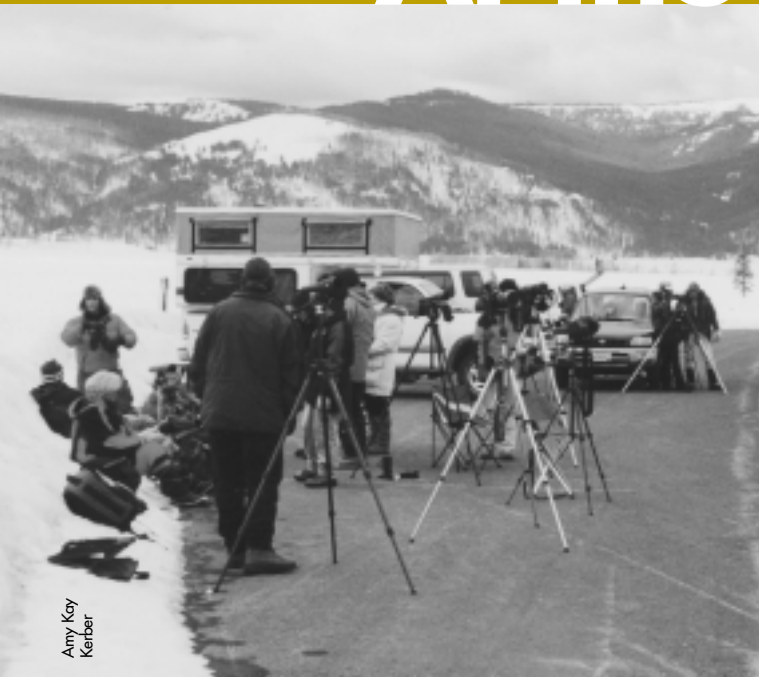


At the

Crossroads:

Productive wolf education should not only teach wolf biology but also foster discussion of moral and ethical issues inherent in wolf conservation.



Amy Kay Kerber



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Although wolf educators talk a good deal about the importance of moral values to wolf conservation, most wolf education programs focus predominantly on biology and devote little or no attention to values.

A few years ago, I attended a wolf seminar in Yellowstone during which I witnessed a revealing exchange. In a talk on wolf management, the instructor explained that it is often necessary to kill *individual* wolves in order to conserve wolf *populations*. Afterward, a student asked, “How can we justify the intentional infliction of suffering and death on a sentient animal *for any reason?*” “As I said,” the instructor responded, “research shows that livestock depredation will rise to socially unacceptable levels unless managers are willing to kill offending wolves.” Unsatisfied, the student responded simply, “That doesn’t address my question.”

Indeed, the instructor had not addressed the question, at least not directly. The student was asking a question about moral values—those deep-seated beliefs that concern “how we ought to live.” Because the Yellowstone instructor did not recognize the moral nature of the question, he missed a valuable opportunity to help his students critically examine one of the many important moral issues in wolf conservation.

This exchange is emblematic of a pervasive contradiction in wolf

Toward a New Era in Wolf Education

education. Wolf educators talk a good deal about the importance of moral values to wolf conservation. Yet most wolf education programs focus predominantly on biology and devote little or no attention to values. To understand this contradiction, we need to go back to the roots of wolf education in the field of biology.

The Virtues and Limits of Wolf Biology Education

From a historical perspective, wolf education might be more precisely termed wolf *biology* education. Wolf biologists founded the wolf education movement, taught most of the early programs, and established the science-based tools and standards that have

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guided wolf education ever since. As a result, today's wolf educators are all, in some sense, "biologists," if not by academic training then by their immersion in a professional community dominated by biology.

In large degree, emphasizing biology in wolf education makes sense. The wolf is, after all, an organism whose evolution, physiology, ecology and behavior can only be understood through the theories and methods of biology. On a practical level, biology-focused wolf education has advanced wolf conservation by tempering extreme pro- and anti-wolf views that are often based in part on misunderstanding of wolf biology.

But the wolf is not only an organism, and misunderstanding of wolf biology is not the only reason why extreme views of the wolf persist. The wolf is also the subject of human moral values whose great impact on wolf survival is sometimes independent of correct biological understanding. In our Yellowstone example, the student understood the instructor's science-based arguments but objected on ethical grounds, believing that individual wolves have moral standing that may supersede the value of population conservation.

Philosophers of science tell us that biology and the other "hard" sciences cannot answer such moral questions.

Despite this, the science-dominated wolf community continues to rely on science to understand and explain all things, including moral values. In wolf education, this misapplication of biology only further obscures already subtle and complex moral issues.

Wolves and Moral Values

Wolf education's failure to recognize and meaningfully examine moral values has broad implications. Wolf conservation is infused with conflicting moral values, and animal welfare is just one of several common moral themes. Other common themes concern the following:

Democracy: Wolf recovery is an antidemocratic imposition of elitist urban and suburban values on rural people, or the U.S. government unnecessarily constrains wolf recovery because it is beholden to politically powerful anti-wolf interests.

Virtue and vice: Wolves that play, cooperate, love and sing are the embodiment of virtue and the good life, or wolves that kill wastefully and mercilessly are the embodiment of evil and depravity.

Religion: Wolves are part of God's creation, and as such, we are obligated to protect them, or wolves are part of the wilderness that God intended man to subdue.

Spend enough time as a wolf educator, and you will encounter all of these moral themes and many more.

Political scientist Martin Nie argues in his book *Beyond Wolves: The Politics of Wolf Recovery and Management* that moral values like these are ultimately the basis of most



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sociopolitical disagreements about wolves. If Nie is correct and wolf education is failing to meaningfully address moral values, then the wolf education community's nearly exclusive focus on biology misses some of the core issues in the debate.

“Sound Science, Sound Ethics”

Ethicist William Lynn has offered a simple but profound solution to this dilemma. He terms it “sound science, sound ethics.” Sound science is the theory-rich, evidence-based knowledge that is relied on to ground our thinking about wolves in biological facts. Lynn argues that we need to *complement* sound science with a sound

ethics equipped to illuminate the moral dimension of wolf conservation.

Easier said than done. Ethics is a distinct scholarly discipline, no less complex and demanding than biology. Wolf educators can no more simply begin teaching ethics competently than a carpenter could begin practicing dentistry. The wolf conservation community too often misses this crucial point, mistaking mere *conversation* about moral values for critical *analysis*. The result is that the discussions that do take place are often unproductive.

But what would sound ethics in wolf education actually do? Sound ethics must do at least five things for students:

- Identify and clarify the moral values that are often implicit and difficult to articulate.
- Examine the internal consistency of moral value systems.
- Examine the compatibility of moral values with the best available science.

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- Identify and remediate conflicting values.
- Develop and justify refined value positions that meet all of the above tests.

Educators of a scientific bent often ask whether this sort of approach can reveal a single right answer—an unambiguously “correct” moral value—and if not, whether such an approach has any practical worth. Most philosophers would not endorse the idea that we can reveal definitive moral truths analogous to biology’s hard and fast facts. But the assumption that moral values are, therefore, beyond rational analysis is incorrect. A sound ethics has the power to *refine* moral beliefs by identifying and eliminating inconsistencies, illogic and false premises. The prevailing moral beliefs on all sides of the wolf debate usually suffer from many such flaws. By eliminating them, we can raise the moral debate to a new level of rationality and integrity.

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A New Era in Wolf Education?

Incorporating a sound ethics in wolf education begins with improving the wolf education community’s knowledge of ethics. Improving knowledge of ethics requires formal training in ethics for wolf educators as well as the hiring of new wolf educators who already have strong training in ethics.

The good news is that there is a wealth of excellent scholarship on moral values and their role in conservation issues. If we in the wolf education community are willing to avail ourselves of this scholarship, we have the opportunity to offer enhanced educational programs whose sophisticated treatment of moral values *and biology* can do for the era of state wolf management what wolf biology alone did for the era of wolf restoration. Until we seize this opportunity, that student in Yellowstone will still be waiting for an adequate response to her question. Let’s not make her wait too long. ■