

The Return of the Black-Footed Ferret to Mexico

A New Day... Un Nuevo Dia

“The fact that the President, George Bush’s first foreign visit has our country as its destination is a clear message of the interest his administration places on strengthening links with Mexico.”

President Vicente Fox, Mexico

“We are welcoming a new day in the relationship between America and Mexico. Each nation has a new President, and a new perspective. Geography has made us neighbors; cooperation and respect will make us partners.”

President George W. Bush, U.S.

The United States and Mexico share a 2,235-mile border and a long yet little known history of wildlife conservation. As early as 1936, wildlife managers from both countries have reached across the way to each other and have been quietly conserving the wildlife and wild places of the border region.

What: The very first reintroduction of black-footed ferrets into Mexico.

Where: Janos, Mexico

When: TBD, likely in October, 2001

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The Story

“The idea is to breed more and to spread them out,” explains Mike Lockhart of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, describing the strategy to recover the black-footed ferret from the brink of extinction. “If you have more than one population, then a catastrophic event, like a disease epidemic, isn’t as likely to wipe them

out...again.” Black-footed ferrets are long, slender-bodied animals characterized by a brownish-black mask across the face, a brownish head, black feet and legs, and a black tip on the tail. Once reduced to just 18 individuals, they now number in the hundreds, thanks to captive breeding programs, such as the one at the Phoenix Zoo. But although captive breeding has gone well, re-establishing wild populations has been difficult. Re-introduction efforts at various locations across the U.S. have been struggling. Only at South Dakota’s Conata Basin are ferrets breeding in the wild at a rate high enough to relocate some individuals to other re-introduction sites. Lockhart and others have their eyes on Janos, Mexico,





where there are half a million prairie dogs. (Black-footed ferrets prey almost exclusively on prairie dogs and also use their burrows as dens.) Presently, U.S. and Mexican conservationists are working out the details on the transportation and release of dozens of black-footed ferrets into Janos's prairie dog colony.

Status of Black-Footed Ferrets

Recognized as an endangered species in the U.S. and no longer in existence in Mexico. The black-footed ferret is North America's only native ferret. The present population is estimated at 600,

with approximately equal numbers in captivity and in the wild. In 1987, only 18 black-footed ferrets remained. The species suffered tremendous declines in numbers as a result of rural development and disease, which impacted not only black-footed ferrets, but also prairie dogs, a species vital to their survival.

Recovery Efforts

The U.S. first recognized the species as endangered in 1967, under the predecessor of today's Endangered Species Act. At the time, only one known population of black-footed ferrets remained in the wild. That population crashed in 1974 and its last member died in captivity in 1979. At that point, the species was thought to be extinct, until a rancher accidentally discovered a colony of about 120 ferrets near Meeteetse, Wyoming, in 1981. Biologists were thrilled with this second chance to rescue the species from extinction, but hope dimmed when the newly discovered population succumbed to disease (canine distemper). In 1987, biologists captured the last 18 remaining members of the colony in a last ditch effort to save the species through captive breeding. Following a tremendous effort, biologists have realized extraordinary success with captive breeding (from the last 18 ferrets, they have bred hundreds). Now a new struggle is underway: the re-establishment of wild populations.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>

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