

Blackfeet Swift Fox Reintroduction Program

INTRODUCTION - A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL REGENERATION OF NATIVE PEOPLES IS BASED UPON THE RESTORATION OF THEIR TRIBAL LANDS AND THE INDIGENOUS SPECIES WHICH ONCE OCCUPIED THEM. THIS FACT IS RECOGNIZED BY THE MANDATE OF ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION OF TRIBAL FISH & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENTS IN THE U.S GREAT PLAINS. THE SWIFT FOX (*VULPES VELOX/V.V.HEBES*) A SPECIES UNIQUE TO THE GREAT PLAINS, WAS CLASSIFIED AS EXTIRPATED OVER ITS CANADIAN RANGE IN 1978 AND EXTIRPATED OVER 90 PERCENT OF ITS U.S. RANGE IN 1995. THE SPECIES WAS DECLARED EXTIRPATED IN MONTANA IN 1969.

THE ONLY SOURCE FOR SWIFT FOX IS THE COCHRANE ECOLOGICAL INSTITUTE-COCHRANE WILDLIFE RESERVE (CEI), WHICH HOLDS THE WORLD'S ONLY CAPTIVE COLONY OF SWIFT FOX. THE CEI ALSO HAS A PROVEN RECORD IN ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION THROUGH THE REINTRODUCTION OF THIS SPECIES, AS SHOWN BY THE DOWNLISTING OF THE SWIFT FOX IN CANADA FROM EXTIRPATED (1978) TO ENDANGERED (1998).



IN ACCORDANCE WITH ITS MANDATE, THE BLACKFEET TRIBAL FISH & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CEI UNDERTOOK A FIVE YEAR SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PROGRAM ON BLACKFEET TRIBAL LAND (1998 – 2002). THIS PROGRAM WAS THE FIRST SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION UNDERTAKEN IN THE USA AND WAS FUNDED IN PART (33%) BY DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE, USA.

THE BLACKFEET SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMME WAS THE FIRST SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION IN NORTH AMERICA TO USE ONLY CAPTIVE BRED SWIFT FOX FOR REINTRODUCTION, AND TO UTILIZE THE REINTRODUCTION PROTOCOLS DEVELOPED BY THE CEI (PORTABLE PROTECTIVE SHELTERS, PPS, SEE PUBLICATIONS LIST).



THESE PORTABLE PROTECTIVE SHELTERS, PPS, WERE DEVELOPED AT THE CEI. THEY ARE DESIGNED TO BE PLACED OVER AN ABANDONED BADGER HOLE IN THE RELEASE SITES. WHEN THE FOXES ARE RELEASED, THEY ARE PLACED, IN THEIR TRANSPORT KENNELS (SEE ILLUSTRATION) ADJACENT TO THE PPS. FOOD AND WATER IS ALSO PLACED BESIDE THE PPS.

THE FOXES REMAIN IN THEIR KENNELS UNTIL THEY HAVE RECOVERED FROM THE STRESS OF TRANSPORT. THEN THE KENNEL DOORS ARE OPENED AND THE FOXES EMERGE FROM THEIR TRANSPORT KENNELS IN THEIR OWN TIME. TRANSPORT KENNELS AND ANY UNEATEN FOOD IS REMOVED AFTER 7 HOURS. SOME FOXES ENTER THE PPS IMMEDIATELY, SOME DO NOT, BUT OVER THE PERIOD FOLLOWING RELEASE (FIVE DAYS) ALL REINTRODUCED SWIFT FOX WILL USE THE PPS. PPS ARE REMOVED FROM THE REINTRODUCTION SITE AFTER 10 DAYS.

ONE OF THE KEYS TO POST RELEASE SURVIVAL IS TO HAVE A PROTECTED AND FAMILIAR PLACE THAT THE FOXES CAN USE AT WILL. THE PPS PROVIDES THAT PROTECTED FAMILIAR PLACE TO REINTRODUCED SWIFT FOXES IN UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT. RELEASE SITES (IN THE BLACKFEET AND BLOOD (KAINAI) PROGRAMMES) ARE SELECTED ON THE BASIS OF;

- JURISDICTIONAL RELEASE SITE APPROVAL,

- A PRE-RELEASE SURVEY OF HABITAT SUITABILITY (PREDATOR PRESSURE, PREY AVAILABILITY, AVAILABILITY OF ESCAPE TERRAIN)
- INCORPORATES ABORIGINAL TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE.

THE GOAL OF SUCCESSFUL REINTRODUCTION IS TO ENCOURAGE THE REINTRODUCED SWIFT FOXES TO STAY IN THE RELEASE SITE AREA. THE USE OF PPS DOES ENCOURAGE THE REINTRODUCED SWIFT FOX TO STAY IN THE RELEASE SITES.

POST RELEASE MONITORING OVER THE LENGTH OF THE BLACKFEET SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMME, DURING THE REINTRODUCTION (1998 – 2002) AND AFTER (2002 – 2005) ESTABLISHED HIGH SURVIVAL (75% FOR REINTRODUCED ADULTS) AND GOOD BREEDING SUCCESS..

The swift fox population grew at a rate of 16% in 2003/04 and 14% in 2004/05...Based on the population growth rate, the number of foxes counted, and the fortunate discovery of a (breeding pair) of swift fox in Augusta, Montana, I consider this reintroduction a success. The Blackfeet tribe has....attained their goal of restoring a culturally important species to Tribal Lands and have even initiated a comeback for swift fox along the Rocky Mountain Front” (Ausband, D. M.Sc. Thesis University of Montana,2005).

SINCE THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE BLACKFEET SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMME, SEVERAL TRIBES IN THE USA HAVE DECIDED TO REINTRODUCE SWIFT FOX IN THE FUTURE, OR ARE EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITY OF SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION. THE BLOOD (KAINAI) TRIBE OF CANADA HAS ALSO INITIATED A SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CEI, THE KAINAI SIINOPAA REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMME.

IN ADDITION, AFTER THE BLACKFEET SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMME WAS UP AND RUNNING, TURNER ENDANGERED SPECIES FOUNDATION INITIATED A SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMME ON THEIR LAND IN SOUTH DAKOTA, AS DID THE SOUTH DAKOTA STATE PARK DEPARTMENT. BOTH TURNER ENDANGERED SPECIES FOUNDATION AND SOUTH DAKOTA GOVERNMENT USED WILD SWIFT FOX CAPTURED IN COLORADO/WYOMING, TRANSPORTED TO SOUTH DAKOTA AND RELEASED (TRANSLOCATED) FOR THEIR PROGRAMMES.

AFTER EXPERIMENTING WITH THE RELEASE METHOD DEVELOPED BY THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT, THE “HARD RELEASE” METHOD, SEE ILLUSTRATION “RELEASING A SWIFT FOX, COURTESY G. SCOTTER, CANADIAN WILDLIFE SERVICE” WHICH RESULTED IN A LESS THAN 30%

SURVIVAL OF SWIFT FOX RELEASED BY SOUTH DAKOTA STATE GOVERNMENT, THE AGENCY ALTERED THEIR REINTRODUCTION METHODOLOGY TO REFLECT THE PPS METHOD DEVELOPED BY CEI AND USED IN THE BLACKFEET AND KAINAI SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES. THE MODIFIED REINTRODUCTION METHOD USED BY THE STATE AGENCY WAS TO PUT IMPORTED, TRANSLOCATED SWIFT FOX DOWN AN ABANDONED BADGER HOLE AND THEN COVER THE HOLE WITH CHICKEN WIRE FOR A MINIMUM OF 48 HOURS. SURVIVAL SUCCESS USING THIS METHOD INCREASED FROM 30% (HARD RELEASE METHOD) TO 60% USING THE MODIFIED PPS METHOD (PERS COM SD STATE GOVT.)



“HARD RELEASE” METHOD DEVELOPED BY THE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES OF CANADA.

AN INTERESTING BUT AS YET UNEXPLORED ASPECT OF THE BLACKFEET SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION HAS BEEN THAT THE SURVIVAL OF REINTRODUCED SWIFT FOX HAS SURPASSED THAT OF THE DOCUMENTED SURVIVAL OF INDIGENOUS SWIFT FOX IN COLORADO AND THE REINTRODUCED SWIFT FOX IN THE CANADIAN PROGRAMME (1983 – 1997). WHY IS THIS?

IN 1998 ON THE INVITATION OF THE BLACKFEET FISH AND GAME BRANCH, CEI CONDUCTED A PILOT REINTRODUCTION, THE FIRST RELEASE OF A FIVE YEAR REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMME. THE REPORT THE 1998 WORK IS AVAILABLE ([RELEASE REPORT 1998](#)). ALSO TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO VIEW THE RELEASE IN PICTURES ([PICTURES OF](#)

THE RELEASE).

SOME PICTURES OF SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION ON BLACKFEET LAND



**A FAMILY OF SWIFT FOX ON THE BLACKFEET RESERVE. THE ADULTS
WERE RELEASED IN 1998 AND THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN IN JULY
1999 BY MATT CARPENTER.**



A WILD SWIFT FOX CUB BORN ON THE BLACKFEET TRIBAL LANDS IN THE SPRING OF 1999. THE PARENTS WERE RELEASED IN THE FALL OF 1998.



"HOME ON THE RANGE", BLACKFEET TRIBAL LANDS MONTANA, 1999.



Natal Densite, Blackfeet Reintroduction, Montana, USA 2001