CALIFORNIA CONDOR RECOVERY PROGRAM

Background

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service California Condor Recovery Program (Recovery Program) is a multi-entity effort to recover the endangered California condor. Cooperators include the U.S. Forest Service, San Diego Wild Animal Park, Los Angeles Zoo, Oregon Zoo, California Department of Fish and Game, the Peregrine Fund, Ventana Wildlife Society, the Center for Scientific Investigation and Graduate Studies in Ensenada, La Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAP), National Park Service at Pinnacles National Monument, Santa Barbara Zoo, the Chapultepec Zoo in Mexico City and many others. The Recovery Program is currently focusing its efforts on the captive-breeding and reintroduction of California condors to the wild in the hopes of establishing a self-sustaining population.

The California Condor Recovery Team (Team) is an advisory group to the Service. The Team includes representatives from all cooperators of the Recovery Program as well as a broad range of experts and scientists. The Team functions as an advisory entity to the Service and its job is to provide technical assistance to the Recovery Program on issues such as rearing and release methodologies, condor biology and behavior, and other scientific concerns. Contributors to the Team include population geneticists, captive-breeding, environmental contaminants experts, and behaviorists.

Beginning in 1992, the Service began reintroducing captive-bred condors to the wild to reestablish a wild population of these endangered birds. In the early years of the reintroduction effort some problems occurred, including five condor mortalities due to collisions with power lines. Experts involved with the Recovery Program worked to address these problems and made several changes in the rearing methods used. Among the most successful changes was the initiation of a power pole aversion training program for all releasable condors. This training involves the use of a mock power pole placed inside the flight pen where the young condors are kept until transferred to a release site. The power pole emits a small electrical charge whenever a condor attempts to land on it. The young birds quickly learn to avoid perching on these and will, instead, opt to use appropriate natural perches available inside the flight pen. This program has greatly reduced condor mortalities from power line collisions.

The goal of the California Condor Recovery Plan is to establish two geographically separate populations, one in California and the other in Arizona, each with 150 birds and at least 15 breeding pairs. As the Recovery Program works toward this goal the number of release sites has grown. There are three active release sites in California, one in Arizona and one in Baja, Mexico.