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To: letter for "Reader's Forum" Title: "A Fierce Green Fire"

We live in a mythic time! We live in a time when people's hearts are beginning to open to the needs of other species. We are beginning to step aside just a little, to make room, corners here and there as yet, for all creatures to maintain a presence on this planet--even those creatures who provide us no flesh to hunt, no sport at the end of a fishline. Indeed, even those creatures who are a bit inconvenient to live with.

We live in a mythic place! This is the landscape in which the Mexican Gray Wolf has been welcomed back to its home. This is a creature who for generations has known nothing of the wild. Yet here we are, right here and now, helping this proud subspecies remember its wild ways. Surely we and they will fumble in these early stages, but the journey has begun.

These thoughts occurred to me just this evening. I had climbed up the arroyo out of the canyon, as I often do, to admire the not-so-distant plume of a "good" ground fire in the wilderness, to watch the sun set through smoky haze, and to enjoy the antics of our local crew of vultures, playing and socializing on wing, as they do every evening, converging just here from miles and miles around.

I descended via an unmarked trail, and while walking home along the road, came upon two neighbors out for an evening walk. We stopped and talked about our hopes and dreams for the well-being of the wolves. More, we talked about what the return of the wolves symbolizes about us, about these times and the growing generosity of our culture.

We also shared our despair, our worries that somehow this will all come to naught, that those of us who live in Grant and Catron counties may not be quite generous enough in giving the wolves the chance they deserve to relearn wariness and skill.

I told my neighbors that more than once this summer, I had turned to a mythic story to counter my despair, to enhance my resolve. Like so many others I have talked with (anti- as well as pro-wolf), these friends had only a vague awareness of this particular story. Although the essay takes perhaps four minutes to read, they had never done so. They had never read the story that is known throughout the nation--indeed, in much of the world--as marking the spiritual transformation of one of the greatest conservationists of all time. This is the man who envisioned the Gila Wilderness--the first designated wilderness in the entire world. This is the man whose name now graces the adjacent wilderness of the Black Range. This is Aldo Leopold.

Leopold's essay is "Thinking Like a Mountain." It appears in his collection of essays, "A Sand County Almanac," whose 50th year of publication we celebrated last year, along with the 75th anniversary of the Gila Wilderness. The essay begins, "A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night." He goes on to recount a pack trip on patrol for the Forest Service in the Gila and Blue Range country, when he and his partner came upon a wolf and her pups. Like all good forest rangers of the time, the duo "pumped lead" into the pack.

The she-wolf was still alive when they approached. Leopold wrote, "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes--something known only to her and to the mountain."

Leopold continues, "I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

This little extract cannot do the story justice. But perhaps it is enough to prompt some readers to seek out this part of our heritage. Maybe it will inspire a few to begin telling the story and retelling the story. We can argue till we are blue in the face, but a story--a mythic story--can impart so much more.

We live in a mythic time! We live in a mythic place! Fifty years hence, Americans surely will still be savoring the story of "the fierce green fire." In our zeal to help the wolves and argue in their behalf, let us not forget the power of story. Let us not forget to tell the old stories--and to begin creating mythic stories of our own.