



International Wolf Center

Teaching the World About

By DEBRA MITTS-SMITH

In a world where super storms, droughts, energy concerns and the fate of numerous species dominate the headlines, the ability to distinguish between facts and opinions becomes increasingly important for those who are concerned about our planet. The need to understand the economic, cultural, legal and social ramifications of proposed solutions to environmental questions is imperative—and not just for adults. Environmental education and literacy are essential tools for understanding and appreciating the science, the beauty and the importance of our natural environment. Young people will inherit our world, and we need to provide them with the knowledge to be its stewards and the hearts to treasure its beauty.

What is environmental education?

The best type of environmental education does more than impart information. It fosters understanding and awareness of wildlife, plants, insects, eco-systems and geological formations. It provides young people with opportunities to learn by actively observing, exploring and questioning. At its best, environmental education includes both classroom learning and outdoor problem-solving activities—young people investigating nature's diversity and tackling real-world problems. Spending time in the field as an adjunct to classroom lessons is a foundation for lifelong learning.



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Environmental education should not advocate particular viewpoints or policies; instead, it should impart scientific facts that lead to understanding and intellectual growth. Properly done, it helps students develop the critical thinking skills necessary for making informed decisions. It instills appreciation for the environment and commitment to turn decisions into thoughtful, balanced environmental policy. It exposes young people to the array of stakeholder beliefs, opinions and concerns that surround our most pressing ecological challenges. And it enriches lives with an understanding of the natural world.

Ginger Potter (2010), in “Environmental Education for the 21st Century”

argues that environmental education outcomes must go beyond instilling awareness of our natural and environmental challenges to include a deeper understanding of the issues and a sense of personal responsibility for involvement in finding solutions.

Wolf education and environmental education

Education about wolves is an important part of environmental education. For many people, the wolf is an icon of the wilderness. The fall 2004 issue of *International Wolf* focused on wolf education in its past and present forms as well as its future direction. The articles in the 2004 issue showed wolf educa-

tion to be dynamic, adapting its content and methods as scientific understanding, social attitudes and wolf numbers and status changed.

Educating the public about wolves requires more than scientific research to counter and discredit pervasive wolf stereotypes, myths and misinformation. Although science is the essential foundation of learning, the ambassador wolves at places like the International Wolf Center provide people the opportunity to observe real wolves. This experience often ignites young people’s interest in nature, deepening their connection to wild animals and the natural world. A balance between the intellectual experience of learning about wolves and the emotional ties that result from watching them is the essence of good environmental education. The best wolf programs not only keep abreast of advances in scientific understanding of wolves and their role in the ecosystem, but also provide objective reports on the political, legal and economic effects of wolves living close to humans.

Over time, it is not just the content of wolf education that has changed. In the early days, wolf education was the realm of researchers and park rangers. Today, information about wolves is imparted by people from diverse backgrounds—from research scientists to volunteers and political lobbyists—and through platforms from classrooms to nature centers, zoos, websites and blogs.

While numbers and formats of resources have increased, so has the need to distinguish credible, accurate science from faulty data that conflates opinions with reality. Ideally, nature education programs—wolf programs in particular—should arm their participants with the critical thinking skills to question their sources and pursue accurate, credible information.

Environmental education and the learning experience

Environmental education today is surely more robust than it was in 2004. It includes formal, structured curriculum as well as informal, unstructured questioning, exploration and even play. It takes place in classrooms supported by books, films, artifacts, images and websites. Young people also access information about the environment at home, at school and almost anywhere else via the internet. But the preferred locations to learn about nature are places where one finds nature: backyards, gardens, forests and woods, and state and national parks. Even cityscapes have lessons to offer; hawks abound in fields but they also nest on the window ledges of skyscrapers.

The International Wolf Center offers many kinds of learning experiences: on-site, outreach, field trips and webinars. Last year, IWC conducted outreach programs in more than 300 classrooms and nature centers in Minnesota's Twin Cities metro area. International Wolf Center Outreach Director Tara Morrison introduced young people to wolf biology, wolf behavior, wolf habitat, physical and social adaptations, predator/prey relationships, pack dynamics, the challenges wildlife face and the consequences of habitat loss on Minnesota wildlife.

Further, through lectures, exhibits and classes (on-site and online) on wolf communication, research methods, behavior and habitat, as well as human-wolf conflicts, International Wolf Center educators engage people of all ages in activities that foster interest and build connections with wolves. Many of these programs serve as a gateway to exploring other wildlife and the environment in general.

Environmental education also occurs in less formal contexts like a neighbor-

hood park, a hike through the woods, a camping trip or even a child exploring the family's backyard. In formal settings, adults (educators, wildlife scientists, park rangers, scout leaders) determine the content and goals of the class; in informal settings, the child's questions about birds, insects, animals, rocks and plants guide the activities. The adult in these settings (teacher, scout leader, parent, grandparent, or even an older sibling) helps the child explore. In other words, the child's interests determine the "program" — what will be discussed and investigated. The interplay of teaching in formal and informal ways, followed by the student using new knowledge to explore nature, is an important goal of environmental education.

Experiential learning has always been essential to environmental education. Seeing a real wolf, even a captive one, evokes emotional responses in people of all ages. To observe how the wolf moves, to watch as it interacts with other wolves, and to hear it howling (and to learn how to howl) deepens a person's connections as it increases his or her appreciation, knowledge and awareness of the real animal.



Re-naturing the "denatured" child

Environmental education opportunities, especially those that take place outdoors, potentially do more than connect people with nature. In an age where technology and organized activities dominate the lives of most children, time spent outdoors is increasingly rare and important. Richard Louv, in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, describes the "de-natured child" as a child who is disconnected from nature and who spends his or her days inside playing video games or watching TV. He argues that even young people who are involved in organized sports do not experience nature and the natural world on a deep level. Louv advocates getting young people outside, connecting with and experiencing nature as a way to mitigate an array of cognitive, emotional, social and physical issues from attention deficit disorder to obesity. For Louv and other advocates of environmental education, nature is part of a happy and balanced childhood.

Today's child may live a well-regulated life with free time dominated by extracurricular activities. As urban environments grow and green spaces disappear, it's more difficult to for young people to connect with the natural world. These



Wolves at Our Door

"Wolves at Our Door content is engaging and informative. We coexist with wolves in Minnesota, and it is important to learn about how they live in our environment," said one teacher after her class took part in the International Wolf Center's free outreach program for Twin Cities metro area K-12 students.

The *Wolves at Our Door* program gives students opportunities to learn about wolf biology, behavior and predator/prey dynamics, helping them understand the origins of myths about wolves and the nature of conflicts between wolves and humans. Educator Tara Morrison brings the wolf to life in the classroom as children get to feel a wolf pelt, handle a skull and see video of wolves in action.

Through use of facts and sound science, topics are explained and discussed with students from suburban and inner-city schools. Young people learn about the importance of habitat preservation and how loss of wilderness affects wildlife. Pre- and post-program test data show that these programs significantly increase students' knowledge and inform their perceptions of the controversial wolf.

Another teacher commented, "Wolves tend to have a bad reputation in Minnesota. This program helps students understand the truth about wolves, their value to wildlife and the concept of interdependence in ecosystems. It also reinforces our state science-education standards. The presentation style is interactive, using a variety of media to get the message across."

For more information or to schedule a program in the Twin Cities area, go to wolvesatourdoor.org.

changes are accelerating, and need to be countered by increasingly engaging and creative programs and resources like those offered by the International Wolf Center.

The International Wolf Center introduces children to the natural world through the lives of wolves, giving them a foundation to help them explore nature and nurture their appreciation of the natural world.

Learning about wolves is only one step in creating an appreciation of the natural world—and a commitment to protect it. International Wolf Center programs and resources urge the student to look beyond the classroom and to go outdoors, to pause beside a pond, to watch a field for signs of life and explore

the forest floor. The wolf is a captivating entry point to a vast, rich world that is being threatened by urban growth and human indifference. ■

For more information



Louv, R. (2006) *Last Child in the Woods*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.



Potter, G. (2010). *Environmental Education for the 21st Century: Where Do We Go Now?* *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 41(1), 22-33.

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