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Why Support Wolves When People Are Starving?

The look of a hungry child must grip the hearts of all of us with compassion. Yet, here we are asking you to support the wolf, the historical competitor of man and killer of his livestock.

In Today's world when the demands on renewable and non-renewable resources for the immediate benefit of humans are constantly increasing, it seems outrageous to even entertain a thought about helping the wolf. When our resources are limited and we must choose, the question of whom to adopt comes down to: "Who is more important? A child or a wolf?" "The child, of course." In one sense this is true; but there is another important consideration that places this question into a larger context. If peoples of the world are to survive with some semblance of the quality of life that many of us already possess, and to which other nations still aspire, then we must step back, reflect, and learn some lessons from the wolves.

If we want to manage human affairs intelligently for future generations, then we must look at wilderness areas that are still largely untouched by invasive human activities. We need to preserve them so that we can study the complex web of life in healthy ecosystems. With this knowledge, we can then more wisely manage our lands that are in various stages of erosion, and which are being further poisoned every day. Wilderness areas provide the standards against which we must compare our own habitats that are continuously changed by our actions.

Wilderness is a vague concept for most people, and few have experienced it. Yet, it is home to deer, moose, elk, caribou, to beaver and bison. Wilderness is also home to the wolf, for whom these grazers and browsers provide sustenance. The prey can get along without the wolves; but we have learned that the herds are healthier when wolves keep the numbers down by taking the weak, sick, and a few unlucky ones. Wolves never exterminate the wild herds that provide them with their food. The wolf and its prey will live together as long as there is land and vegetation to support them. Displace the natural prey and replace it with livestock, and the wolf will help himself – and therein lies the problem.

Isle Royale, at Lake Superior, is a US National Park where the study of wolves and their prey began in 1957, and continues today, providing 30 years of research into wolf/prey interactions. While wolf, moose and beaver numbers fluctuate, there is a kind of dynamic balance over time. Wolf numbers have varied from 18 to 50 since the beginning of the research. The research team has pieced together the web of life on Isle Royale in its relative simplicity.

Before the wolves crossed the frozen ice on Lake Superior from Canada to Isle Royale, there were about 2,000 moose in various stages of starvation. Coyotes lived off those that died as time went on. The vegetation could no longer feed the many moose. However, all that began to change when a pack of wolves arrived across the ice one cold winter day in 1949. By 1969, after the first moose census was completed, researchers had found about 1,000 moose, 18 wolves, and a healthy vegetation. The coyotes were gone – their scavenger days a memory of the past.

The importance of the Isle Royale studies lies in the fact that they provide us with a model for "Spaceship Earth", this island in the vastness of celestial space that humans call their home, and which they share with the rest of the animal kingdom. To restore and maintain a high quality of life for all people, and more immediately for our own nation we, like the animals on Isle Royale, must live within our means and stop depleting our capital. This is the simple and compelling message of the wilderness that we must learn.

Humans, in spite of their powers of reason, do not have the instinctive wisdom of the wolves. We are well on the way to depleting our non-renewable resources on which modern societies depend. Yet, the renewable resources probably can no longer support the world's present human populations.

Unlike the wolf, whose social control within the pack limits procreations, humans have no internal mechanism to check their numbers. For us the options are starvation, sickness, war. So far, reason has no power of human greed and ignorance, the driving force behind the exploitation of our lands. Meanwhile, ahead lies decreasing prosperity for those who still enjoy it, and increasing squalor for the rest. Spaceship Earth, in many regions, already resembles Isle Royale before the wolves arrived.

We must learn to harness our greed and realize that education is our only hope. But it must be a special kind of education. One that inspires awe, wonder, and appreciation for the world in which we live. We must recognize that Spaceship Earth is our only home, and it must not be abused a moment longer. Instead, we must use our reason to prevent and reduce such suffering by mobilizing our knowledge to bring our numbers down. We must learn to live on the renewable resources of this earth, so that we may have at least a chance of improving the quality of life for all. Science has already given us that knowledge, but the wisdom to use it has to come from somewhere else.

We may not win this fight against human exploitation and destruction of our Earth; but many are working to stop and roll back the tide of degradation. We want to share what we have learned with other people, and invite them to join our vision of a better future. The wolf is our symbol and our ally in this struggle. We, in turn, will fight to save him in the wild, and to improve wolves' lives in captivity – ambassadors of their wild counterparts – wherever we can. As Dr. Allen so simply states in "The Wolves of Minong": "The moose and the wolf need no-one to lead them, but only a place to be left alone."

We should work to guarantee them that place.

(Condensed from an article by Erich Klinghammer, PhD, who is Director of Wolf Park, Indiana, a unique education and research wildlife park.)