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# INTERNATIONAL WOLF

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Don Grandmaison

The Wolves and Humans exhibit was viewed by more than 2.5 million people across the United States including Hawaii. It was built and opened in 1984 at the nationally acclaimed Science Museum of Minnesota.

## The Early History of the International Wolf Center

*“A much-increased emphasis on the wolf is recommended for the [Superior National Forest] Visitors’ Center. An entire regularly scheduled slide talk on the wolf is called for, as well as the frequent references to the animal now made in a number of presentations. The wolf could be to the Superior [National Forest] almost what ‘Old Faithful’ is to Yellowstone. A number of exhibits and displays could be set up. A whole new building the size of the Voyageurs Center could easily be filled to tell the story of the wolf, and such a structure might well be a good investment.”*

P. 9 from “A Plan for the Management of the Timber Wolf on The Superior National Forest of Minnesota”  
June 20, 1972, L. David Mech (by contract from the Superior National Forest).

by L. DAVID MECH

Thus was born the idea for the International Wolf Center. But ideas are easy to come by—implementation is more often the problem.

It was 10 years later when the next milestone along the road to development of the Center was reached. The Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) contacted me in 1982 about developing a “*Wolves and Humans*” exhibit. The museum had obtained a substantial grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to build the exhibit and to send it to six other venues after its six-month display in St. Paul. I ended up chairing a committee to design the *Wolves and Humans* exhibit.

*Wolves and Humans* opened at the SMM in 1984 and was the first large natural-history exhibit anywhere to examine the social, biological, mythological and ethical relationships between an animal and humans. The exhibit presented a historical look at the myths, legends and folklore surrounding the wolf, current knowledge about wolf biology and behavior, and controversies that arise when wolves and humans interact. The exhibit was an instant success, and after its stint in St. Paul, was sent to Yellowstone

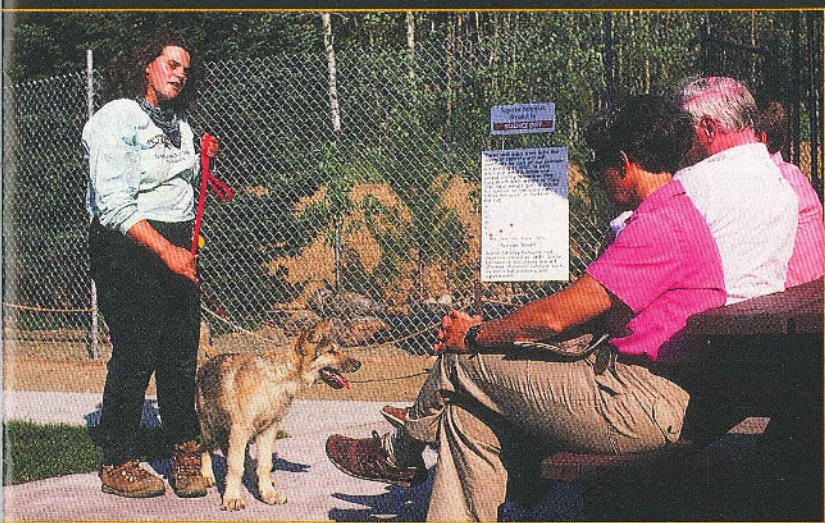
National Park. There it helped pave the way for the reintroduction of wolves into the park by galvanizing public support for this historic undertaking. *Wolves and Humans* later earned a place in the American Association of Museum’s book, *Riches, Rivals and Radicals: One Hundred Years of Museums in America*, as one of the most influential exhibits of the 20th Century. Originally scheduled for a six-venue, three-year tour, *Wolves and Humans* was seen by more than 2.5 million people in 18 cities in the US and Canada.

When the SMM informed me that, unless some special use could be found for the exhibit after its last venue, the museum would have to dismantle it, I seized the opportunity. We could use the exhibit as a lever to develop a wolf center. Several wolf advocates agreed to help. We organized in 1984, added a variety of new members, and incorporated in 1985 as The Committee for an International Wolf Center (the Committee). The offer of the exhibit, valued at \$500,000 at the time, was a crucial incentive to encourage support from various granting

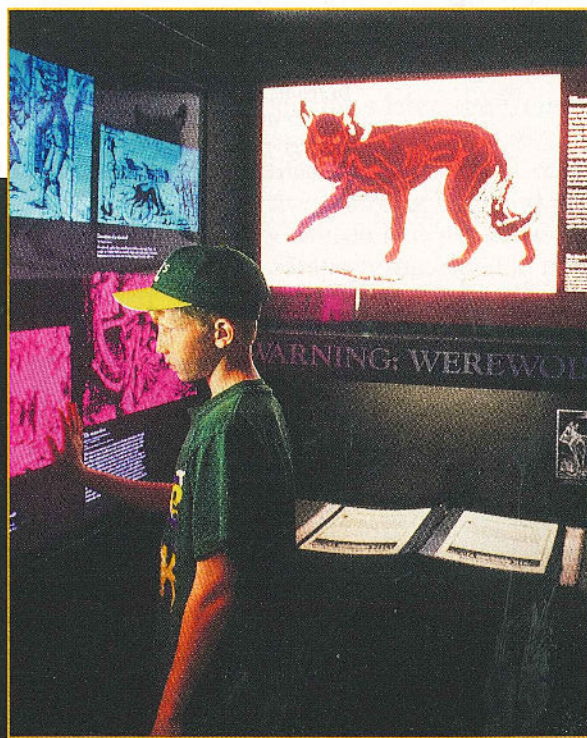
agencies, governmental bodies, and private benefactors.

The Committee wanted a center to be located in Minnesota wolf range to demonstrate that the wolf had a positive, nonconsumptive economic value in addition to the value of its pelt and in contrast to its negative impact on livestock. Thus we asked the northern Minnesota communities in wolf range to compete for hosting the International Wolf Center. The word “international” was added because of my chairmanship of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Wolf Specialist Group, an organization of wolf authorities from around the world. I could call upon wolf specialists from abroad to advise on the project, to visit the Center, and to inform audiences about the wolf in their own countries to help broaden the Center’s appeal and expertise.

Four communities submitted strong proposals for the Center: Duluth, Grand



Curator Lori Schmidt moved Jedediah to the Center’s temporary exhibit in summer 1989 at the opening of the Voyageur Visitor Center wolf exhibit.



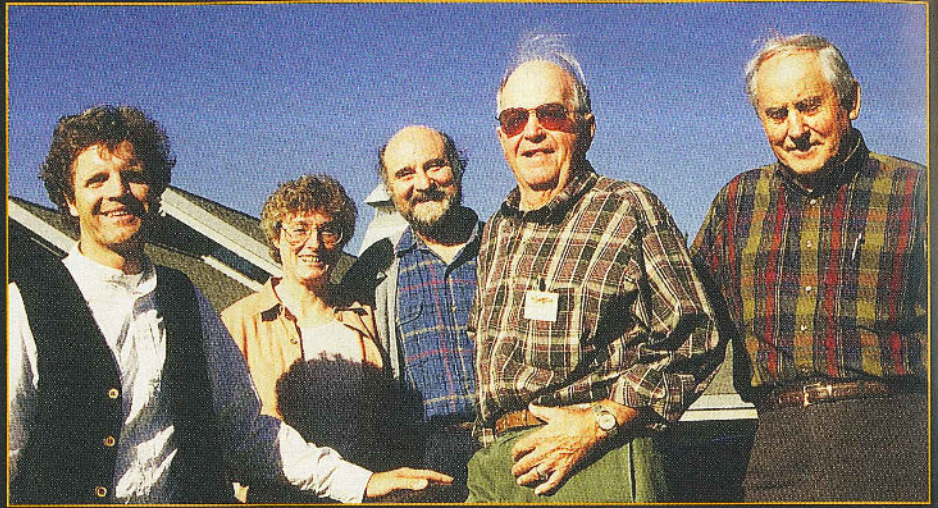
The *Wolves and Humans* exhibit challenged all ages with unique opportunities for learning.

Jeff Frey & Associates Photography

Lynn Rogers



Board member Nancy Gibson helped raise the Center's pups



Early board members and supporters of the Center were Paul Schurke, Nancy Jo Tubbs, Dave Mech, Bill Mills and Milt Stenlund.



In front: Mike Link, Chair of the Committee for an International Wolf Center and Elizabeth Olson. Behind: Jon Harris, Vermilion Community College president; Milt Stenlund, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources biologist; Roger Baker, USFS district ranger and Sig Olson, Jr.

Lynn Rogers



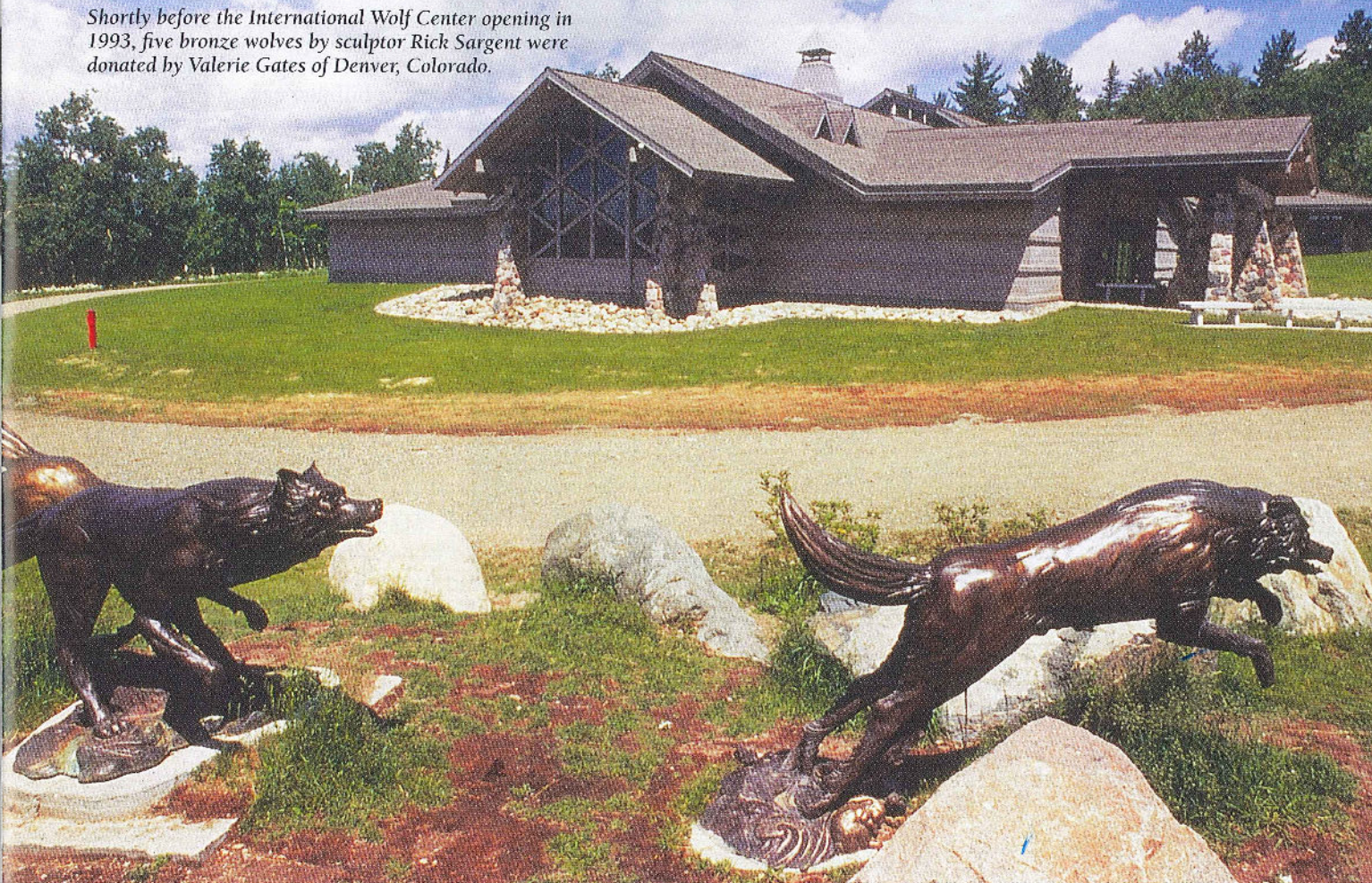
Mary Ortiz was the Center's first full-time staffer, and eventually served as executive director.

*But ideas are easy to come by—  
implementation is more  
often the problem*

Rapids, International Falls, and Ely. The Committee spent three days visiting the cities, meeting with local officials, viewing potential sites, and examining statistics on visitation rates, tourism facilities, and several other factors. We conducted an elaborate analysis of the advantages and incentives each contending city offered. After much discussion, the Committee chose Ely in November 1985. Not only was Ely in the heart of wolf range, but it was also where most of the state's wolf research was currently, as well as historically, headquartered. Both elements would serve the Center well in its planned programs and field trips.

Once Ely was chosen, Governor Rudy Perpich, who much favored the Center, flew to Ely and offered state help to build "the best wolf center" we could. Seed funding of \$55,000 came quickly from the Iron Range Resources Rehabilitation Board, allowing the Committee to continue our planning, including architectural work. Another \$259,000 was granted in 1986. The Committee hired an executive director, board member Mike Link, and recruited new board members from Ely including arctic explorer Paul Schurke. Mary Ortiz of Discovery Adventure began volunteering for the Committee in 1987. She was hired in 1988 to assist and later served in several positions with the Center, including executive director.

Shortly before the International Wolf Center opening in 1993, five bronze wolves by sculptor Rick Sargent were donated by Valerie Gates of Denver, Colorado.



Lynn Rogers

In 1987 a new feasibility study suggested that Ely may not have high-enough visitation to support a wolf center and recommended that the Committee reopen its site-selection process. We did so, but after Committee members visited new sites and heard presentations by local proponents, we again chose Ely. The legislature then granted the Committee \$150,000 in 1988, providing that a legislative committee be allowed to review the site-selection process. Several new members had also joined the board, including Nancy Gibson, public relations consultant, formerly with TV's *Newton's Apple* and the Minnesota Zoo, in 1988. An advisory board was formed, and Will Steger, co-leader of the Steger Polar Expedition, was made an honorary member.

The legislative site-selection committee ruled unanimously that the Committee had followed the proper site-selection process. We were then free

to continue garnering financial support for a center in Ely in 1988.

Also in 1988, the Committee opened an interim Wolf Center in the U.S. Forest Service's Voyageurs Visitor Center just east of Ely, which had been offered for the site of the permanent center. It housed a few displays, disseminated literature, and featured four captive wolves. This interim center was to be a promise of things to come. The following year the Minnesota Legislature granted \$126,000 to jump-start the education programs, and *International Wolf* magazine began publication in fall 1990.

During the 1990 legislative session, the Committee held an international wolf symposium in St. Paul (the first of five so far), attended by about 300 people, including wolf authorities from around the globe. The legislature invited the international wolf specialists to a full session, where all joined in an international wolf howl.

A few days later, the Committee's request for \$1.8 million reached the House-Senate Conference Committee. Intensive lobbying by board member Nancy Gibson and pro-bono lobbyist Ellen Sampson succeeded in obtaining an appropriation of \$1.2 million—a bittersweet victory. After we had scaled back the project from a \$3.8-million building to a \$1.8-million building, it was disconcerting to receive only partial funding. However, this appropriation provided leverage for obtaining private donations.

The Committee immediately set out to raise additional funds. A major contribution from Minnesota philanthropist and environmentalist Wallace Dayton greatly assisted and inspired others' support. In addition, a life-size bronze sculpture of five running wolves, valued at \$75,000, was donated for the Center grounds by Valerie Gates, of Denver, Colorado. The Committee also had to raise more funds to buy land and



In the summer of 1989, the Center featured a temporary exhibit of four pups, Jedediah, Ballazar, Raissa and Bausha, under the care of Curator Lori Schmidt.

The first permanent pack at the Center included MacKenzie, Lucas, Kiana and Lakota.



Lynn Rogers

*With some 6,000 members, and 1.5 million annual visits to its Web site, the International Wolf Center has become the world's foremost disseminator of objective science-based information about the wolf.*

trade that land to the Forest Service for the Visitor Center land the Committee needed. Then, since state money would be used to build the Center, the land had to be donated to a state agency, in this case, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Meanwhile, a new governor had been elected, and he froze all the bonding money the previous legislature had approved, including that for the Center. After considerable lobbying and land-

purchase negotiations by Nancy Gibson, however, Governor Arne Carlson released the Center's funds. Architectural plans soon gave way to construction of a 17,000-square-foot building that

incorporated the U.S. Forest Service's Voyageurs Visitor Center on a hill just east of Ely. (Several years later, the Minnesota legislature granted another \$750,000 to complete a second phase of the building, including a 120-seat auditorium from which to view a captive wolf pack, \$350,000 for the Little Wolf Children's Exhibit in 2000, and \$350,000 to remodel the building's entrance.)

The International Wolf Center opened in June 1993, and like the *Wolves and Humans* exhibit, it was an immediate success. Four captive wolves, Kiana, Lakota, Lucas, and Mackenzie were the first ambassador wolves. Nancy Tubbs, an Ely resorter and writer who lived in the middle of the Burntside Lake wolf-pack territory, joined the board in 1992 and left it briefly to become interim administrator until September 1993. Walter Medwid, hired earlier to start in autumn, became the first executive director.

Thus, some 21 years after the germ of the idea, the International Wolf Center came into full fruition, and the result has been an even better investment than originally envisioned. From a purely economic vantage point, a 1995 University of Minnesota study demonstrated that the Center produced a \$3 million impact on the local economy. Now, some 30 years after formation of the Committee for an International Wolf Center, annual visitation has reached 35,000-50,000 people at the Center itself. With some 6,000 members, and 1.5 million annual visits to its Web site, the Center has become the world's foremost disseminator of objective science-based information about the wolf. ■

*Dr. L. David Mech is a senior research scientist for the U.S. Geological Survey and founder and vice chair of the International Wolf Center. He has studied wolves for more than 50 years and has published several books and many articles about them.*