

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET REINTRODUCTION

1. In this role-play activity, students consider the question of whether the black-footed ferret should be reintroduced on public lands. By presenting the positions of various interest groups to a mock town council meeting and working together to resolve conflicts over the proposed reintroduction of an endangered species, students are involved in resolving competing interests and turning a potential conflict into a collaborative effort. Read the following scenario to the students.

Concerned about the possible impact on adjacent private landowners and people who use the public lands, the BLM has asked the Smithdale Town Council to comment on the proposal. The council has scheduled a hearing to engage citizens in a public dialogue about the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret into its former range near the town of Smithdale.

2. Give each student a copy of the “Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction Background” reading. After students have read the passage, have them form groups of three to five students and give each group one of the “Black-footed Ferret Reintroduction Position Cards.” Each group will represent one of the various community interests.

3. Ask students to prepare an argument for their position by researching how communities have handled the reintroduction of other species, such as the reintroduction of the gray wolf in the West or the red wolf in the East. Students also should find out what issues people are most concerned about and choose a spokesperson to present their argument. Discuss the different types of values each group holds using the information below.

Value Descriptors: These descriptions attempt to name and define some of the values that might be held by individuals.

<u>Value</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Aesthetic	the appreciation of form, composition, and color through the senses.
Economic	the use and exchange of money, materials, and/or services.
Ecological	the maintenance of natural biological systems.
Educational	the accumulation, use and communication of knowledge.
Egocentric	a focus on self-centered individual needs and fulfillment.
Environmental	human activities as they related to quality of natural resources.
Ethical/Moral	present and future human responsibilities, rights and wrongs, and ethical standards.
Ethnic	a focus on the fulfillment of ethnic/cultural goals.
Health	the maintenance of positive human physiological conditions.
Legal	relating to regulations, laws; law enforcement; law suits.
Political	the activities, functions, and politics of governments and their agents.
Recreational	leisure activities.
Religious	the use of belief systems based on faith or dogma.
Scientific	process of empirical research; knowledge gained by systematic study.
Social	shared empathy, feelings, and status.

4. The “town council” can be composed of students (who also research the issue), teachers, or parent volunteers. Students may also want to elect their town council. For the “public meeting,” have the Smithdale Town Council sit in front of the class.

5. Give each group five minutes to state its position to the council, which can then question the spokesperson. Once every group has expressed its opinion, lead students in a general discussion about the issue. Make sure students understand that each group has a valid concern, and that there is no “right” or “wrong” in this situation.

6. After the public meeting, have students assemble in groups made up of one person from each of the interest groups, with the exception of the town council. Challenge each of these new groups to collaboratively come up with a recommendation on how the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret could be managed to have the least impact on the local community, while still allowing for the reintroduction of this species. Use the discussion questions below to guide students’ discussions.

7. Each of the multi-interest groups should then present its solution, and the Smithdale Town Council can then vote on what to recommend to the BLM about

Discussion Questions

- 1. Would the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret improve the overall health of the ecosystem, and, if so, how?*
- 2. What are some things about the impacts to local communities that would be useful to know? Examples could include the economic impact to adjacent private landowners (normally, the BLM would not reintroduce the species on private lands although the species might naturally expand there), energy and mining companies, hunters and anglers, and cattle ranchers.*
- 3. What is the best use of this public land for human interests? For biological diversity? What solution could satisfy the needs of both?*
- 4. How do the values of the various interests differ?*
- 5. What can you give up or alter about your position?*
- 6. What if you knew the economic benefits and costs of some of the choices? Would that make a difference in your decision?*
- 7. How does the fact that the black-footed ferret was historically a part of the ecosystem affect your recommendation?*

Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction

The Black-Footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) is considered the most endangered mammal in the country, and, in fact, by 1980 was believed to be extinct. IN the late 1800s, however, an estimated 5.6 million of these animals were found throughout the Great Plains. As the prairie was settled, large stretches of native grassland were plowed into farmland, eliminating prairie dog habitats. This had a devastating effect on ferrets, whose lives revolve around prairie dog towns. Ferrets eat prairie dogs and live in prairie dog burrows, hunting mostly at night.

In many areas, poisoning programs wiped out large colonies of prairie dogs, leaving only small, isolated dog towns. As prairie dog numbers declined, black-footed ferrets nearly disappeared. By the 1950s, very few ferrets were left. The ferret was officially listed as an endangered species in 1967. By 1980, the species was thought to be extinct. However, in 1981 a small ferret population was discovered near Meeteetse, Wyoming. While this population peaked at about 130 animals in 1984, by 1986 canine distemper (thought to be transmitted through domestic animals but also carried by wild animals) had reduced it to 18 known animals. Worried about the ferret's ability to survive, biologists captured these few remaining animals and launched a successful captive-breeding program. The captive population has now increased to more than 400, and the animals have been reintroduced into Wyoming, Montana, South Dakota, and Arizona.

The goal of the program is to establish 10 free-ranging populations of black-footed ferrets, spread over the widest possible area within their former range. Each of these populations is to have 30 or more breeding adults. It is hoped that 1,500 free-ranging black-footed ferrets will live in the wild by the year 2010.

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Black-footed Ferret Reintroduction Position Cards

Private Landowners

Private landowners fear that activities on their own lands might be restricted. They want

- to cooperatively decide the number and distribution of prairie dogs (and correspondingly ferrets) that may occur on privately owned and leased public-domain lands.
- assurance that they will not be forced to place benefits to black-footed ferrets ahead of economic gain and/or stability.
- to continue operations and activities associated with their lands without fear of problems that could develop from the potential or actual accidental killing or displacement of an endangered species.

Energy and Mining Companies

Energy and mining companies fear that the animals will interfere with their ability to work in the area and put them in violation of the Endangered Species Act. They want

- assurance that accidental killing or displacement of a black-footed ferret while conducting approved operations will not be in violation of the Endangered Species Act and its penalty provisions.
- clearly established provisions for new development and exploration, which will aid them in avoiding impacts to black-footed ferrets and their habitat.
- an opportunity to become a major participant in a program that is likely to receive nationwide attention and public interest.

Hunters

Hunters fear that their legal rights to hunt in the area will be curtailed or eliminated. They want

- access to hunt deer, pronghorn, sage grouse, and small game except in the actual vicinity of release cages during the release phase of reintroduction (one to five years).
- to be able to shoot prairie dogs, except in prairie dog towns where black-footed ferrets are in release cages or are establishing a new population (one to five years) and may suffer from a reduction in the prairie dogs, the ferrets' primary prey.
- assurance that accidentally harming or killing a black-footed ferret will not result in prosecution if it is properly reported.

Wildlife Biologists

Wildlife biologists would like to see the black-footed ferret restored to the wild so eventually it can be taken off the Endangered Species List. They want

- to build self-sustaining populations of ferrets at several locations so that captive-breeding facilities are no longer needed for reintroduction.
- to encourage the widest possible distribution of reintroduced black-footed ferret populations.
- to minimize the potential impact of canine distemper and other diseases common to carnivores to both ferrets and their primary prey, prairie dogs, by avoiding areas where the potential for this disease is greatest.
- to design the black-footed ferret management program to be compatible with existing ranch, livestock, and mineral-extraction operations so that neither lifestyles nor income potential are negatively affected.
- areas of at least 10,000 acres for each reintroduced ferret population that are relatively free of diseases, particularly canine distemper and plague, that could wipe out an entire colony.

Ranchers

Ranchers are concerned that livestock grazing will be restricted. They want

- to continue operations and activities associated with their private lands or leased public lands without fear of problems that could develop from the potential or actual accidental killing or displacement of an endangered species.
- assurance that prairie dogs, which are the black-footed ferret's primary prey, do not compete with livestock for the available forage (that is, that benefits to black-footed ferrets will not be placed ahead of ranchers' economic livelihoods).
- acknowledgment that grazing is compatible with the maintenance of prairie dogs.