

with great surprise I realized what
I was looking at. My
eyes were staring at it for
100 feet away. And then, I heard
a muffled half-bark followed by
a deep, smooth, heavy sound rising
into the air. None of the other

Personal Encounter

Eyes on Wildlife

Text and photos by Becky Rennie

In the early 1990s, wolves returned to the northern edge of Otter Tail County, Minnesota. Rumors abounded, and speculations piqued the interest of my students. “Do we really have wolves here?” some asked. “What are they like? Are they mean?” These questions and more were addressed to me by students. “I don’t know very much about wolves except that they are on the endangered species list,” I replied. Our facts were limited and sketchy, and our opinions on whether it was desirable to have wolves return were based solely on the few things we had read or heard from others.

On a 1994 field trip to the Ely, Minnesota, area to study water quality, my students asked if we could visit the International Wolf Center to find out more about these mysterious animals. We did visit, and we learned. We sat in awe of the captive wolves; we knew it was a special opportunity to see a real wolf!

This was not an end to the questions, only the beginning. That visit sparked the design and implementation of *Eyes on Wildlife*, a high school science curriculum designed to provide authentic research opportunities for students. It was important to me, as a teacher, to nurture the natural curiosity these students had

about wolves. It was also important to me for these students to learn the facts and various opinions about wolves—to talk and work with people knowledgeable about this controversial animal.

A major goal of conducting wildlife research with students is to help them understand more fully their responsibility for better ecosystem management. Students who get to know a wildlife population well and share the information they have gathered in an objective way with experts and the community become empowered and believe they can make a difference in local and world problem solving.

Eyes on Wildlife, a high school science curriculum, provides research opportunities for students, such as using radio telemetry to track radio-collared wolves.



With program funding we traveled to Ely to learn about tracking radio-collared wolves, howling and other important information. We learned about the causes of the wolf population decline, the management plan to increase the population and the issues the plan raised. The staff at Vermilion Community College and the International Wolf Center prompted students to look at all sides of the issues and taught them to respect the concerns of various stakeholders. We learned that there are no easy solutions, but to get any solution at all, we need to work together. This philosophy became a cornerstone of the *Eyes on Wildlife* program.

Since those early years, students have conducted track pad and howling surveys in our area and have visited the Agassiz



Students learn how to locate radio-collared wolves by using triangulation.

National Wildlife Refuge and Camp Ripley to observe research biologists capturing and radio-collaring wolves. We study the habitat, make plaster casts of wolf tracks, collect scats and talk with field biologists about discoveries they have made about wolf behavior. Students receive the tracking data and plot the movements of the animals using GIS. This past winter we saw a wolf for the first time running through the woods at Camp Ripley! Once again, the students knew they had seen something not

everyone gets to see. But this was even more special; this wolf was not a captive wolf, this wolf was free.

We continue to study wolves every year. It is a success story in wildlife management and a constant reminder to us of how humans so dramatically affect the ecosystem. Are we making an impact on how students view wildlife management and the wolf in particular? I think so. I asked former students for their thoughts. Here are some of the responses:

Andy: "I thought of wolves as animals that run about causing mischief. But after the trip, I thought of them as animals that keep to themselves. The survival of the wolf is important because they help maintain the natural food chain."

Rachel: "When you study a particular animal in depth, you have a better understanding of how complex the ecosystem is and how it is all interrelated, how changes in animal populations affect people, and how what we do determines whether animals in the food chain live or die."

Patrick: "I have lived in the woods all my life, but I didn't realize that



Student participants in Eyes on Wildlife observe research biologists capturing and collaring wolves.



everything in nature is so closely knit together, that every animal is affected by every other animal. I have learned basic ecology, how things work in wildlife.”

One of our project cooperators is Gary Huschle, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “This project has far reaching benefits for our nation’s conservation efforts,” he says. “Students involved in this project will have a much greater appreciation for the environment, all aspects of a field research project, the professionals that care for it, and the role that public policy plays in conservation. . . . The success of this project will be measured when these students become community leaders and resource professionals.” ■

Becky Rennie has been a science teacher for 24 years and has always strived to make education meaningful for students by linking with professionals in the community to provide authentic opportunities for students.

For more information:

🐾 Eyes on Wildlife: <http://www.mnstate.edu/regsci/eyes/project.html>

🐾 WISE: <http://wise.berkeley.edu>

🐾 International Wolf Center: <http://www.wolf.org>



Agree or Disagree?

Overview:

Students will differentiate between beliefs, values and attitudes, and then conduct a survey.

Directions:

The following definitions will be helpful for this activity:

Belief: an assumption based on information. It may be right or wrong. Example: Where there are more prey, there are more wolves.

Value: a worth attached to an object, event, idea or place. Example: Wolves are magnificent animals.

Attitude: a position based on a belief or a value with a predicted behavior. Example: Wolves should be controlled and managed.

Instruct students to write a list of five belief statements, five attitude statements and five value statements related to wolves. Have students develop a survey to ask at least 30 other people whether they agree or disagree with each statement. Students will then report survey findings to the class. Be sure students phrase their findings properly, for example, “X percent of survey respondents agreed that...” instead of “X percent of people think that....”

