

Conservation Challenges: Defenders in Action

Video: *Saving America's Wolves*

Teacher Notes

Grade: 6 and up

Subject: Social Studies

Group Size: Whole class

Duration: 20 minutes for video, 50-minute period for activities.

Skills: Note-taking, information gathering, informational reading (Leopold essay)

Vocabulary: Captive breeding, Mexican wolf, gray wolf, red wolf, endangered species, reintroduction, experimental, non-essential, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

OBJECTIVES:

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

- Understand the importance of citizen activism in a democratic society
- Discuss the reasons for reintroducing wolves into portions of their former ranges

READING ASSIGNMENT:

- 3. The Wolf and the Web of Life
- 7. Wolf Conservation
- 8. Captive Breeding and Species Survival

MATERIALS:

- Video: *Saving America's Wolves* (in trunk)
- **Essay: "Thinking Like a Mountain" by Aldo Leopold** (for extension activity)
- **Map of historic and current wolf range in North America (overhead transparency)**

BACKGROUND:

Wildlife and habitat conservation and species recovery are the responsibility of every citizen in a participatory democracy. It is important for students to understand that they are not too young to take a stand on these issues. If a healthy democracy is to thrive, teachers must encourage activism. This is not to say we should teach students what to think; rather, we must teach them to think critically and rationally, so they can make informed choices of their own and communicate their views effectively.

Saving America's Wolves encourages activism and demonstrates the importance of nonprofit advocacy organizations such as Defenders of Wildlife. Defenders of Wildlife depends upon its

members - citizens of every age and level of commitment - to support the essential work it does. *Saving America's Wolves* makes an excellent case for restoring wolves to portions of their former range in the lower 48 states and for joining Defenders of Wildlife.

PROCEDURES:

- **Before viewing the video**, review and discuss the wolf's role in the web of life and current wolf conservation efforts and techniques.
- Show students the map of the former and present ranges of wolves in North America. Ask them to list as many reasons as they can for the disappearance of the wolf from its former range. For example:
 1. Persecution by settlers who brought a legacy of fear and hatred for wolves to America
 2. Loss of habitat as forests were cleared to make way for farms and ranches
 3. Elimination of the wolf's natural prey - bison, elk, and deer - as the nation expanded westward
 4. Federal government policy of exterminating wolves
- Ask your students why some people support the restoration of wolves and some oppose it.
- Tell the students to take notes **while viewing the video** on the reasons Defenders of Wildlife cites for supporting the restoration of wolves. Urge them to listen carefully as Ed Asner, the narrator of the video, reads a portion of Aldo Leopold's classic essay, "Thinking Like a Mountain."
- **After viewing the video**, have the class assist in listing the reasons why Defenders of Wildlife advocates wolf restoration on an overhead transparency or the chalkboard. Start by listing the four categories the reasons fall into, then the reasons. For example:

Biological: Wolves are needed to restore the balance of nature in places where the absence of a top predator has resulted in ecological stress. (In most places, natural recolonization by wolves would be far too slow to ensure a future for this endangered animal.)

Economic: Restoration is, in the long run, more cost effective than maintaining critically small populations. It can also bring economic benefit to communities as people come to hear and see the wolves.

Political: Restoration allows citizens to take an active role both in the recovery process and in the formulation of a sensible wolf management plan.

Ethical: When species are lost to extinction, "the American landscape loses its soul." Restoration of wolves allows Americans to experience "the wonder, beauty and grace of wilderness."
- Explain to the class that prior to choosing a restoration area for a top predator like the wolf, a feasibility study must be done. Have the students look up the word "feasible" in the dictionary. Ask them to write several sentences explaining what they think might be in a feasibility study. What factors, in other words, need to be considered before wolves are restored to an area?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

- Give each student a copy of the essay "**Thinking Like a Mountain.**" Explain that Aldo Leopold wrote this essay in 1949, long before there was any large-scale public awareness

of the value of wilderness and wildlife. Back then, many people felt that wilderness was to be exploited for our own benefit. An ethic of public stewardship had not yet been established. As the class follows along read the essay aloud (or have students take turns reading it).

- After reading the essay, discuss with the class how killing the mother wolf changed Leopold's life. What did he think about shooting wolves before he saw the wolf die? How did this experience alter his thinking? What, specifically, about the death of the mother wolf revealed new truths to Leopold?
- Give the class five to ten minutes to write about an experience that changed their lives in some way (watching a dog with newborn puppies, holding a baby brother or sister for the first time, seeing a magnificent bird of prey in the wild, etc.).
- Tell the students to work in pairs to make a list of words in the essay that are unfamiliar to them. Have them try to figure out the meanings by how they are used in the essay, then look the words up in a dictionary to see how close they are to the actual definitions.
- An essay is the writer's opinion about a subject. This opinion is sometimes stated in a thesis statement which is the writer's opinion boiled down to one arguable statement. Sometimes the thesis is suggested as the essay develops. This is particularly true in deeply personal and reflective essays. Have students explore Aldo Leopold's essay and see if they can figure out his thesis and distill it into a sentence or two. What, in other words, is Leopold's point in "Thinking Like a Mountain?"

"Thinking Like A Mountain"
by Aldo Leopold
A Selection from *A Sand County Almanac*

"A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world.

Every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.

Those unable to decipher the hidden meaning know nevertheless that it is there, for it is felt in all wolf country, and distinguishes that country from all other land. It tingles in the spine of all who hear wolves by night, or who scan their tracks by day. Even without sight or sound of wolf, it is implicit in a hundred small events; the midnight whinny of a pack horse, the rattle of rolling rocks, the bound of a fleeing deer, the way shadows lie under spruces. Only the ineducable tyro can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves, or the fact that mountains have a secret opinion about them.

My own conviction on this score dates from the day I saw a wolf die. We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Since then I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a mass of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anemic desuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddle-horn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers.

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades.

So also with cows. The cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. He has not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea.

We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with its supple legs, the cowman with trap and poison, the statesman with pen, the most of us with machines, votes, dollars, but it all comes to the same thing: peace in our time. A measure of success in this is all well enough, and perhaps is a requisite to objective thinking, but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men."