

# Can Attitudes Toward Wolves Change from Fear to Curiosity?

## Experiences from an Educational Program in Norway

by Kristin Evensen Gangås

After decades of absence, wolves returned to the Stor-Elvdal municipality in southern Norway in the late 1990s, and their presence led to serious controversy. People asked questions about the chances of a wolf attacking children. Was it dangerous to walk in the forest, ski in wolf areas or pick berries? Words like “decreased quality of life” were heard more often.

In 2000, the Ministry of the Environment, for which I work, and local authorities started an educational program in Stor-Elvdal to help alleviate the controversy. The aim of the program was to increase knowledge about large carnivores. We did not take any political stance in the discussion. Lynx, bears and wolverines also occur in this area, so it was natural to treat all large carnivores as local species and to not make any of them “symbol species.”

People were invited to participate in outdoor activities like snow tracking, visiting old bear dens, radio tracking and looking at kills. We presented slide shows in schools and for the general public. The latest news about research was distributed in bulletins sent regularly

to every household in the municipality. People could join the researchers in the field, and school classes visited the college in the area that also runs a research station. We encouraged people to relate their experiences with large carnivores in the

bulletin, and quite a few took the opportunity. These efforts increased the understanding of how research works, and the divide between scientists and local citizens seemed to decrease.

When the project started, some folks claimed that it was just another manipulative project with a hidden agenda to make everyone have positive attitudes toward the wolf. But the children were enthusiastic and transferred this enthusiasm to their parents. When the project ended in December 2002, people asked for more, and some activities were continued in 2003 and 2004 and have become traditions.

The project was evaluated by NOVA (Norwegian Social Research). One conclusion was that people with no experience of conflict with carnivores found an opportunity to increase their knowledge without taking a political stance. Those who participated in project activities said that they increased their understanding of nature and also became more curious about large carnivores. In the first years after the wolf pack was established, the children expressed fear, and school staff hesitated to use their outdoor area because it was part of the wolves’ habitat. Today this is no longer an issue, and the school staff uses any area they find appropriate.

Our experience has been that people’s fear decreases over time as they become used to the presence of the wolves. But I think that citizens’ participation in the project activities and their increased knowledge accelerated the decrease in fear and controversy.

Norway now has similar projects, called “Living with Carnivores,” in eight other conflict areas. It will be interesting to see the results from these projects!

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Harold  
Torbjornsen



Harold  
Torbjornsen

Top: Children in Stor-Elvdal, Norway, participated in radio-tracking lynx and bears as part of a program to increase knowledge about large carnivores.

Bottom: Children in Stor-Elvdal, Norway, helped radio-collar a moose for a study on wolf-moose predation.