



Outdoor

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Striking



Eli Lucero/Herald Journal

Wolves credited with helping quaking aspen as researchers continue to monitor tree's decline

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Researchers studying the recent die-off of aspen trees in the West have found an unexpected ally: the gray wolf.

For the past five years or so, scientists have been scrambling to explain a sudden, large-scale die-off of quaking aspen that has occurred from Arizona to Canada. This week many of those interested parties convened at Utah State University for a Restoring the West conference titled "Frontiers in Aspen Restoration," and Joshua Halofsky of the Washington State Department of Natural Resources told the group

that aspen are thriving in Yellowstone National Park since wolves were reintroduced there.

According to Halofsky, aspen densities peaked in the park between 1880 and 1920 before beginning a steady decline. That timing happens to coincide with the extirpation of wolves from the area, which was more or less complete by the 1930s. Without wolves around to keep the elk herds on the move, Halofsky believes, the big ungulates tended to stay in certain areas longer, and as a result they would eat the young shoots of aspen and cottonwood before they had a chance to mature.

In contrast, two areas inside the park that were fenced off in the 1940s to keep elk out have yielded large, healthy stands of aspen that survive to this day. Since wolves were brought back into the Yellowstone system in 1995, other areas have started to take on the same robust

appearance, Halofsky said.

"It does appear that browsing has been an issue," he said, adding that even when elk are not being chased by wolves their behavior now shows they are more wary and less likely to hold in one spot. "Wolves can have a direct effect on aspen regeneration. Species such as aspen that elk favor benefit" from the appearance of the wolf.

To Halofsky, that means grazing, whether by wildlife or livestock, can take a place alongside conifer encroachment, fire-control policies, human development and climate change as possible culprits in the aspen die-off: "You can add predators to the list of things that can influence aspen through space and time."

The benefits accrued to aspen have also come to cottonwood and willow plants, which are also flourishing under reduced grazing pressure.

Unfortunately those benefits cannot be easily transferred to areas that do not have wolves, but there was some good

Color fade?

Once there were nine million acres of aspen across the West; now there are fewer than four million acres, and Utah has lost nearly 60 percent of its native aspen.

— Rocky Mountain Research Station, Logan

Gold

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news. Paul Rogers, director of the Western Aspen Alliance, a new partnership between USU's College of Natural Resources and the USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, said it appears that some of the aspen die-off is being offset by new growth.

"In most areas we're seeing some regeneration coming back," he said. "We still don't have all the data or know the causes, and it's still a concern, but we're not talking about a catastrophe."

He estimated losses at 10 percent or less in most cases, and said he knew of many researchers who would like to dig into the issue if they had funding.

Money was also discussed at the conference by Cindy Swanson out of the Rocky Mountain Research Station in Missoula, Mont., who attempted to put a dollar value on aspen. Without much data from Western states to go on, she studied the New England area, where tourists, many of

them "leaf-peepers," spend millions of dollars each year.

Swanson found that aspen comprise about 9 percent of the tree composition in the area, and said logging of aspen contributes around \$1.4 billion to the region's annual economy. She also calculated that tourism related to fall foliage viewing — much of which she attributed to the golden aspen leaves — generated almost exactly the same amount, \$1.4 billion.

"People just love it (seeing the fall colors) and plan vacations around it," Swanson said, yet few states focus on marketing the value of the trees that produce those vibrant colors.

She suggested that Logan Canyon might be a good place to study the financial value of scenery, an idea that Rogers endorsed.

"It's difficult to get a handle on how much is that contributing to the financial situation of a community," he acknowledged, "but an area like Logan, we could really market the fall colors."

For more on the "Frontiers in Aspen Restoration" conference, go to <http://www.restoringthewest.org/>