

The Community of Life: Two Activities for Older Students

A. Predator Pyramid: Wolves and Ecosystems

B. “Connecting With Wolves” Essay Response

Teachers Notes

Grade: 6 to 8

Subject: Language Arts

Group Size: Whole class, small groups

Duration: 50-minute period for each activity

Skills: Understanding ecosystem relationships, informational reading and analysis

Vocabulary: ungulate, predator, primary consumer, primary producer, scavenger, herbivore, carnivore, secondary consumer

OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

- \$ Articulate the role of wolves in the ecosystem and the scientific definition of the web of life (activity A)
- \$ Respond to the author’s perspective that in addition to the scientific definition of the web of life, there is an aesthetic and spiritual one as well (activity B)

A. PREDATOR PYRAMID: **Wolves and Ecosystems**

READING ASSIGNMENT:

- \$ 3. Wolves and the Web of Life

MATERIALS:

- \$ **How Wolves Affect the Ecosystem** January 19, 1998 *Time* magazine article
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/1998/dom/980119/nation.the_big_not_so_ba1.html

BACKGROUND:

Food pyramids are an important factor in maintaining ecosystems. The soil forms the base of the pyramid and supports the next level (plants) that in turn supports the next (herbivores) which support the top or apex of the pyramid (wolves and other carnivores). Significant variations of population at any level of a pyramid soon bring about adjustments at every other level.

PROCEDURES:

\$ Have students read both of the selections listed and discuss them in class. Talk about the food web, including the role of primary producers, primary consumers, secondary consumers, scavengers, etc. Why do the organisms at each level depend on each other? Encourage the class to get beyond “who eats who” and think about animals using plants for nesting material, scavengers releasing nutrients for plant use, predators preventing the spread of disease among prey by culling sick animals. Ask why there are fewer predators than herbivores in a system and how removing organisms from one level affects the rest of the system.

B. CONNECTING WITH WOLVES

MATERIALS:

\$ **Connecting with Wolves** essay from *Defenders Magazine* Winter 1994/95 issue

BACKGROUND:

Once students have a firm grasp of the scientific concept of the web of life and the roles that organisms play within it, they can broaden their understanding of it.

PROCEDURES:

- \$ Ask students to reflect on what would happen if a certain plant or animal ceased to exist. What would be the damage to the web of life? Would there be economic damage? What about the aesthetic damage? Is there something in the human spirit that responds to the existence of other life?
- \$ Have students read **Connecting with Wolves**, the essay by Defenders of Wildlife president Rodger Schlickeisen and discuss their reactions to it in small groups. Ask them to write a letter to the author in response to it (address below) or make an entry in their journals about it. Have them share their work in class.

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CONNECTING WITH WOLVES

By Rodger Schlickeisen

At approximately 8:30 a.m. on January 12, *Canis lupus* - the gray wolf - returned to Yellowstone National Park. The event signified a wildlife conservation victory years in the making.

As television cameras whirred, I watched and applauded a white truck with a horse trailer rolling through the Roosevelt Arch at the park's northern entrance. Soon television and radio stations and newspapers all across the nation were reporting the arrival of eight wild wolves from Alberta, Canada, to be followed a few days later by six more wolves. After a forced absence of some 70 years, the top predator was home again in the world's first and most famous national park, and in a sense America was celebrating.

I have given thought since then to why so many Americans are so supportive of the wolf in its struggle for survival. I believe the answer lies deep in our psyche.

Surely humans have an innate psychological need for the beauty and inspiration of unspoiled nature, although this need is becoming difficult to satisfy on our increasingly crowded planet. For all of its existence, after all, humanity has been an integral part of the natural world around us. And evolutionary biologists such as Harvard's Edward O. Wilson believe we retain a powerful genetic affinity for that natural world.

But rather than acting as partners in the natural community of life, humans have become primarily exploiters and conquerors of nature. Many view nature almost exclusively as an economic resource, or even as an obstacle to be overcome. It is true enough that exploitation of natural resources has brought great benefits to Americans and to the citizens of other developed nations. But experience has taught that human happiness depends on more than material gain. Riches cannot cure the psychological maladies that seem increasingly part of modern urbanized existence.

Americans, despite our wealth as a nation, are obsessed with human problems and stressed by the incessant demands and communications overload that modern society imposes. Feelings of alienation are all too common. Few of us have the time or means to escape more than occasionally to places where it is possible simply to enjoy the beauty of nature, to gain fresh perspective. Because the need to feel a part of nature is inherent in each of us, we subconsciously seek to restore our lost connection with nature. Perhaps more than anything else, the cause of wolf recovery provides that opportunity.

The wolf's plight affords humans the chance to express our need not only for nature but also for caring about something other than ourselves. The wolf needs us, and there is a deep satisfaction in responding.

The wolf has a long history of being unfairly persecuted by mankind. Most species become endangered because of human-caused elimination of their habitat. But in the wolf's case endangerment has resulted largely from extermination campaigns that included poisoning, gassing, shooting, trapping wolves and even such grotesque practices as lassoing them and literally tearing them apart. Humans are guilty of having acted inhumanely, and showing compassion now is an opportunity to assuage our guilt.

For many Americans, the wolf is not just a part of the natural community - it is the very embodiment of wild nature. While folktales like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Three Little

Pigs” engender a deep-seated and irrational fear of the wolf, books such as *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* have cemented in our psyches the oneness of wolves and wilderness. By helping to restore the very symbol of wilderness, we too are restored in spirit.

I am not known to overflow with optimism about the human future. But like most people, I am eager to interpret any positive event as a possible sign of better things to come. Is the impressive public support for restoring the wolf in the West such a sign? I hope so. If it is, it could be an indication that we are entering a new era in which our cultural response to nature comes to complement better our genetic need for nature. And if that happens, who knows what is possible? The result might even be that we become a nation of people who are happier and richer spiritually because, paradoxically, we have learned to care deeply about something beyond our personal day-to-day concerns.

Moral theorists call this the great moral paradox-humans gain personal happiness only by not directly pursuing it. This, I believe, is the main source of the outpouring of heartfelt support for *Canis lupus*.