



A Haven for Wolves

by Allen Cox

Chief Seattle once said, “What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected.”

Those are prophetic words taken to heart by the staff at Wolf Haven International, a sanctuary for wolves, wolf-dog hybrids, and even a few coyotes, in Tenino, Washington. “I don’t know of any other facility in the world like this,” says Wendy Spencer, the facility’s Animal Curator, as she opens the gated wolf enclosure to lead me

inside. “Wolf Haven is unique among sanctuaries because you can see grays, Mexican grays, reds, and coyotes, all side by side.”

I have the privilege of touring the sanctuary with John Blankenship, the facility’s Executive Director, Linda Saunders, Director of Conservation, and Wendy. The morning fog is lifting above the trees, and in every direction the mysterious geological phenomenon known as Mima Mounds marks the landscape, rising up like giant gopher hills, spreading across the prairie and into the forest. Gravel crunches beneath our boots, and straight ahead

a striking white wolf perks up its ears and watches us approach. Another one lopes up beside it.

Although the facility is open for public tours, Wolf Haven is not exactly a zoo. What happens outside the wolf enclosure is perhaps the most important work John Blankenship and his staff of fourteen take on. The non-profit organization has been fighting for wolves for over a quarter of a century, and remains the only sanctuary that manages such a wide range of programs that benefit not only the wolves that live within its confines, but the future of all wolves. Besides providing a safe haven for forty-nine wolves, Blankenship and his team hold high the standard of wolf conservation, are leaders in public education about wolves and human co-existence with predators, and participate in the Species Survival Plan to help ensure reintroduction of wolves into the wild.

As we approach the spacious enclosures, each surrounded by jump- and dig-proof fences, the wolves begin to pace, lope, and posture. A male named Chinook, whose coat sports every shade of gray, walks up to his fence, lowers his head, peers at us, and makes a quiet yipping whine. “A good-morning greeting,” Wendy tells me.

Myth-Busters

In his memoir and groundbreaking discourse on conservation, Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold recounts that in his youth “we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf,” and goes on to describe a scene in which he and a group of friends cruelly pumped lead into a pack. He writes of watching “the green fire die” in the eyes of an old wolf they had shot, and of the far-reaching and destructive consequences of that senseless act.

“Since then I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly



Nanook spent most of his life at the Niabi Zoo, in Coal Valley, IL, before becoming a Wolf Haven resident in 2007.

wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed...to death."

In the big picture of species survival, little has changed for the wolf since Leopold wrote those words in 1948. Both red and Mexican gray wolves are endangered; the gray wolf (not to be confused with the Mexican gray) is endangered in areas where their populations still struggle, but elsewhere, where their numbers have increased, their survival falls at the mercy of state regulators. The gray wolf was de-listed in three western states in March of 2008. This removal from federal protection means that states can permit the hunting of significant

numbers of the gray wolf population, which could again set the species on a grim path to annihilation.

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We've all heard that wolves are stealthy predators, and livestock the ultimate prey; after all, wolves hunt in packs and each pack member wields 1,500 pounds of jaw pressure. Few of us realize that cougars and coyotes are the primary culprits in livestock kills. Yet the wolf still takes the rap.

"A pack of gray wolves was recently hunted down and destroyed in Idaho," John laments. "Ranchers and hunters maintain a mindset about wolves that is difficult to change. That's why we're here — somebody needs to speak for the animals."

The wolf's bad reputation has been passed down from one generation of ranchers to the next. Even when presented with the statistic that less than one percent of wolves depredate livestock (from a study of the Rocky Mountain wolf population), the ranching industry still perceives them as the villains. And, even though ranchers receive fair-market-value compensation when a predator kills one of their livestock, the wolf, in the view of many, must be eradicated.

The greatest threat to a wolf's survival in the wild, besides the bullet, is misconception. At the facility and beyond, John lists public education high on his list of priorities. Megan Moskwa, an energetic and animated educator full of facts not only about wolves, but about the entire food web, directs the facility's education program. Skulls, antlers, posters, and fact-filled charts fill her walls and shelves. Groups of children and adults march through her classroom and emerge with a clearer understanding about the role wolves play in the scheme of nature and about their complicated behaviors as members of a pack. She treads carefully to avoid playing on her audiences' sympathy, but it's difficult to leave Moskwa's classroom without feeling some affinity for these animals.

Educating the general public is one matter, but there is a less receptive audience out there. "One of the greatest challenges in wolf conservation

is educating ranchers," Linda Saunders explains.

How does one go about changing misconceptions held by nearly an entire industry and the legislators they help elect? Through cooperation with other conservation groups, presentations to ranchers and legi-

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slators, workshops on co-existing with predators, and efforts to influence wildlife management legislation, Linda is taking a hard run at it. A biologist with a career background in various government wildlife and land management agencies, she understands the obstacles and that

the finish-line remains far in the distance.

Running with the Pack

Typically, in the wild, six to nine wolves run in a pack. Solo, they are inefficient hunters, but a pack can take down an animal the size of a moose. At Wolf Haven the animals have no need to hunt. Instead, they reside in cozy pairs in half-acre enclosures outfitted with shelters, and enjoy two square meals a week. To us, that sounds like a starvation diet, but to a wolf it's a feast.

"Seventy-five percent of the animals on public display at the sanctuary were acquired from private owners," Wendy says. "For many, it's the first time they've ever felt grass or dirt under their paws." The animals come from various backgrounds and environments, some more deplorable than others. A common scenario is the loving, well-intentioned owner,



Miwok, a female gray that has been at the Haven since she was a pup in 2000, is part of a five member pack from Idaho.

who attempts to live with a wolf as a pet, but when faced with a snarling predator challenging him for alpha status over his steak dinner, he realizes he's gotten in over his head. A more unusual scenario is the case of Amrock, a resident wolf once owned by a man who worked odd jobs in Chico, California, and who allowed Amrock to freely roam the streets while he worked; the citizens of Chico viewed that as a problem, and Wolf Haven acquired the wolf.

Clearly, the animals at Wolf Haven

Haven's method of a single male and single female comprising a pack, a strong bond usually forms, with one as the alpha wolf (most often the female) and with considerably fewer visits by a veterinarian to treat a fight wound.

Most of the wolves at the facility live behind the scenes, sequestered from public view, and the staff keeps their exposure to these endangered red and Mexican gray wolves to a bare minimum for good reason. Unlike the animals on public display, which

vanish within a century, others hold a more optimistic view.

"Wolves are a necessary part of the ecosystem," John says. "They should be in a place where they can live." As a participant in the Species Survival Plan, Wolf Haven has bred two packs of Mexican grays and released them in Arizona's Apache National Forest, and a third pack will be released in 2008.

Ambassadors

Backstage at Wolf Haven, the staff has placed a few dozen whole frozen



Sister and brother, Siri and Kooskia, form one of Wolf Haven's strong, single male/single female packs.

have issues. They are dysfunctional and would be in lifelong therapy if they were humans. Socialization for wolves never before exposed to a pack in the wild brings challenges. The natural order in wolf society is a pecking order, and wolves thrown together must work out a hierarchy of dominance and submission, which can get downright brutal. With Wolf

are unable to breed, these off-limits wolves play an important role in wolf restoration. They do breed and will eventually be released into the wild along with their offspring.

In the wild, the numbers of red and Mexican gray wolves have shrunk to near extinction, and the scale could tip in either direction. Some conservationists predict they will

chickens in large plastic tubs to thaw for tomorrow's meal. Those are for the wolves on public display, the ones not used for breeding and that will never be released into the wild because of their tainted and dysfunctional backgrounds.

John leads me into a walk-in freezer and throws back a tarp where a pile of whole, frozen deer are waiting

to be devoured. "Road kill," he says. "We have a county permit to use road kill to feed the wolves that are part of the breeding program."

I ask why those wolves won't get chicken, and I realize, as soon as the question leaves my lips, the obvious answer. Familiarizing those wolves to the taste of farm animals and livestock would be the same as signing their death warrants in the wild. They'd join the one percent of wolves that depredate livestock and face the barrel of a rancher's rifle. These endangered animals are isolated from humans and our trappings as part of the plan to ensure their survival in the wild. John and his team want them to remain wary of man.

"By design, the sanctuary is a quiet and structured environment for the wolves," Linda Saunders explains. "They are not overly stimulated, which gives them a chance just to be wolves."

With 30,000 visitors passing through Wolf Haven's gates in 2007, the animals on public display have grown used to people. Still, the tours, conducted by well trained, knowledgeable volunteers, are tightly controlled. Guides warn visitors to keep noise and movement to a minimum so the wolves do not feel threatened.

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Besides guided tours and classes, the sanctuary offers many avenues for the public to become involved. Wolf sponsorship programs provide the opportunity to support a chosen animal's ongoing care and develop a personal stake in its well-being.

Life is good at Wolf Haven. The animals live fifteen to sixteen years

as opposed to the five to nine years common in the wild. But, when one of the sanctuary's residents does die, its caregivers treat its passing with dignity and honor, its life and death with a ceremonial burial. Wolf graves occupy the slopes of a few Mima Mounds on the edge of the prairie, each grave bordered with small boulders and marked with a sign bearing the animal's name and the span of its life, silent testimony that, here, these are not monsters to be hunted and destroyed, but remarkable animals that possess their own intrinsic value and right to survive.

When one of their own passes, all the wolves in the enclosure somehow know, and those who have heard their collective howl claim they have never heard a more mournful sound. ▶

For information on Wolf Haven International, visit <http://wolfhaven.org>



Mima mounds, natural piles of earth surrounding Wolf Haven, are dotted with well tended wolf graves.



▲ Sissy, a female red wolf, has been a Wolf Haven resident since 2006.

◀ Jinkies, a female gray wolf from California, came to Wolf Haven in 2003 as part of a seven member, familial pack.