

Predator Reintroductions: Socio-Political Feasibility



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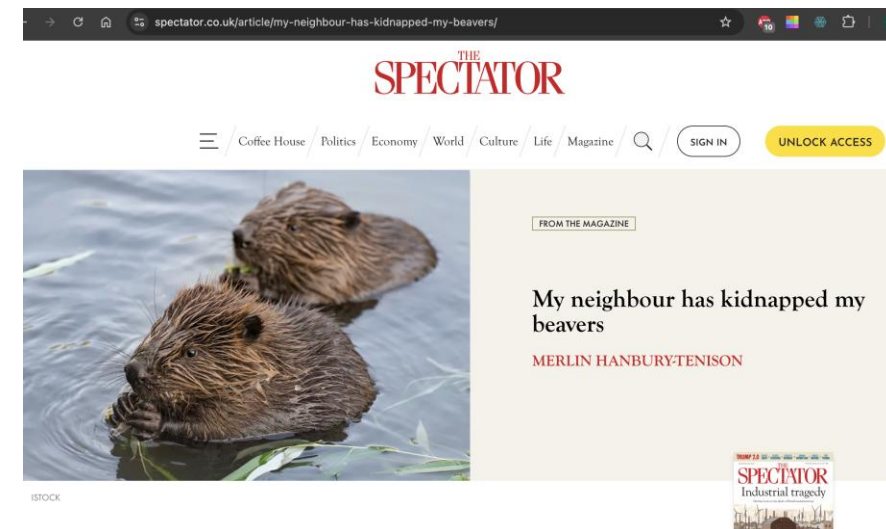
Outline

- Baseline concepts
- Red wolf reintroduction
- Pine marten reintroduction
- Important overall issues



Species Reintroduction

- Extirpation is widespread across the United States and the world.
- Recent decades are seeing a rise in ecological restoration in general, and of species translocation and reintroduction in particular.
- Reintroductions are political decisions, and a reintroduction's failure or success will depend in part upon social and political support or opposition.



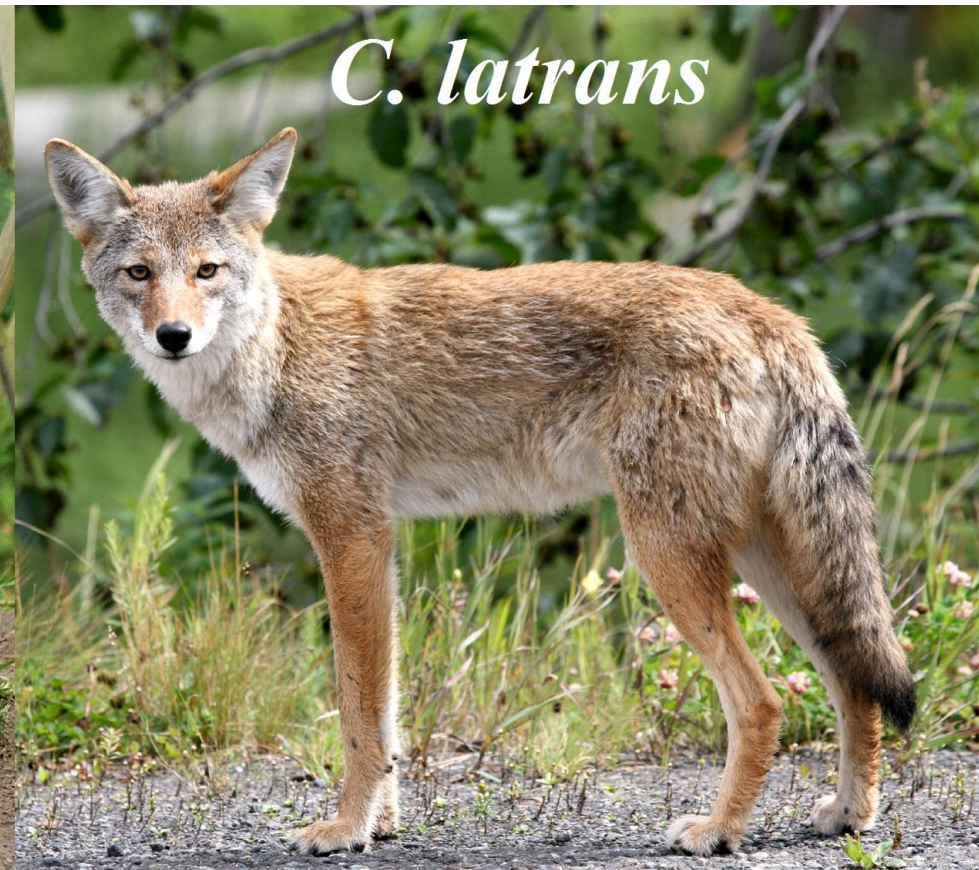
Red wolves, *Canis rufus*

- Formerly widespread in the eastern US. Extinct in the wild, 1980. Reintroduced in eastern North Carolina, 1987.
- Red wolf numbers rose to ~130 until the mid 2000s, when they began to descend, largely due to gunshots. About 7 in the wild in 2020.
- Political support fluctuated, locally and nationally.
- ~30 in the wild as of 2025.



Red wolves, *Canis rufus*

- Coyotes' arrival on the eastern seaboard complicated the situation.



Red wolf politics

- Some people were afraid of wolves.
- Others were concerned about wolves' impact on game, and coyote hunting.
- A key issue became the wolves' identity as a distinct species – many felt that they were a hybrid coyote. Genetic researchers are split on the subject.
- Some of them felt that these animals had been foisted upon them by the government for nefarious reasons.
- All this stoked vocal and effective opposition to the restoration program.

Back On Our Map

- BOOM was a program trying to reintroduce/reinforce 12 species in Cumbria, northwestern England, 2019-2023.
- Among these was the European pine marten (*Martes martes*).
- The program's goals were to engage and benefit local people while reintroducing target species.
- Target species were chosen by largely by the community as part of a lengthy and widespread consultation process.



Back On Our Map

- Martens (and corncrakes) were only feasibility studies and education programs because of the extra complexity of reintroducing them.
- The feasibility study included two surveys, one of the general public, and one of farmers and landowners. The survey focused on both attitudes and relevant activities, such as pest control.
- The study also included press releases, focus groups, and canvassing.
- The study indicated broad support for marten reintroduction.
- They were reintroduced in 2024. There are now over 30. Two have disappeared “suspiciously.”



Issue 1: Community engagement

- Involving community actively at each step can improve political palatability.
- This is well established during the planning phase. Involving the public in implementation and monitoring matters as well.



Issue 2: Science

- Communicating science is necessary but not sufficient.
- The more the public understands project goals and likely outcomes, the less opposition there is likely to be.
- At the same time, people often prioritize their preferences and fit their understanding of science around them. In the literature this is sometimes called “barstool biology.”



Issue 3: Individuals

- Reintroduction projects, and restoration projects more generally, tend to rely on small-group interactions.
- Engaging, open-minded, consistent people who can communicate well on complicated topics are more likely to form necessary connections and foster successful restoration projects.
- This can be challenging within institutional and financial constraints.
- Personal connections are particularly crucial in ecologically and socially fragmented landscape.



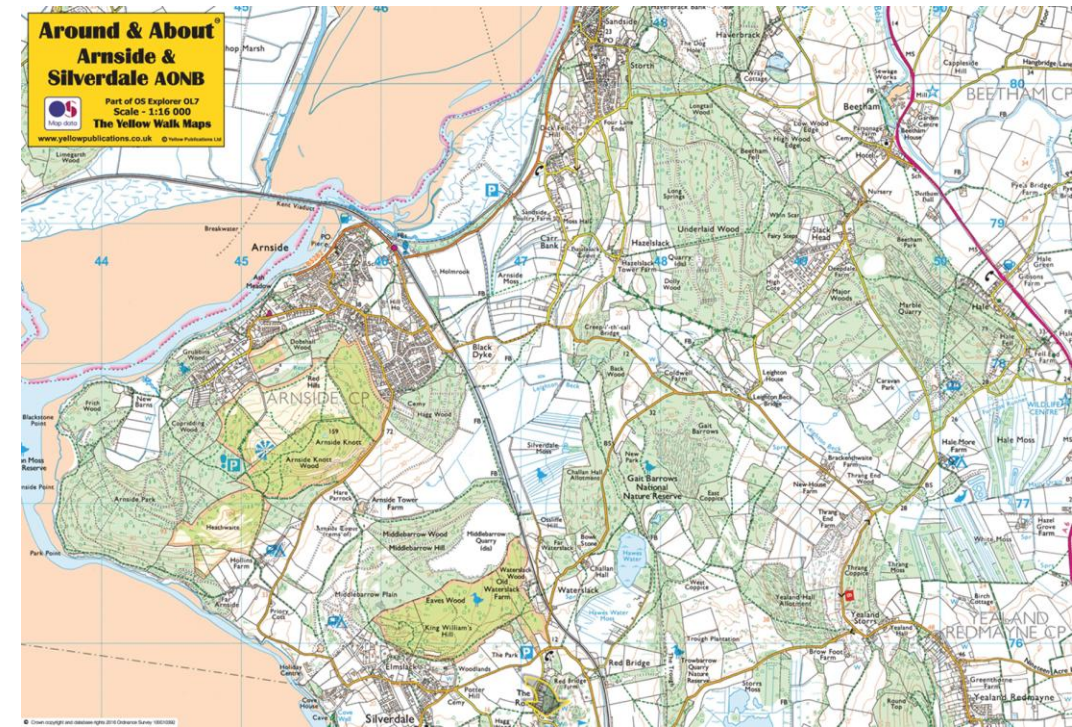
Issue 3: Individuals

- A small number of people will oppose restoration no matter what.
- This group can successfully delay, halt, or reverse the project.
- Some of this comes from inborne conservatism – people prefer the environment they're used to, and are more afraid of losing it than of potentially gaining a better one.



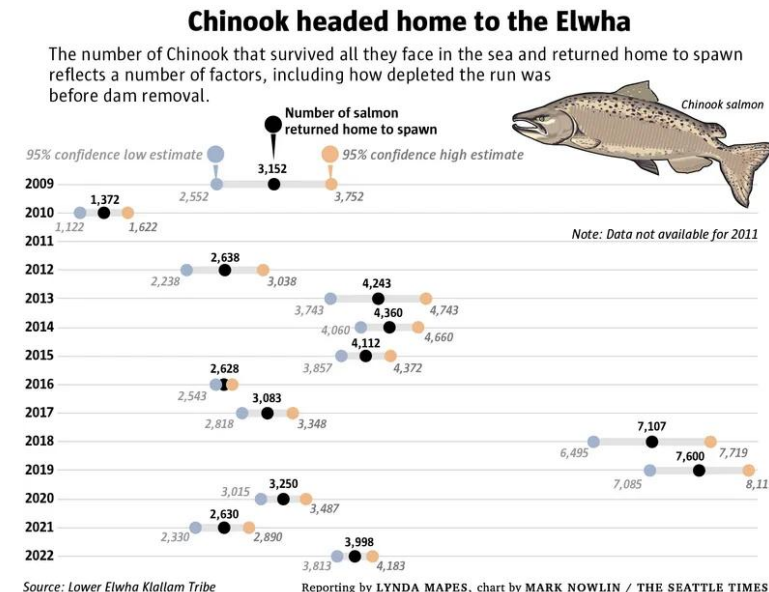
Issue 4: Scale (in space)

- If the project is successful at first, the species will move beyond its initial release area.
- In a fragmented landscape, this will involve new landscapes and stakeholders.



Issue 5: Scale (in time)

- Funding and attention may lapse before the time the species needs to reestablish itself.
- Many projects will require long-term commitments.
- Doing this in an effective, affordable way can be challenging.



Questions?

