

The black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) is one of the most endangered species in North America. The ferret is in a large family of mammals whose members include the skunk, badger, wolverine, otter, and mink.





Black-footed ferrets were once found from Alberta and Saskatchewan Canada, throughout the Great Plains of the United States, and northern Mexico. These locations are ideal for another mammal, the prairie dog.

Black-footed ferrets depend almost entirely on prairie dogs. Prairie dogs comprise over 90 percent of ferrets food source. An adult ferret can consume over 100 prairie dogs in one year.



Black-footed ferrets use prairie dog burrows for their homes. Scientists estimate that approximately 90 percent of a ferrets life is spent underground in passages and chambers made by prairie dogs.



Prairie dog towns are the best ecosystems to support self-sustaining populations of black-footed ferrets. Prairie dog colonies are essential to ferrets in the wild.



Ferrets are long, slender, and flexible, which make them a perfect prairie dog predator. This body shape is ideal for moving through narrow tunnels. They have razor sharp teeth which they use to kill their prey.



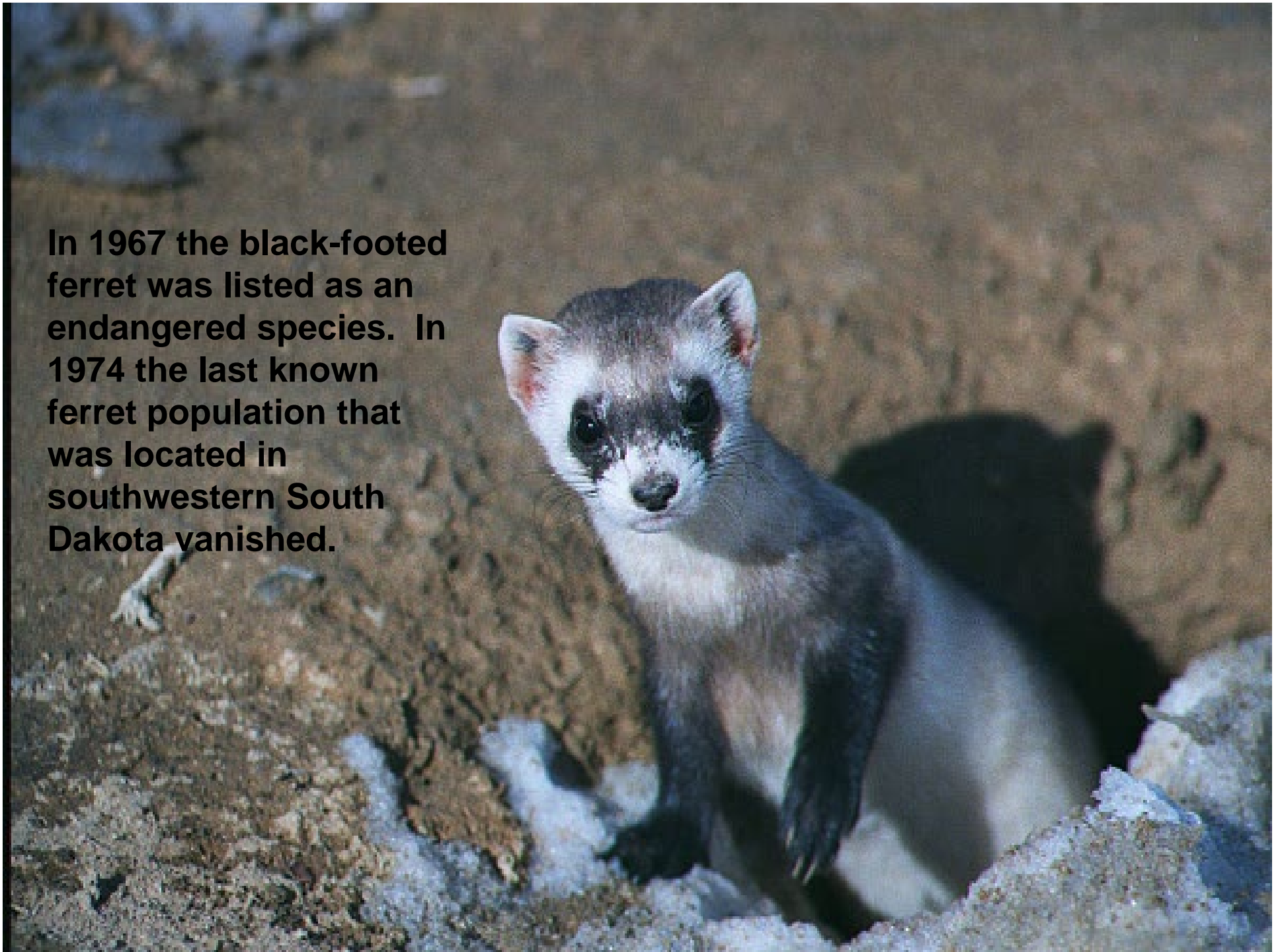


Ferrets are predators but they are also prey. Black-footed ferrets are hunted by owls, hawks, eagles, coyotes, badgers, and bobcats; all of which are found at Wind Cave National Park.

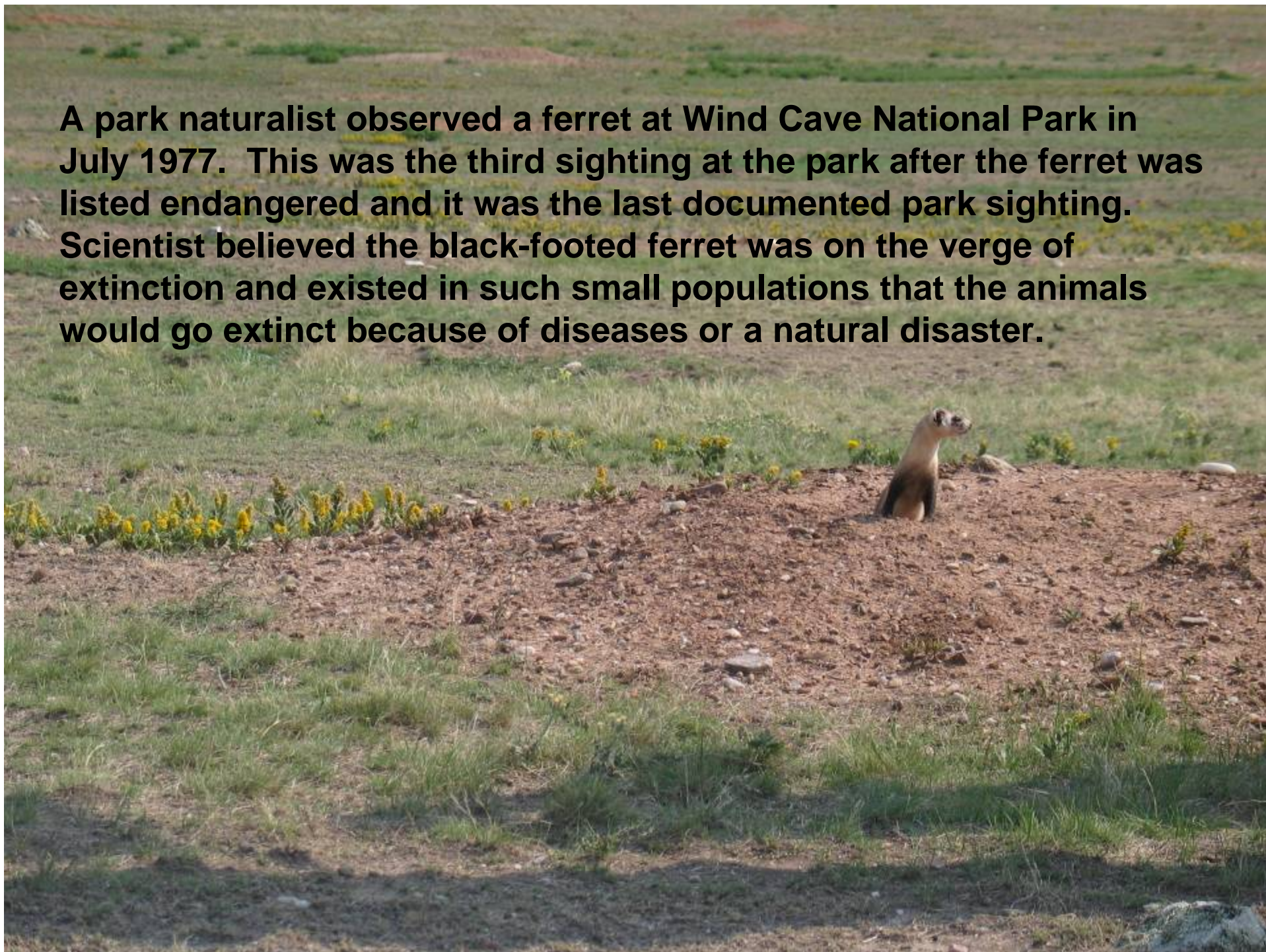


The extermination of prairie dogs, and the conversion of prairie dog towns into land for agricultural use, prompted a decline in prairie dog populations. This reduced the black-footed ferret's main food source. Disease like sylvatic plague and canine distemper also took their toll on ferret populations.

In 1967 the black-footed ferret was listed as an endangered species. In 1974 the last known ferret population that was located in southwestern South Dakota vanished.



A park naturalist observed a ferret at Wind Cave National Park in July 1977. This was the third sighting at the park after the ferret was listed endangered and it was the last documented park sighting. Scientist believed the black-footed ferret was on the verge of extinction and existed in such small populations that the animals would go extinct because of diseases or a natural disaster.

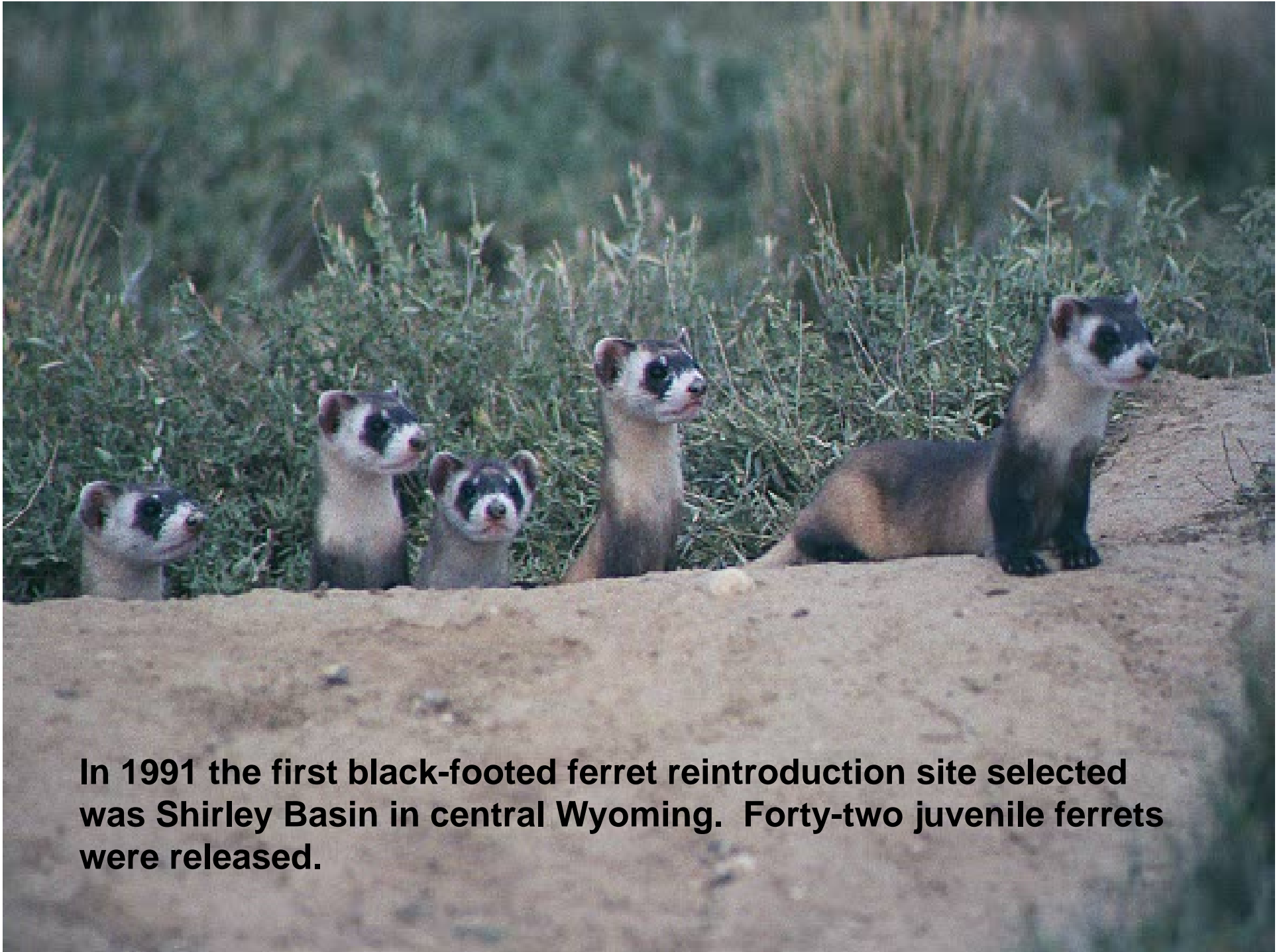


In 1981 a ranch dog named Shep killed a black-footed ferret near Meeteetse, Wyoming. This led to the discovery of approximately 130 ferrets in that area. These ferrets were studied but an outbreak of sylvatic plague and canine distemper decimated the population.





Scientists captured the last 18 known ferrets from Meeteetse by the end of 1987. These animals were transported to a facility in Sybille Canyon, Wyoming where a captive breeding program began. This facility later became known as the National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center.



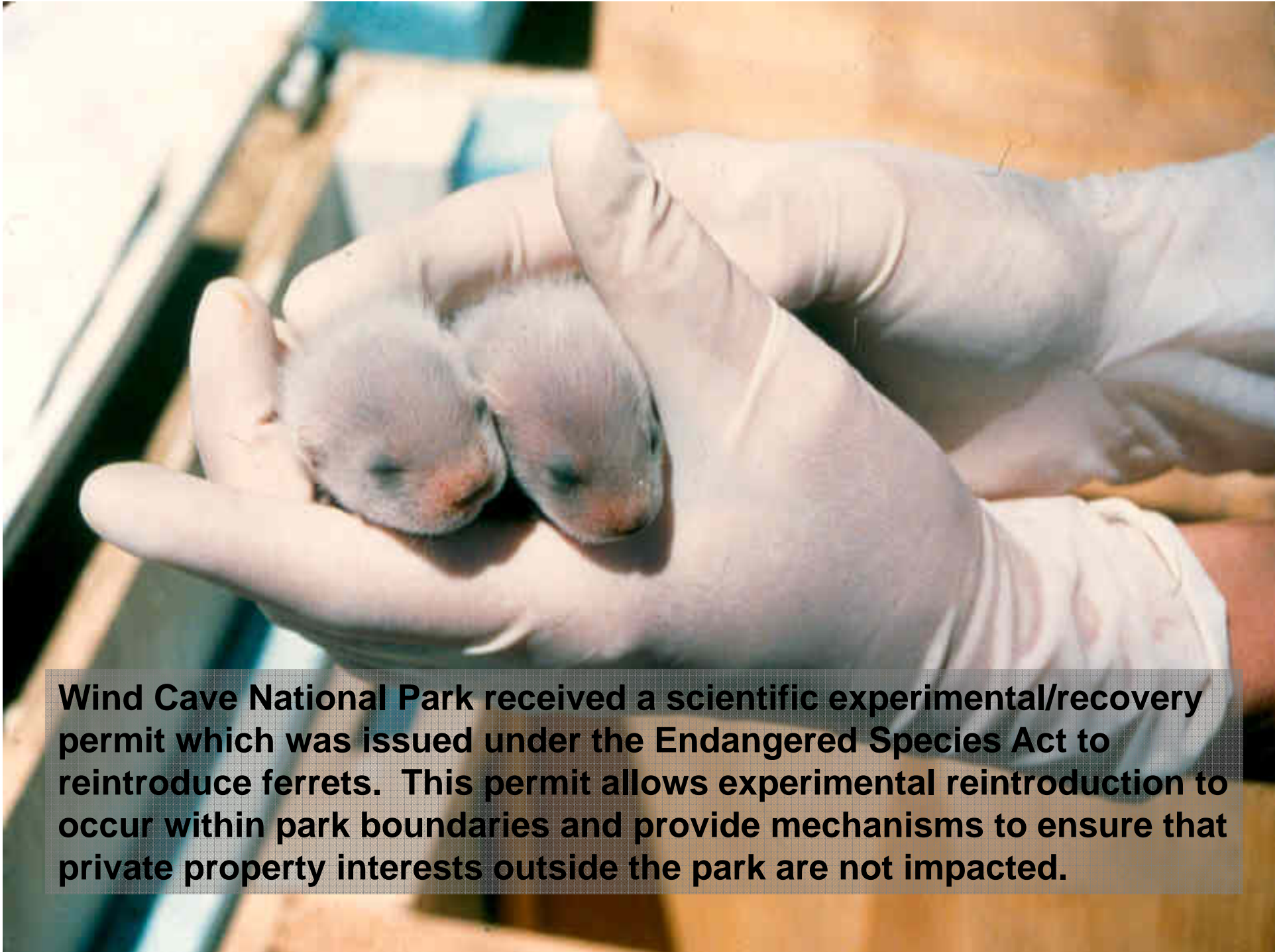
In 1991 the first black-footed ferret reintroduction site selected was Shirley Basin in central Wyoming. Forty-two juvenile ferrets were released.



Wind Cave National Park is one of the few remaining plague-free locations with a large enough population of black-tailed prairie dogs to attempt a reintroduction effort.



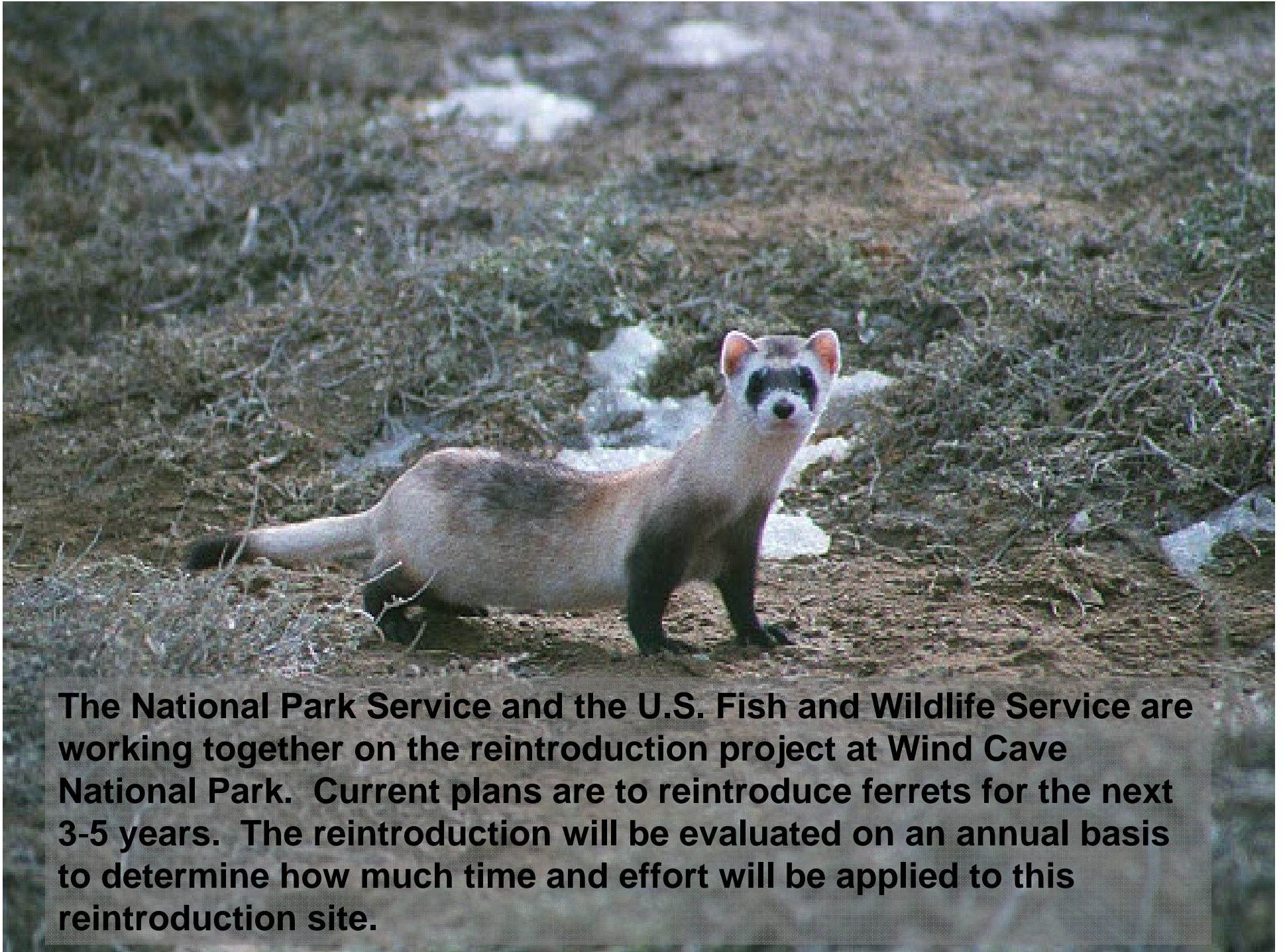
Starting in 2000, national park resource management staff began working on a plan to reintroduce black-footed ferrets at Wind Cave National Park. This process included completing an environmental assessment study, prairie dog management plan, and applying for a special permit to reintroduce an endangered species.



Wind Cave National Park received a scientific experimental/recovery permit which was issued under the Endangered Species Act to reintroduce ferrets. This permit allows experimental reintroduction to occur within park boundaries and provide mechanisms to ensure that private property interests outside the park are not impacted.

On July 4, 2007 the first 8 ferrets were reintroduced to Wind Cave National Park. Between July and November a total of 49 ferrets were released. Sixteen of the ferrets were born in captivity at the Black-Footed Ferret Captive Breeding Center in Fort Collins, Colorado. Thirty-three were wild ferrets captured at Conata Basin, South Dakota and transported to Wind Cave National Park.





The National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are working together on the reintroduction project at Wind Cave National Park. Current plans are to reintroduce ferrets for the next 3-5 years. The reintroduction will be evaluated on an annual basis to determine how much time and effort will be applied to this reintroduction site.



To date ferrets have been reintroduced in Wyoming, South Dakota, Arizona, Montana, Utah, Colorado, Kansas, and Chihuahua, Mexico. Currently the most successful population is in Conata Basin near Badlands National Park, South Dakota.

The black-footed ferret recovery goal is to have at least 10 separate, self-sustaining, black-footed ferret populations. To achieve this goal many federal, state, and local agencies are working together along with private citizens.





Public involvement is key to the recovery of the black-footed ferret. If you see a black-footed ferret in Wind Cave National Park please report the sighting to a park ranger. This information can help wildlife managers learn more and better protect this amazing animal.