

Koani in her role as an ambassador wolf with the students of Wise River School in Montana

The Romance of Having



A modified climbing harness made for walking Koani. Note the wolf wrangling gear: gloves, 9/16-inch nylon tubular webbing and pepper spray clipped to the harness (at right).



Moments after a deer carcass was placed in Koani's enclosure, she sends a clear message that she's not about to share any of it.

It's happened again. Koani is loose. It's always the same scenario: somehow she's gotten out of the pen or off the leash. She dances just out of reach, and I can see the gears in her brain turning: "What's first: Killing that dog down the road? How about those sheep in the pasture on top of the hill? Ooh, look! What's that little human doing in the driveway?" Before mayhem ensues, I wake up, and relief floods through me. Twelve long years and no disasters. And that is what it's like to live with a wolf.

To begin with, we never dreamed of "owning" a wolf. Born in captivity and socialized to humans from the age of 2 weeks, 3-month-old Koani came to live with us as part of an ABC documentary about wolves we'd been hired to consult on. For a variety of reasons we ended up with a wolf. Feeling an obligation to give her life in captivity purpose, we founded Wild Sentry and embarked on a life of traveling ambassador wolf programs. Twelve years, 1,387 programs and 182,456 people later, there's no question that Koani has succeeded in changing many hearts and minds, and that has kept us going through some tough and grueling times.

Before embarking on reasons why owning a wolf is not as romantic as

the responsibility to protect from humans and to protect humans from. We would not find it romantic to cage this alien or fasten a collar around its neck.

By acquiring a captive wolf one takes on a legal and moral responsibility. The first and primary rule of life with a wolf is that no socialized wolf can ever be allowed to run unleashed or initiate human contact without supervision by a qualified caretaker. Wild wolves avoid humans. A captive wolf is less shy and therefore more dangerous.

A captive wolf requires special fencing—a fence 10 feet high with a 3-foot skirt and an outer 8-foot fence. Each animal needs a minimum of a quarter acre. Psychologically stable wolves need a canine companion—preferably another wolf of the opposite sex. A dog is a poor substitute but better than nothing. However, if a wolf and dog are kept together, don't

two hours in the morning and early evening, because it mimics a wolf's crepuscular activity patterns. These walks occur every day—including Christmas morning, Super Bowl Sunday, or after a hard day of skiing. Walks keep Koani sane, and we take this responsibility seriously. She doesn't, however, willingly walk at our side or at our pace. The leash, connected from Koani to our modified climbing harness, keeps her from attacking dogs or chasing livestock. Being attached to her is like being attached to a 100-pound cat. And while she enjoys these walks, we are constantly reminded that she'd enjoy them more if we'd let her go.

When a strange dog is encountered, we're jerked, sometimes to the ground, by 100 pounds of aroused muscle. From Koani's point of view, a dog is a territorial intruder. Denying contact with the dog is our responsibility. Even though we outweigh

Koani by 40 pounds, she's amazingly strong and quick. A momentary lapse in attention can lead to the death of a neighbor's pet

or worse. Though constant vigilance may be good training for "living in the moment," there are cheaper, less dangerous ways to work toward Zen mastery than walking a wolf.

While Koani enjoys the stimulating smells and sounds of walking in a new place, transporting her there is hardly worth the energy or effort. Wolves don't possess the "filtering" apparatus of dogs. Because

a Wolf of Your Very Own

you may imagine, let me state unequivocally that we love this animal. We love her as we would a psychopathic sibling who is in turn charming and frightening. We do not love her like a child or like our dog, Indy. We love her like you might love an adult being from another planet—an intelligent being, yet utterly lacking human moral values, and for whom you are entrusted with

be surprised to come home to a mangled dog. Place more than two wolves in a pen and the chance for injury increases. Wolves have their own rules of engagement, and for a variety of reasons they may seriously injure or kill a pen mate; this has nothing to do with right versus wrong or like versus dislike.

Wolves need physical and mental exercise. We walk Koani for one to

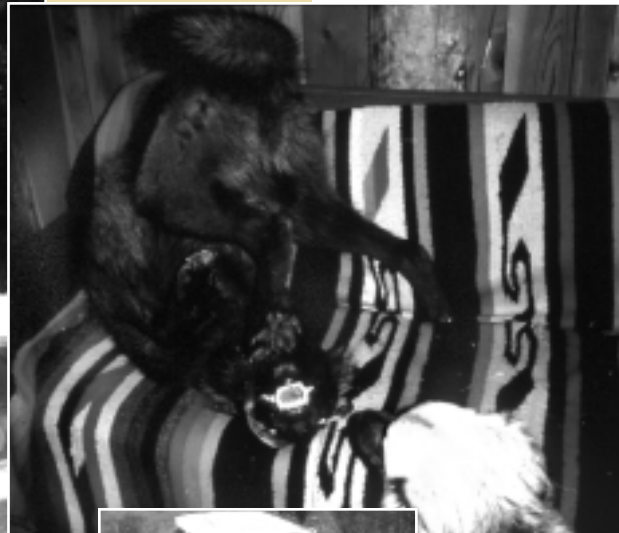
Below: When directed to get in a car, Indy (Koani's dog companion) knew to get in the car — Koani didn't (maybe she thought I said "on"). ▼



◀ Left: The first time we allowed Koani in the house, she jumped on the table. Moments later it toppled over.

Below: On occasion, when Koani is allowed in the living room, she acts in an undoglike manner, as exemplified by her behavior on the couch. ▼

Koani is a nervous traveler, she must be confined to a 4-by-6-foot kennel. The kennel doesn't calm her, but it does prevent her from jumping in our lap and attempting to wrest the steering wheel away when she sees an approaching semi. And when her bowels loosen from stress, it's in the kennel instead of on the upholstery.



Wolves are social animals. Isolation in a pen without stimulation is one of the crueler fates for captive wolves. But before you allow a wolf into your house, put the garbage up on the refrigerator, place soap, food and any other substances that might smell interesting in the closet, and exchange heirloom furniture for junk from the secondhand store. Koani is a good wolf, but she's a really bad dog. Sure, all dogs are destructive when they're puppies, and there'll be occasional "mistakes" on the carpet. You can, however, depend on the fact that after consistent training, your dog won't wreak havoc when left home alone. To accommodate Koani's need for social contact and to keep our

▲ Above: Koani is on the cable run we clip her to when we stop for the night while on the road presenting Wild Sentry programs. The debris on the ground is what is left of a pillow she got hold of.

◀ Left: Loading Koani for a Wild Sentry program tour, or even to take her on a hike in the mountains, is always a chore. In 12 years, she has never once entered the van willingly.



We owe it to wolves to keep their numbers in captivity to a minimum.

Remember, your desire to be “close” to wolves is not their desire.

home intact, we dug a 40-foot tunnel from her pen to a living room enclosure.

Then there are vacations. We’ve yet to find wolf-sitters listed in the Yellow Pages. Since the Wild Sentry staff consists of two, we are in the same boat as private individuals when it comes to activities that require “going away.” Captive wolves need professional, as in expensive, care. In the 12 years we’ve lived with Koani, we’ve not been away together for more than four nights in a row, and that has happened only twice. My nightmares of her running loose really heat up when we’re away.

Why do we think we should be able to raise a wolf and other people shouldn’t? We don’t consider ourselves special. We just don’t think most people would make the personal and professional sacrifices we’ve made. Really, we guess, we think most people are smarter. To give us credit though, it’s not that we *wanted* to make the sacrifices. Again, we never dreamed of “owning” a wolf. We had one choice, and that was whether to become involved with the film project. Once we opted in, we started down a path of narrowing alternatives.

A decision to make a wolf part of your life is an “until death do us part” decision with euthanasia the only way to opt out. Should life with a wolf prove more demanding than expected, leaving it consigned to perpetual boredom in a pen, shipping it off to a refuge for ex-pet wolves, or turning it loose are cowardly alternatives and, in the latter case, also illegal. Look before you leap, and once you’ve leapt, be prepared to turn your life upside down or admit your mistake and kill your “pet.”

Could it be that Koani is an especially difficult wolf and that another might be easier to deal with? Possibly.

However, another might be more difficult. Wolves are born with a wide range of personalities with traits that don’t become apparent until adulthood. While environment makes a difference, it’s unrealistic to expect a wolf to fit into your life like a dog.

So are there any reasons to keep captive wolves? In the best of all possible worlds we at Wild Sentry say, “No.” Unfortunately, we don’t live in that sort of world. Because of this, we do believe captive wolves can serve important educational purposes. However, for these animals to fulfill an educational mission, they should only be part of not-for-profit organizations, exhibited by knowledgeable people, and in a program reviewed and sanctioned by professional educators and biologists.

Educators have an obligation to help their audiences understand that no matter how large and natural-looking an enclosure appears, it cannot provide the space and stimulation to fulfill the prey drive and social interactions that wolves experience in the wild. Their sacrifice is justifiable only in that it sheds light on human ignorance. We owe it to wolves to keep their numbers in captivity to a minimum. Remember, your desire to be “close” to wolves is not their desire. Responsible, sensitive people understand that caging wildness is an oxymoron.

We realize that we’ve concentrated on the negative aspects of living with a wolf. That’s because part of Wild Sentry’s mission is to discourage people from obtaining wolves for pets. However, as we stated early on, we love Koani. She has added a

dimension to our lives that could not have been achieved otherwise. Has it been worth it? Neither of us can speak for Koani. But we know that for us, the educational good she’s performed is tinged with sadness. Not a day goes by but what we’re made aware of our shortcomings when it comes to providing Koani with the life of a wolf.

Wolves are wild animals that have evolved over millions of years to take care of themselves. Wolves don’t need us to provide them with food, shelter or companionship. What they need from us is to leave them space on this increasingly crowded planet so they can provide these things for themselves. If you love wolves, work to ensure that this dream remains possible. ■

For more information relating to captive wolves and hybrids as pets:



Go to www.wildsentry.org, navigate to the education page, and click on *Can You Turn a Wolf Into a Dog?* (also available for \$2.00 in booklet form). Wild Sentry can be contacted at wolfwranglers@wildsentry.org, or P.O. Box 172, Hamilton, MT 59840.

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