
HABITAT AND MANAGEMENT

WILDERNESS ETHICS AND ECOTOURISM - A WOLF'S VIEW

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This past summer, during the annual ecology immersion camp I guide into the Athabasca Sand Dunes, we lucked into an opportunity to observe a litter of five half-grown wolves near their den. For more than an hour we watched from our bellies on a soft dune among scattered hairgrass and willow sprouts as the pups sun-lounged, groomed, and romped in a small blowout below. One of them, perhaps on a daily, leisurely exploration of the den site perimeter, unwittingly angled up the dune towards us. At less than three paces distant it abruptly stopped, cocked its head sideways, and struggled to settle this strangely unfamiliar scene into some recognizable focus. Ecotourists! A whole flock of them!

In so far as a person's ethics consists of the internalized values and philosophy that shape her or his behaviour, wilderness ethics is concerned with one's interaction with nature. To maintain a healthy relationship with Nature "requires us to practice ethical constraint upon ourselves rather than unbounded pursuit of self-serving goals."¹ A healthy wilderness ethic promotes zero-impact camping and hiking, and therefore should be of primary interest to hikers, campers, and ecotourists generally.

In this brief moment of gazing into each other's eyes, and then as we watched the curious pup slither away,

tossing backward glances over one shoulder and the other, I felt a new awareness stirring. If values are what is treasured, aspired to, and defended I dare say wolves have values too. One might reasonably speculate they value privacy; safety; group allegiance and cooperation; experience and knowledge of territory; a pond-rich landscape rife with moose, beaver, deer, hares and grouse; soft, strong earth for dens; clean water; zero competition (as from coyotes, foxes, lynx); and zero harassment from trappers and hunters. Each species uses its values to determine how it should interact with the components that make up its perceived environment - it evaluates (sorts) these into degrees of good-bad-indifferent.

Although some of these wolf values may support those we humans elevate to song and worship, others may compete. Values underlying the behaviour of say a downy woodpecker are supportive of human values - after all, they feed on ants and other "destructive" insect larvae. Wolves, unfortunately, are near the bottom of our scale. Too many humans still consider them as nothing more than cattle-killing vermin to be eradicated.

Through further reflection on this wolf encounter, I have become increasingly aware of how important it is to see ecotourism as not merely about good experiences for ecotourists. It is equally

about good experiences for the landscape and wildlife that participate in the moment. In fact, to be successful and sustainable, ecotourism must be perceived as essentially a partnership between ecotourist and nature.

Ecosystems contain many examples of this sort of partnership arrangement; ecologists call it mutualism. The underlying understanding between the partners is, "As long as you continue to scratch my back, I'll keep scratching yours." Or, in an example, say of magpie and bison, "As long as you remove the occasional bug from my hide I'll let you perch on me to find them." Both parties benefit.

There is, however, one subtle (but critically important!) difference. In the case of ecotourists, our mutual understanding should not be with a single species or a select few species but with nature in its entirety - the entire ecosphere. Perched as we are at the top of the food and technology chain, we humans are challenged under the banner of "sustainable development" to rise above mere parsimonious evaluation and recognize first the fundamental goodness of the whole.

The underlying attitude that allows this mutual understanding to succeed indefinitely is complete and unwavering respect for nature. The ecosphere is so immense, so complicated, so fascinating that it deserves our respect. In Aldo Leopold's words "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to the land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for the land."² Learning helps us develop this respect and so strengthen the partnership. Whether we are ecotourists or other wilderness visitors, by looking, listening, and actively exploring, Nature offers us moments of intense learning and personal growth. Her expectation

is that, in return, we will not merely maintain ongoing respect but become proactive in defending her against threats to her integrity and diversity. Our learning and consequent understanding empowers us to defend Nature and so strengthen our partnership with her.

Responsible ecotourism challenges us to embrace the following general guidelines:

- strive for zero impact on landscape and wildlife
- encourage other wilderness users to strive for zero-impact, and teach them how
- take nothing from the wilderness except the garbage we bring in, our memories, our learning, and our experience of personal growth
- undertake, facilitate, model, and encourage maximum learning. More specifically, the following are some down-to-earth ways in which we can exercise our respect for nature and thus become better ecotourists and wilderness visitors (adapted from D.N. Cole³)
- plan your trips with small groups, not large
- buy and store your food and drinks with an eye to minimizing leftover packaging
- avoid off-trail travel if man-made trails already exist
- be quiet, passive, and receptive instead of loud and aggressive
- do not harass, follow or disturb resident wildlife
- wear soft-soled shoes whose heels and toes are less likely to scoop holes into the soil
- if permitted at all, feed on berries or other naturally growing foods only sparsely
- in remote locations try to camp where you will cause least impact; acknowledge resident wildlife and your intention to share their home respectfully

- camp in natural openings to avoid cutting herbs, shrubs or any other vegetation
- do your bathing, wash your dishes, and dispose of waste water well away from water bodies
- if formal toilets are unavailable, deposit human waste in a 25 cm deep cathole (covered over) where it will decay as quickly as possible
- avoid using wood fires (use a camp stove); do not use fires to dispose of garbage or food
- if a fire cannot be avoided, use only existing deadfall
- if a fire is used, be sure to burn it down to ashes, soak the ashes with water, and disperse them so the fire-site can return to a natural state as early as possible
- do not leave behind bottles, cans, packaging or any other garbage
- do not bury garbage
- do not leave behind any human consumables or leave them at risk of being tasted or consumed by wildlife
- if you have space in your pack, take out garbage you may find left behind by other campers or hikers
- upon leaving, remove all evidence of your stay in a campsite; thank resident plants and animals for sharing the site with you
- avoid using motorized transportation
- hike, canoe, etc., in ways and at times that minimize impact on landscape and wildlife
- use only biodegradable soap and in small amounts.

References

1. JONKER, P.M. 1996. Moving From Reactionism to Constructive Education: A Critique of the Canadian Environmental Lobby. p. 214-222 In W.D. Willms and J.F. Dormaar (Eds.), Proceedings of the Fourth Prairie Conservation and Endangered Species Workshop, Edmonton: The Provincial Museum of Alberta. Natural History Occasional Paper No. 23.
2. LEOPOLD, ALDO. 1949. A Sand County Almanac. New York: Oxford University Press.
3. COLE, D.N. 1989. Low-Impact Recreation Practices for Wilderness and Backcountry. USDA For. Serv. Gen. Tech. Rep. INT-265. 131pp.



A force more powerful even than predators in moulding butterfly behaviour has been climate, and its daily expression, weather. The elements probably account for as much butterfly mortality as predators, parasites, and disease together.