

To Teachers:

This article appeared in The Wolf Sanctuary Review. The author, Debbie Causevic, is the Public Relations Coordinator for the Wolf Sanctuary. We think you will find the article relevant and thought-provoking.

WHERE IS WILD?

Recently, during an outreach program for the Wolf Sanctuary, I was faced with what I believe to be one of the most profound questions I had ever been asked by one of my program attendees. In this case, the person happened to be a 6-year-old boy. His hand was lifted into the air, as were at least 12 others of similar shape and size. When I finally called on him, I felt I was well-prepared for any question he might ask - which usually varied anywhere from, "Do wolves bite?" and "Can I pet a wolf?" to the occasional personal account of a wolf living nearby a child's house.

What he asked, though, presented such a myriad of potential answers that, for the first time in a long time, I was stumped. It wasn't that he questioned one of the little-known facts regarding wolves that I had learned long ago and stored in the deep recesses of my brain, yet was unable to retrieve. Instead, his question was so simple and straightforward, yet at the same time so infinitely complex, that I found myself turning over in my head how best to answer him.

For the first time I was acutely aware of how I can shape a young person's mind by the choice of information that I present in a program whose relatively simple aim is to better inform individuals about the lives of wolves. His question was in response to what I had said earlier about the goal of the Wolf Sanctuary to reintroduce wolves into the wild. He had asked, quite simply, "Where is wild?" And he expected a simple answer in return.

I quickly realized that my answer would need to be more than just relaying impressive facts which can be quickly forgotten. This young boy was searching for a concept, a concept that would bring clarity to a puzzled picture forming in his mind. As he patiently awaited my response, I could imagine the thoughts that must be going through his head. "What's the big deal about reintroduction anyway? Why all the fuss? The city park near my house: is that wild? Or that patch of forest the bus passes on the way to school: is that wild? What about the rolling farmland just outside the city? Isn't that wild?"

I briefly wondered if I should try to explain wild in terms of relative size. A simple fact about the average size of territory that a single wolf needs to survive might fit in nicely here. Or should I speak in ideals - of land without humans, livestock, fences, and roads? Or, more realistically, of approved recovery zones, radio-collars and tracking devices? I finally opted to tell the young boy that wild, like many things in life, has different meanings for everyone. After all, there are many degrees of wildness. Humans, for example, might be content to only experience wild in the wide network of parks, which are designed, for the most part, with human needs in mind. Other forms of life, particularly those that we label as wild, have different needs. I tried to explain that for every animal, there is a unique definition of wild. For some types of wildlife, back yard, forest patches, and city parks are ideal. Others, like the wolf, need something else.

Wolves, I explained, need to live in places that are apart from humans. They need land - undeveloped land. Land without parking lots, shopping malls and highways. They need prey, and they need space in which to hunt and track it. They need trees to mark as their own. They need earth in which to dig their dens. Young wolves need land to which to disperse when they decide it is time to leave their pack and find a mate.

That afternoon, I better realized the sheer immensity of the task facing environmental educators. It is said that the future of our planet's wildness lies in the hands of today's children. Perhaps the conservationists of today realize this and often times push a little too hard to make children understand the wide array of problems facing us. I often catch myself trying to squeeze all the information I can about wolves and reintroduction efforts into an hour-long education program in hopes that by teaching children everything I can, they will make the right decisions when they are faced someday with such issues as finding a place for wolves in a crowded world.

Perhaps I should try to forego telling the children at my programs some of the somber realities facing wolves and other wildlife, and focus instead on helping them to better develop the concepts still forming in their fragile minds. Concepts like freedom and wildness, those very concepts that might perhaps instill a greater appreciation of wild life.

After all, I only have an hour, and I am trying to make an impression that will last a lifetime.