



GETTING TO KNOW THE 'BIG BAD WOLF'

Conserving the Eastern Wolf population in La Mauricie National Park

The Eastern wolves (*Canis lupus lycaon*), which once ranged throughout all of eastern North America, owed much of their decline to human activities. Not only did humans settle in their territory; they also launched numerous extermination efforts. Many people feared the "big bad wolf". And although those fears had little basis in fact, they resulted in serious declines in wolf habitat and populations. The eastern wolf is now limited to southern parts of Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. In 2002, it was added to the list of Canadian species at risk. To halt its decline in La Mauricie National Park (MNP), the employees quickly understood that biological studies were no longer enough and that the public needed to be engaged and consulted.



La Mauricie National Park of Canada

Calling on social sciences for help

The Eastern wolf plays an important role in the ecosystem of La Mauricie National Park. Since they feed on beavers, white-tailed deer and moose, the wolves help maintain their populations at sustainable levels. Keeping numbers in balance is important to preserving the richness and diversity of plant species in the park, and indeed, the integrity of the entire forest ecosystem.

To assess the situation for the La Mauricie wolves, Parks Canada conducted an extensive scientific study. The protection of the two packs that occur in the park is not assured. The two wolf packs in La Mauricie National Park regularly cover a whopping 500 to 700-km².



Visitors looking at Wolf skulls at the Mauricie National Park © Jacques Pleau, Parks Canada

Even La Mauricie, which protects 536-km², cannot contain them. Once the wolves travel beyond park boundaries, they are subject to road traffic, hunting and trapping. Parks Canada decided to launch an interpretation and communications program to interest local people in protecting the wolves. But how could park staff catch the attention of the many different people in the area, each with their own point of view? To learn about local perspectives, park managers called on social science specialists from the Quebec Service Centre. In 2005, they began a three-year project to assess the human and social dimensions of wolf conservation.

Everyone has an opinion about wolves

For Marie-Andrée Leith, the study's senior social science analyst, the first task was to get to know the neighbours. As liaison between the communities and the park, she wanted to understand the thinking of everyone whose activities directly affected the wolves. As she attended local workshops, she discovered that discussing wolves is a delicate matter. The study team developed questionnaires and validated them with park managers and community representatives prior to starting the Consultation Study. They collected information from hunters, trappers, local residents and park visitors regarding their perceptions, knowledge and attitudes about wolf.

Eastern Wolf © Jacques Pleau, Parks Canada



They also looked beyond local groups to strengthen their work. They involved both Memorial University and the Quebec Department of Natural Resources and Wildlife. As well, to ensure their study used the best approaches, they incorporated methodology developed by the Working Group on Large Carnivores in Europe, which is part of the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Getting the facts straight and learning to love the wolf

The consultation revealed, among other things, that the number of wolves in the park was overestimated. This fact alone helped change perspectives. "Before the activity, I didn't want to protect wolves because I didn't think they were at risk," said one respondent. "I thought that there were some 300 wolves in the region. Now, I believe it is important that Parks Canada continue its efforts to protect the species. It's part of its mandate." In fact, the populations are closer to 20 wolves (two wolf packs of 5-10 animals each). And as people learned the facts, the majority of study participants – some 75 percent – came to recognize the importance of maintaining wolf populations. But it was more the study process itself that provoked the greatest changes. By participating in the research, people were actively engaged. They began to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility. Most wanted to be kept informed about wolf management in the park. This innovative approach produced encouraging results for park managers and generated interest among other parks and Fields Units across Canada.



Eastern Wolf © Jacques Pleau, Parks Canada



Visitors participating in an educative activity in La Mauricie National Park of Canada, © Jacques Pleau, Parks Canada

Respecting local concerns

If conservation programs are to succeed, park managers need to understand the perceptions, values and behaviors and provide the knowledge people need. Now that La Mauricie staff understands the local audiences, the project will focus on public education. With clear, compelling messages tailored to the concerns of each group, Parks Canada can help the Eastern wolf survive in La Mauricie National Park, and beyond its borders.

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