

## Jinxed Lynx?

### Some Very Difficult Questions with Few Simple Answers

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In Colorado Canadian lynx have recently been reintroduced to areas where they once roamed. This highly controversial project brings to light some concerns about reintroduction efforts and humans' role in trying to control nature. Critics believe that it's hurried and ill-planned. Colorado represents the southern most portion of the lynx's historical range. Lynx will be taken from Canada and, according to a wildlife manager (public meeting, October 1, 1998) in the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW), they'll be "dumped out" into a rather different ecosystem in Colorado with an expectation of at least 50% mortality, some due to starvation. John Seidel (DOW) views the reintroduction as "an experiment of sorts" (Boulder Camera, January 10, 1999, p. 10A). In the same article, Dale Reed (DOW), who no longer works on the project, agrees that Colorado's plans are a gamble because of the possibility that there won't be enough food for translocated animals. Should such experiments be conducted with such poor odds of success?

The reintroduction of lynx is justified by some people because the animals "will be killed anyway by trappers." This reasoning simply buys into a system that supports animal exploitation. Just because animals might be killed in one way doesn't justify killing them in other ways. Conservationists (and others) would be well-advised to think of better reasons to undertake reintroduction projects. Furthermore, additional lynx likely will have to be trapped in Canada to meet the demand for pelts. Thus, in addition to the death of translocated lynx, others will die to replace them. On January 5, 1999, a local news program showed lynx who were going to be translocated to Colorado struggling violently with trappers. Some trapping is being done by inexperienced trappers and lynx are escaping from traps and some have been injured. These facts raise numerous practical and ethical concerns.

The importance of blending rigorous science and public support in reintroduction programs can't be emphasized too strongly. It's necessary to know if lynx show enough behavioral flexibility to allow them to adapt to ecosystems differing in climate, vegetation, and food resources. It's also essential that suitable habitat be protected indefinitely. Lynx are difficult to reintroduce in the best of conditions. A well-planned effort in New York State was unsuccessful and Swiss

biologists have been working for years on a similar project.

It is unethical and disingenuous to perform reintroduction experiments when it is believed at the start that half the animals will die. It's also unethical to undertake reintroduction programs simply to prevent species from being listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). When the ESA is invoked, local control over land use (for example) is trumped by federal control, and some people understandably want to keep the federal government out of local concerns. One way to keep the federal government out is to attempt to reintroduce animals to keep their numbers up. In Colorado, Mr. Seidel (setitalClawmarksendital, 1998, volume 1, p. 1) noted "If we don't begin work on this reintroduction, the federal government will take the lead within the next several years." Indeed, action by the Federal government could occur as soon as June, 1999. Along the same lines, in an article in the Bozeman (Montana) Daily Chronicle (September 12, 1998, page 5) concerning the reintroduction of lynx into Idaho, it's noted that "Idaho officials acknowledge granting permission to relocate lynx is partly an effort to block possible Endangered Species Act restrictions in the state."

Needless to say, I wish these programs and all animals well, but rushing into reintroduction efforts because of political and other pressures is ill-advised. Moving slowly and carefully is essential. Let's hope the lynx weren't jinxed from the start.

### Is More Better?

Reintroduction programs also raise other questions. For example, it's not clear that species preservation and conservation always have to be valued, why "more is better," why biodiversity should be conserved, or if we can improve nature. With rare exceptions, carnivore reintroduction programs are unlikely to do much for preservation, conservation, or biodiversity given the high mortality of reintroduced animals even in well-planned efforts (witness the fate of recently reintroduced Mexican wolves). In 1995, Benjamin Beck, then Chair of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association's Reintroduction Advisory Group, lamented ". . . we must acknowledge frankly at this point that there isn't overwhelm-

ing evidence that reintroduction is successful.” Two reintroduction experts, Richard Reading (at the Denver Zoo) and Tim Clark (Yale University) stressed in a recent review of carnivore reintroduction projects that “It is clearly desirable to improve approaches to reintroduction.”

Given that even many experts are extremely skeptical of attaining the goals of reintroduction efforts, it’s important to reassess what we are doing and why. Just because we *can* do something doesn’t mean we *ought* to do it. Indeed, there are numerous factors beyond the control of scientists and others who so dearly want them to succeed. Recently, three biologists argued that personal attitudes, human shortsightedness, and greed, would, with few exceptions, be insurmountable stumbling blocks in attempts to manage animal populations.

### Can We Achieve More By Doing Less?

I raise the questions I have not because I’m a kill-joy who’s against all reintroduction efforts. I deeply appreciate the good intentions and efforts of all involved, but sometimes good intentions aren’t enough. And, there’s no room for failure. I ponder these questions because the issues aren’t as clear as many people want them to be. Nature is complex, but many people want simple, quick solutions when tinkering with her. There aren’t any. Successful proactive planning takes time. Making compassion choices often requires patience and restraint. When trying to conserve species or restore ecosystems we must be concerned with all animals who are involved, not only human-centered goals. Many lives are at stake. Should individuals be moved and perhaps suffer and die because of what we want? Should individuals be traded off for the good of their species? Should individu-

als who have lived without certain predators or competitors be confronted with them? Should populations and ecosystems that have developed and sustained themselves in the absence of predators be altered? It may turn out in some cases that it’s impossible to regain what was lost. It may be infeasible to recreate what once existed because times have changed and we can’t recreate what once was. In the end we may simply be faking nature.<sup>2</sup>

### Endnotes

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<http://rmad.org/lynxfact.html>  
<http://www.bouldernews.com/opinion/columnists/mark.html>  
<http://www.bouldernews.com/news/local/03alynx.html>  
<http://www.bouldernews.com/news/local/25alynx.html>  
<http://www.bouldernews.com/opinion/letters/0305lett.html>  
<http://csmonitor.com/durable/1999/03/11/fp2s2-csm.shtml>  
<http://insidedenver.com/news/0325lynx5.shtml>  
<http://www.bouldernews.com/news/local/28alynx.html>  
<http://www.bouldernews.com/opinion/letters/28alette.html>  
<http://InsideDenver.com/news/0329lynx6.shtml>  
<http://cfapps.insidedenver.com/opinion/8.cfm>
2. Sadly, four lynx have already starved to death. Gene Byrne, a DOW official was quoted as saying “We’re kind of bummed out.” Well, they should be as this was entirely predicted before the reintroduction began.