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Introduction

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The Black-footed Ferret

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INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT.—Context for the Meeteetse, Wyoming, black-footed ferret studies and recovery efforts, reported in this volume, is presented.

This is the second draft of this manuscript. My first draft was ready in the early summer of 1985. It conveyed a sense of confidence about the survival prospects of the black-footed ferret, *Mustela nigripes*. By the fall of the year at press time, circumstances had changed so dramatically that draft 1 became obsolete and the editor asked for a rewrite. I submit draft 2 with dismay and no sense of what the future holds. As for the ferrets, 6 are in captivity in a place called Sybille Canyon in Wyoming; perhaps 10 are still out there near Meeteetse, in a sprawling prairie dog colony in the Big Horn Basin of northwestern Wyoming; canine distemper has swept the ferrets; plague has been confirmed in the prairie dogs; and options for management have dwindled like Custer's Last Stand.

As a result, I write from unsure footing. The series of papers contained herein were intended to report on the natural history and management criteria of a critically endangered species, the black-footed ferret, and to highlight data that might contribute to its recovery. The research, and publication here of the results, seemed to be two steps in an orderly, modern, even scientific, recovery process. This introduction addresses that "process," endeavoring to record the perplexing political events that occurred concurrently with the field research following the ferret's rediscovery in 1981; events that by

late 1985 have left an unnecessarily critical and unpromising survival outlook for the species; events that may have made an epitaph of this monograph.

The ferret is a legal animal. By virtue of the U.S. Endangered Species Act the ferret enjoys something akin to "standing." It cannot be legally abused or ignored. That is the beauty, the novelty, of the act. Thus, when a species enjoying that novel standing is seen to decline, one must question the fitness of the act itself. That is not to say that one can take the ESA for granted as a tool for species survival. On the contrary, this act, like other federal laws, has always taught a strict lesson in civics: democracy is what you make of it.

No major social advance since World War II has intrigued me more than the Endangered Species Act of 1966. I was young when the act was passed. My generation was idealistic in those days. The act restored the conservationist's faith in America as a rational society and in government as a body capable of responding to the will of the people. The Endangered Species Act, coming as it did after the orgy of materialism during the previous decade, affirmed that the general public was ready to acknowledge that, aside from tangible wealth, prosperity meant preserving the natural heritage of the country. Government would be the willing vehicle of this philosophical renaissance.

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The act has matured since then, and so have I. When the act was passed I supposed that species were saved and that I could devote my own energies to other matters. In the intervening years, years of tremendous social challenges in the U.S., ranging from civil rights to Vietnam, I gradually gained insight on a concept I came to call "ghost government." The reality is that no matter how fine a governmental system may be, the citizen should expect little from it if he or she is unwilling to be involved in its operation—forever. Ghost government. As in ghost writing. A governmental system is only as successful as the ghost government of citizens that watches it and coddles it and intimidates it and pats it on the back. It would seem to be an inefficient process, but it works, and the crucial thing about a democracy is that it permits this ghost government, this band of sometimes unruly interest groups, to participate freely in the stewardship of society—and black-footed ferrets.

Plainly my thesis is that a congressional mandate to a government agency has been an inadequate incentive to save the ferret. The mandate to save this animal is clearly there in the Endangered Species Act. But implementing that mandate has required a frustrating but persistent give-and-take between citizens and the mandated agencies. Ghosting.

If the hand-holding role of the citizenry was at all unusual in 1981 in mobilizing government to respond to the ferret's plight, it was made necessary, in part, by the unusual times of the ferret. One must recall that immediately before the ferret's rediscovery came the appointment of James Watt as Secretary of the Interior. The anti-act posture of this secretary demoralized federal officers and damaged budgets to such an extent that no real government rally to help the ferret ever arose. The ferret was given no significant "priority." The ghost government responded in two ways: first, it tried to foster its own rally, and I'll discuss that more below. Secondly, it "dumped" James Watt. Democracy is what you make of it.

With the exception of James Watt, the individuals involved in the early acts of the ferret's saga were more captivating than the agencies. That's perhaps the way it is most often with "issues" in American life. Individuals make things happen. One figure who intrigues me

in particular is Mr. Jack Turnell, manager of the Pitchfork Ranch, where most of the remnants of the only known ferret colony existed. I have yet to meet Mr. Turnell, but I think he is a national hero. He made certain decisions shortly after the ferrets were found that, frankly, assured them a chance for recovery. My guess is that Turnell made these decisions out of some personal conviction about wildlife and the West and humanity's obligations to the world we live in. His direct interest in the ferret was crucial because, as I have said, governmental authorities were not moving with alacrity at the time. So, Mr. Turnell fascinates me. Someday perhaps I'll have the chance to talk to him about those early days, and the sacrifices to his land and privacy that he perceived to be concomitant with helping a federally protected species. There are few people in history who have had the opportunity and the power to unilaterally decide to save a species.

A second prominent figure in modern ferret lore is Dr. Tim Clark who, it is fair to say, owes much of his notoriety to Jack Turnell. One of the crucial decisions Turnell made was to agree to let Tim Clark look for and study the ferrets on the ranch. I have had the privilege of knowing Dr. Clark. He is not a boastful fellow, but surely he deserves no less a title than "Mr. Ferret." In support of the claim I need only refer to the authorship of many of the manuscripts that follow. Tim's interests know no bounds when it comes to black-footed ferrets. He has done the hard field research; he has publicized the plight of the ferret; he has lobbied; and he has raised money.

In keeping with his predilection for holistic research, Tim also took an academic interest in the dynamics of American conservation, as represented by the unfolding story of the ferret. My own organization, Wildlife Conservation International, was scrutinized in this regard.

Wildlife Conservation International (WiCI), the division of the New York Zoological Society (NYZS) that concerns itself with field conservation, is chiefly devoted to work outside the United States, mostly in the tropics. This emphasis is based on the observation that the United States is amply endowed with conservation agencies and conservation money, es-



Fig. 1. This 1906 photograph is believed to be the first one taken of a black-footed ferret (New York Zoological Society photo).

pecially when compared to the species-rich countries of the developing world. In the United States, an endangered species might expect attention from layers of interested parties: the federal government, state government, private nongovernmental organizations including universities, and, of course, individuals. Such infrastructure is rarely present in the Third World, and so WiCI concentrates its efforts there, conducting and supporting research on the biology of endangered species. We call it conservation biology, and, at any given moment, we will have 30 or so projects underway.

However, since the founding of NYZS in 1895, the society has never entirely divorced itself from species conservation in the United States. In the early part of this century, the vociferous contributions of William Hornaday, the first director of NYZS, to shaping the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, its refuge system, and the early laws entrusted to it succeeded in leaving a permanent NYZS imprint on American wildlife conservation. The society also takes considerable pride in having played a central role in restoring the American bison to the western plains between 1905 and 1919. In conjunction with the federal government, remnant groups of bison were gathered at the society's Bronx Zoo, in New York.

Stocks from the combined herd were sent by rail to such protected areas as the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge.

Among the studies sponsored by NYZS in this country is one of particular relevance to the present monograph. It is Carl Koford's work with prairie dogs, appearing in 1958 as "Prairie Dogs, White Faces and Blue Grama" in the journal *Wildlife Monographs*. Koford's was the first major technical paper to show a tie between prairie dog eradication and ferret decline. It was a deadly tie indeed.

The society was helpful to Koford's prescient research and now finds itself back in the West, again with the ferrets, this time promoting science appropriate to recovery. Despite our current commitment to conservation biology abroad, the society's affection for wildlife of the West is clear. In fact the attachment is symbolized in the logo of NYZS, a bust of the bighorn sheep.

In the fall of 1981 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's *Endangered Species Technical Bulletin* announced the discovery of a black-footed ferret colony near Meeteetse, Wyoming. It was electrifying news, and a host of American conservation groups perked up, looking for ways to lend a hand. Just about every one had accepted the USFWS bitter decision three years prior to consider the fer-

ret extinct. Everyone, that is, except for a very few individuals who kept searching throughout those bleak years.

A shaggy ranch dog turned things around. It's true, the dog killed the only ferret anyone had seen in years, but the single specimen, probably a wayfaring yearling from the colony, was tangible evidence that a whole species still lived.

I confess, I don't mind defending the dog. I met him once. His name is Shep. He is very tractable, and blithely unconcerned with the hoopla stirred up by his routine vigilance.

Following the *Bulletin's* report of the ferret find, Wildlife Conservation International made the decision to become involved in the species' recovery. We were influenced by three considerations:

1. Without doubt—and without apology—we saw public-relations value in taking a leadership role in the potential restoration of this highly publicized American species. A good job with the little ferret would help us in the chronic task of raising funds for other species. The ferret might have become a mini-panda, valuable to our image making. And so, we dominated the private funding picture from 1982 to 1985.

2. Secondly, there was the political situation, to which I have alluded before. In the view of most conservationists in late 1981, the Endangered Species Act was in jeopardy, and consequently the ability of the federal government to respond constructively to the ferret find was predicted to be limited. The times were chaotic for wildlife conservation. Already that autumn I had joined a letter-writing campaign to halt dismantling of USFWS Cooperative Wildlife Research Units at universities all over the country. The Endangered Species Office budget had been slashed. The secretary of interior had declared that his department would list no more endangered species, just as it would gazette no new national parks. It was a tough time to arise from the dust of extinction, and we at WiCI felt that if we didn't make a move to help the ferret, the little beast might actually slip back into oblivion. It's expected savior, Uncle Sam, was hobbled by an anomalous secretary of the interior.

3) Our third motivation for entering ferret history was a practical one. After reading the

first reports that the ferret colony might consist of a couple of dozen breeding animals, we were very certain that captive breeding and establishment of new colonies would be recommended. That form of animal management has attained a high degree of sophistication at the Bronx Zoo, the sister organization to WiCI in the New York Zoological Society. The cadre of NYZS people involved in captive breeding of wildlife, from curators to veterinarians, is large and skilled, and we planned to make it clear to all concerned that we were ready to contribute when the time came.

With these circumstances in mind, we set about to find an outlet for our good will, talent, and cash. At precisely the same moment, one Dr. Tim Clark began inquiring of possible WiCI interest in granting support for his ferret studies. His field work—counts, feeding behavior, reproduction studies—were precisely the type of biology favored by WiCI, and his commitment to working in conjunction with the complex federal-state mechanism reassured us that our sponsorship would go toward an influential project. We began work with Tim Clark and his Biota Research and Consulting, Inc. in 1982.

Largely through Dr. Clark's initiatives, the ferrets attracted the attention of numerous other conservation organizations, most of whom assisted Clark's project directly. These included the World Wildlife Fund—U.S., the National Geographic Society, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Charles A. Lindbergh Fund. Aside from contributing cash, several of these prominent nongovernmental organizations assumed lobbying tasks in Washington in support of the ferret. But Dr. Clark's first support—given even before the ferrets were discovered, and sustained, one presumes, out of blind faith that some animals must have remained somewhere in the vastness of the West—came from the little-known Wildlife Preservation Trust International (WPTI). WPTI is an American-based offshoot of the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, an institution given prominence by Gerald Durrell, director of the famous Jersey Zoo in England.

A discernible recovery program began to take shape in Wyoming. The one known colony was secured, thanks in large part to the unusual cooperation of the owners of the only

inhabited ferret land. Research was begun promptly and was pursued with vigor, to the extent that, as the papers contained herein and others reveal, we quickly learned the size of the single colony, its demographics, and that possibly "surplus" youngsters were available every fall as potential candidates for captive breeding or translocation. We learned how to search for ferrets, and, tragically, that over tremendous areas of potential habitat there were no more ferrets. The American conservation community rallied effectively to underwrite the bulk of the research to the tune, cumulatively, of over \$550,000, according to a recent manuscript by Tim Clark. In the final analysis, cooperation in the field between government and nongovernmental agencies was satisfactory. To help enhance this atmosphere of cooperation, the Black-footed Ferret Advisory Team (BFAT) was put together, a sort of clearing house for the growing interest in black-footed ferrets.

I became optimistic. I thought I sensed a surge of enthusiasm among ferret people, a threshold of determination that, once crossed, would overwhelm whatever obstacles might be thrown up by the Watt administration.

In April 1982 I saw a ferret and was inspired even more. I flew out to Cody, Wyoming, with Jim Doherty, the seasoned curator of mammals for the New York Zoological Society. I was anxious for Jim to accompany me because already we were certain that captive breeding of ferrets would become a recovery priority, and Jim could represent the society's expertise in this field.

We drove south to Meeteetse and joined Tim Clark and his research associates Tom Campbell, Louise Richardson, and Steve Forrest. They were the principal figures in the field program and they introduced us to the research. Later I wrote about the outing in our newsletter, *the Ferret*, first published shortly after WiCI joined forces with Tim and his colleagues:

After a day with Tim Clark, exploring the prairie dog colony where the ferrets cling to their tenuous future, . . . Jim Doherty and I joined ferret biologist Tom Campbell for a unique adventure. Driving in a pickup truck along a graded road near the prairie dogs in the dead of night, we saw a black-footed ferret. We were lucky.

Only nine individuals had been found by spotlighting since Clark and Campbell had begun their surveys back before Christmas. Our ferret came bounding across the prairie in its odd, accelerated inch-worm gait and wound up in a prairie dog den twenty feet from the right fender of the truck. We feasted on the view for many excited minutes.

The ferret was as high strung and energetic a creature as I had ever seen. It fairly crackled with nervous impulses, first digging, then stretching to stare, then circling the den, then looping back in. I was moved by the idea that if we humans would give the ferret half a chance, that purposeful dynamo would surely do the rest.

It was a nice sentiment at the time. It seems naive now, because that "half a chance" was never granted.

Time passed. The field work continued. Searches for ferrets were begun in other states. Litters of ferrets were recorded at Meeteetse. Data were published. Letters were written. No progress was made toward captive breeding during 1982 and 1983.

Finally, at the request of the nongovernmental conservation community, a meeting was called by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in the spring of 1984 in Cheyenne. Jim Doherty and I were invited to participate. The meeting would include field biologists, veterinarians, and administrators representing federal, state, and private agencies, essentially the extended network of people responsible for the survival of the black-footed ferret.

Sure enough, captive management became the focus of the meeting just as soon as the introductory material was set aside. Tim Clark and his colleagues presented enough demographic data to suggest that the Meeteetse ferret colony was stable or even growing. Arriving at comparable figures from year to year is difficult because census methods were evolving and improving as time went by, but the best published estimates for all years, based on early August counts of adults and young, are as follows:

1982	61 (incomplete survey)
1983	88
After this meeting:	
1984	129
1985	58

The 1983 figure and the abundance of youngsters every fall relative to the number of adults, were strong indications that ferrets

could be captured without jeopardizing the Meeteetse colony. Thinking back to that large gathering in Cheyenne, I recall a universal consensus that establishment of one or more captive colonies was of utmost urgency. The chief justifications were (a) to provide a strategic cushion in the event a disease—an epizootic—struck the little Meeteetse population and (b) to provide, in the course of time, the stock for recolonization of suitable ferret habitat. It was sound, if belated, reasoning. The only dissention came in deciding how to do it.

As early as 1981 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had granted Wyoming Game and Fish Department "lead agency" status for ferret recovery, a legal courtesy permitted under the Endangered Species Act. Thus, Wyoming Game and Fish had begun to organize activities, helping foster BFAT, convening the Cheyenne meeting, and generally assuming responsibility for major decisions. Assumption of leadership by a state agency in this manner had precedent elsewhere; and, in cases where the federally protected species is limited in distribution, it seems a logical way to implement the act. Provided the surrogate agency responds to the federal mandate, the process is viable.

At Cheyenne we began to see the hang-up on captive breeding as an element in the survival process. State officials, while concurring with the captive propagation tactic, announced firmly that no ferrets would leave Wyoming to achieve this purpose. Simultaneously they declared that their own Sybille Canyon Wildlife Research Unit was unsatisfactory as a captive breeding facility, an ironic viewpoint as things turned out; and they concluded that federal and/or private agencies should pay for the cost of building and staffing a proper facility in Wyoming.

In view of the availability of well-equipped, well-staffed, well-funded facilities in several locations around the U.S., this pronouncement by the lead agency for ferret recovery was met with consternation by both federal and private nonprofit organization representatives. The 1984 capture season (September-October, when young of the year are weaned and dispersing) came and went, but the Cheyenne impasse prevailed despite the probabilistic certainty of the consequences.

In May of 1985 a decision was made by state and federal officers to attempt to capture ferrets in October, provided the scheduled summer counts showed an acceptable but unspecified surplus. Sybille Canyon was agreed upon as a holding facility, but no specific breeding facility was identified. Almost concurrently with the meeting, plague was reported among the white-tailed prairie dogs of Meeteetse, the prey base of the ferrets. To everyone's relief, the mustelids, evidently, were immune to plague, but there loomed the possibility of starvation for ferrets if the prairie dog die-back was too severe. As it turned out, the plague episode served chiefly as an unnerving object lesson of the principles of epizootic disease, principles that were familiar to most of us from the beginning.

During the period June-October 1985, the principles were applying themselves with mortal vigor. The July-August count gave strong indications that something was amiss, but no real credence was given the declining population figures until 22 October. By that time supplementary surveys in September had arrived at a count of 31 ferrets, one month after the August estimate of 58, and by October 9 only 13 ferrets were seen in the field.

Six ferrets had been captured by early October and brought to the Sybille Canyon Wildlife Research Unit. On 22 October one of these animals was reported dead and the cause was diagnosed as canine distemper. Wyoming Game and Fish acknowledged that the disease was "probably the worst event that could have occurred in the ferret population."

Immediately a capture team was sent to the field to capture as many of the threatened remaining ferrets as possible. Six were brought in by the following week when the capture term was withdrawn before capturing all the ferrets. Biologists departing the scene after the emergency exercise guessed that fewer than 10 remained in the Meeteetse population. Their significance to the future of the species must be regarded as negligible for the time being. Their numbers are few; they are scattered over a vast terrain; distemper is presumably still among them; and the Wyoming winter is coming on.

Now, after additional deaths in the captive group, six ferrets remain. The Sybille Six. There is no cushion. For a while the best of

American wildlife science might have governed the future of this species. Now luck is the guiding force. We need luck with the Sybille Six, that they might multiply; and we need luck out on the prairies, that some stalwart surveyor might chance upon yet another last colony of black-footed ferrets.

The black-footed ferret once enjoyed a range about as extensive as any that North America can offer, encompassing all of what we call the Great Plains and beyond. The little mustelid was the incidental victim of one of the most diligent vertebrate pest control exercises in history: the attempt to eradicate prairie dogs for the alleged benefit of livestock grazing. The assault changed prairie dog distribution dramatically. In the process it wiped out ferrets from Canada to Mexico—except for the few discovered near Meeteetse.

History should record that rational people stepped forward when the Meeteetse colony was found. Among them were the authors of the papers that follow, people who assumed

that they worked within a rational system, far different from the cavalier times that brought the ferret so near extinction in the first place. But that system, ultimately based in the U.S. Endangered Species Act, has failed the ferret. It has converted a tense but hopeful outlook for the species into a crisis. The system became impotent as decision makers locked themselves into years of indecision as to the venue for captive propagation of ferrets.

Altogether, the species has not fared well in its ecological partnership with modern man. But in every such sad story there is a lesson. The ferret story may contain two. Following its first decline, we people reviewed our use of pesticides, our fanatical reaction to agricultural "pests," our obligation to public lands; and our general management of Great Plains land, whether private or public. I believe the message of the ferret's second decrement is that the U.S. Endangered Species Act may no longer be the safety net for American wildlife that Congress intended it to be.