

A Look Beyond

Home

by Bruce Weide and Pat Tucker

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Wild Sentry, Newsletter #48

Home is where you live, the place you know and feel comfortable to move around in. Most humans understand the rules of home ownership. We'd be shocked, incensed, and probably a little more than righteously indignant to find a stranger clear-cutting the backyard trees or bulldozing the family garden to make way for a tennis court. But when we buy a piece of vacant land and build a house, we often overlook the fact that tenants already live there. They didn't pay for the land or possess a title, but from their point of view it's theirs, and we're the intruders.

As houses are built, habitat for wildlife becomes an island amid a sea of human development. That is habitat fragmentation. It's insidious. It's difficult to control. It isn't vivid or gory. Yet, over the long run, habitat fragmentation poses far graver repercussions for wild wolves than aerial hunting or leghold traps; in fact, it is a major threat to most wildlife.

While a return to an early-Pleistocene mode of existence seems an unsavory and impractical solution to this problem, at the very least we can be aware of our impacts and mitigate them when possible. We can actively back politicians who understand that there are limits to how many humans this planet can support. We can choose fuel-efficient vehicles and overcome our reluctance to use public transportation. We can educate ourselves to act as responsible consumers. We can question wants versus needs. We can affirm those who live in town and not ogle over

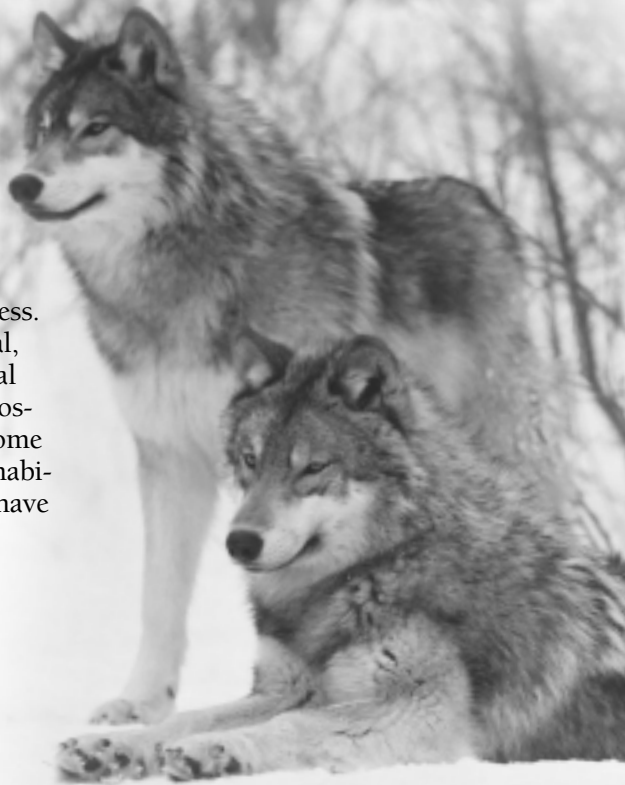
McMansions. We can choose to keep our eye on the ball—focusing on threats that truly constitute a major menace to animals—and not get sidetracked by peripheral wildlife issues. Comprehending limits and playing a role in community planning can't compete with the drama of protest, but when it comes to the longevity of a species, they are the more critical.

Our insatiable appetite for goods and services takes a toll on the reproduction and survival rates of our wild brethren. Those cumulative effects don't send an animal crawling off to whimper and writhe with a bullet through the spine. Encroachment won't cause animals to chew off a trapped leg. Nevertheless, habitat fragmentation leads to death by attrition. And because it's not dramatic or "in our face," our brains are not well equipped to empathize with its victims. But in the rest of the animal world, discomfort, confusion, death and finally extinction occur nonetheless.

Whatever your spiritual, religious or philosophical beliefs might be, it's impossible to deny that our home planet and its living inhabitants are a gift—humans have

evolved and adapted along with the entirety of life, not merely a selection we deem "good" or beneficial. Now, more than at any time in our past, we need to direct our big brains toward envisioning a future that provides for the needs of wild creatures as well as our own. Without a home, life is impossible. Like climbers connected by a rope, each dependent on the other not to make a fatal slip, our lives are linked to all of life on the earth. The quality of my future, your future, and the future of our children and grandchildren depends on us comprehending this simple fact. ■

Bruce Weide and Pat Tucker direct Wild Sentry (www.wildsentry.org). Wild Sentry combines science and the humanities to foster a fuller understanding of wolves and natural history.



Sherry Jokinen