



Tracking the Pack

Lifespan of a Wolf: Captive versus Wild

by Lori Schmidt

If you've been reading "Tracking the Pack" for awhile, you know about the Center's first permanent resident ambassador wolves, the 1993 litter that is now the Retired Pack. As this pack's members, Lucas, MacKenzie and Lakota, age, the wolf management team is preparing for inevitable age-related mortality. First comes the graying muzzle or tail, then the stiffness as the wolves slowly lower their hips to their beds, then the small lumps that appear under the skin, until the day when their appetite seems to dissipate and a series of medical tests leads to the conclusion that they are just old.

Years ago, the Center's management team drafted a euthanasia document that discusses animal health, quality of life and a process for decision making that recognizes an animal's suffering. As I write this, the pack is still active and mobile, but any responsible animal management program needs to plan for the future. Captive wolves may live up to 16 years or more, but the majority of facilities that our management program has consulted acknowledge that 14 years is a common mortality age for wolves in captivity.

While the inevitable loss of one of the Retired Pack will be difficult for staff and members of the Center, it is important to recognize that the care given to captive wolves more than doubles the lifespan of a typical wild wolf. Wolves in the wild rarely live past 6 to 8 years of age, and very rarely to 14 years. What causes mortality in the wild? If human-related wolf mortality is low, the main cause is starvation and aggression between wolves for territory or in pack conflict. Wolves can also be injured when

hunting prey equipped with defensive weapons such as hooves and antlers. The Russian proverb "a wolf is fed by its feet" is appropriate when discussing wolf mortality. When those feet get too old to keep up, food becomes hard to obtain. By age 7 or 8, a bit of stiffness in the joints may make the difference between a hunting

success and another day without food.

Fortunately for captive wolves, food is delivered in a wheelbarrow once a week, and roadkills don't kick. The Center would like to thank Andi Nelson and Pam Dolajec for their continued donations of medicines and vitamins, which help keep the older wolves healthy. We may have several good years left with the Retired Pack, but the staff think about the inevitable and cherish every day of wolf care. ■

Top: Lakota is starting to show her age in her graying face and desire for more sleep.

Below: Although the Retired Pack wolves are aging, they can still race around the enclosure.



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