

The wolf as opportunistic predator

Mother Nature spent some 15 million years developing *Canis Lupus* from the original Canid ancestors. That is about ten times as long as what was spent on the development of *Homo Sapiens*....

There are many illustrative examples of *Canis Lupus*, the wolf, being an extremely well adapted species. One is its ability to heal wounds; members of the canid family generally heal wounds after injuries in less than half the time a similar healing process takes for a human. Another example of utmost importance is the wolf's ability to adjust to all kinds of changes in the environment. Wolves will naturally populate just about every spot on the globe where other animals live that can be preyed on: the Arctic and the Tropics included. No other mammal comes even close to this kind of adaptability when we exclude man's use of technology for his own survival in climates/environments that naturally would kill him.

This adaptability has not likely developed overnight – but it has been constantly promoted by Nature's harsh principle of "survival of the fittest".

There is strong link between this adaptability and the wolf's ability to *learn* – and to *teach*. Its pack hunting behavior is a strong factor in this, giving the offspring some very profound education in specific hunting techniques. This has often led to what deserves to be classified as "culture": wolf puppies will learn the specifics of hunting so well from their parents that they will more or less stick exclusively to the use of this knowledge "forever after" – or at least for as long as the environment supports it. A good example is given by the wolves in the Kootenays of British Columbia¹, which appear to have divided themselves into two categories that do not interfere with each other:

- The "elk wolves" that exclusively hunt elk.
- The "deer wolves" that exclusively hunt deer.

They "stick to their trade" and have never been observed "crossing the line" into the other group's domain. It is almost like two human tribes, one being settled as fishermen, the other as hunters. They do not bother each other, but live in co-existence, organizing their lives completely independently of each other.

It is important to understand, though, that this kind of flexibility is one of choice – the wolf is not genetically programmed for it – so it can change this "way of life" any time the circumstances no longer support it. What it is genetically programmed for is *the willingness to learn and change – and the ability to do so*.

¹ Private communication with members of the British Columbia Ministry of Environment 1998.

Mogens Eliassen:
"The Wolf's Natural Diet – a Feeding Guide for Your Dog?"

An important lesson from evolution

Another important aspect of the evolutionary process that created the wolf is that there has to be a close match between

- a. The need its body has for nutrition
- b. The food it gets and its ability to digest it.

If those two don't match, the species cannot be successful. After 15 million years, we can pretty much conclude that this match must have been in place – otherwise *Canis Lupus* would have gone extinct because of malnourishment, long time ago.

A critical question then is this: is this match still in place?

The answer depends on many factors.

First of all, of course, the availability of adequate food sources. Those change with time, but generally *slowly*, compared to the wolf's ability as a species to adjust through natural selection. Again, it must have been so – otherwise wolves would no longer be around.

But they are no longer around in many places that previously were their natural habitats.... Man has killed them by the millions, and in most countries in Europe and in the USA, wolves are practically extinct! The main reason for the killing, however, has been that man changed the environment and wanted to *farm*. This desire deprived the wolf of its natural prey, replacing it with farm animals. Yet human farmers were not keen on sharing *their* proprietary "prey" with the wolf they stole the land from....

Even in areas where wolves are left alive – or re-introduced – we can no longer claim that the environment is "undisturbed". Man's influence is dramatic. Our "wildlife management practices" do allow wolves to kill too many of those animals that make good income from hunting licenses for governments, who control wolf territory. The result is that the number of wolves is generally kept artificially low, compared to the natural balance that would exist without man's interference.

But this, in turn, will place the remaining wolves in an environment that is much richer in food resources than what the terms were all the way through the development of the species....

This will literally allow the wolf to be "picky" about its food – which is also clearly observed in Yellowstone where wolves were reintroduced in 1995 into an environment that had been completely stripped of its top predator for more than 70 years.

(To be continued)

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