

Education about Wolves in the Southwest

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Nowhere is the need for education about wolves greater than in the American Southwest. In a region where environmental politics commonly breeds bitter conflict and widespread confusion, it is not surprising that reintroducing such a controversial carnivore as the wolf has caused the lines between fact and fiction to blur. The eventual update of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's wolf recovery plan for the Southwest is likely to amplify the corrosive rancor. All who have a stake in wolf recovery have an interest in a well-informed public dialogue in which respectful, solution-oriented discussion leads to better recovery plans that have broad public support. The key to transforming the public discussion is education. An informal survey of experienced wolf educators in the Southwest revealed increasing frequency and quality of wolf education opportunities in the region.

In the K-12 school system, education about wolves is infrequent and dependent on teacher interest. The International Wolf Center has begun offering educator workshops to build on the educator training work done by others in the region.

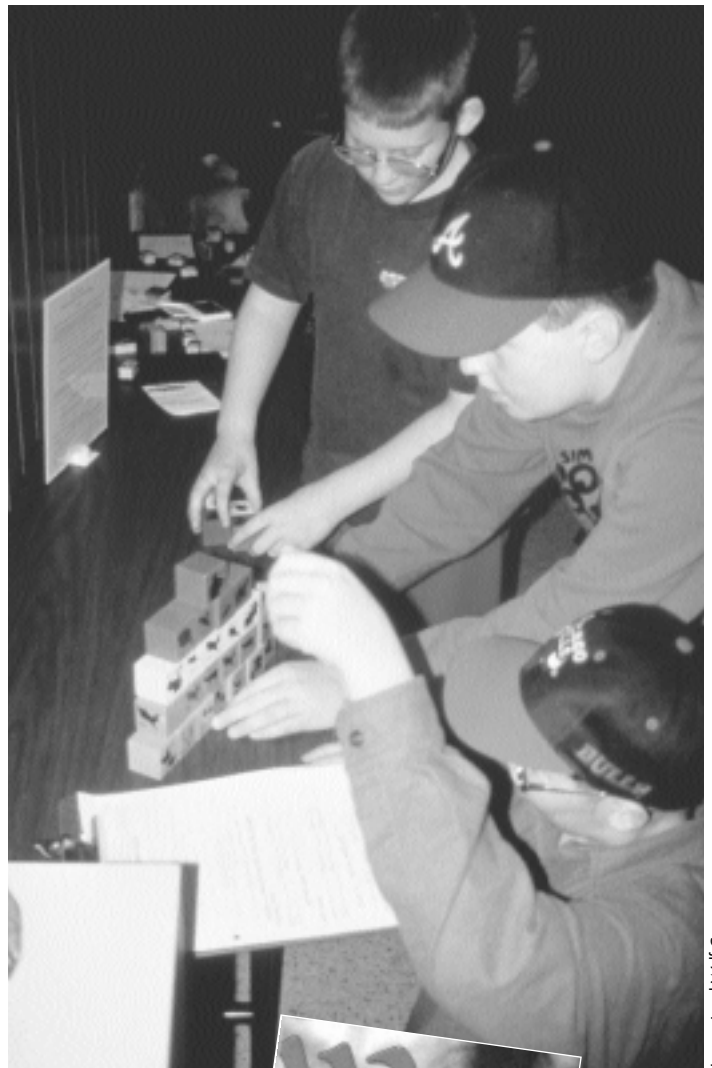
Wildlife agencies have informed the public about wolves through news releases, status reports, Web sites, hearings, public presentations and informal citizen contact with biologists who are involved with the

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reintroduction program. Outreach to schools through speakers and curricula helps improve general environmental literacy.

Advocacy groups of all stripes use newsletters, informational brochures, Web sites and fundraising appeals to educate their constituents and others about their perspective on the issues.

Science education facilities such as zoos and museums offer occasional docent training and wolf-related programming for schools and other groups. The Wolf Forum of the Southern Rockies is a newly formed consortium consisting of the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, the Denver Zoo, the Pueblo Zoo, the Albuquerque Biological



International Wolf Center



Park and the International Wolf Center, whose cooperative aim is to coordinate and provide wolf information and education in the region.

These education efforts generally communicate basic information about wolves—their appearance, eating habits and basic ecology—and provide some introduction to the varying viewpoints about wolves. Many of these programs focus largely on orienting people to the details of the Mexican wolf reintroduction program. In most cases these efforts reach relatively small audiences who are likely to have an existing interest in wolves and wildlife.

Media outlets with their broad reach also play an important role in disseminating news and information about wolves. The quality of wolf information is widely variable, in some cases focusing on hardships experienced by individuals who have lost livestock or pets to wolves. Some

media outlets cover science issues relating to wolves and portray a wide array of divergent viewpoints, while others present a romantic view of wolves that gives insufficient due to the real challenges they pose.

Together these sources for wolf education have contributed to a moderately widespread awareness of wolves in the region but provided little in-depth understanding of wolf issues. Just as wolf recovery in this region is complex and challenging, wolf education needs to rise to that challenge. If people are to develop a deep understanding of wolves and wolf issues, then wolf education must do three things. First, education must scrupulously convey pertinent

science by addressing myths, analyzing ecological issues and adhering to high standards for truth and honesty. Second, it must impart the reality of living with wolves by helping residents outside wolf range to empathize with residents who face daily problems caused by wolves. Third, wolf education must uncover underlying sources of conflict by illuminating fundamental value differences among citizens who have a stake in wolf recovery. ■

Please visit www.wolf.org/wolves/learn/intermed/intermed_population.asp for an extensive list of Web and book resources about wolf recovery in the Southwest.



Jacquelyn Fallon

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