Lesson 15

Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?

Early American settlers, alone at night in their log cabins, far from their nearest neighbors, must have had a sense of **foreboding** as they heard the howling of wolves in the darkness. **Lurid** stories of savage attacks on humans had fired their imaginations; they believed that the wolf was a ferocious beast who made unprovoked attacks on humans. Phrases such as “keeping the wolf from the door” and tales like “Little Red Riding Hood” may have **perpetuated** this misunderstanding.

This fear of wolves is quite **irrational**. Wolves do kill to live, but they seldom kill humans. Most stories of wolves attacking humans have been **discredited** by those who have studied the subject. One researcher investigating the behavior of arctic wolves in northern Canada removed a pup from its mother and took it into a nearby tent. Even though the mother became **restive**, she waited outside the tent until the pup was returned to her.

The truth is that wolves are quite wary of humans, if not completely afraid, and with good reason. During the last several hundred years, humans have **encroached** on their habitats. Trapping, shooting, and poisoning almost completely eliminated wolves from the lower forty-eight states. By the 1970s, the gray wolf, also known as the timber wolf, was found on the North American continent only in the northern United States and Canada.

In the last several decades, however, attitudes toward wolves have changed. People have realized that these creatures might not survive without human help. They have actively supported plans to reestablish wolves in wilderness areas where they once flourished. During the late 1980s, red wolves were successfully returned to regions of the southeastern United States where they once lived. In 1995, a three-year project to reintroduce gray wolves to one of their original habitats began in Yellowstone National Park.

To make sure these projects succeed, scientists and wildlife specialists have been studying wolves extensively. To gather information, they catch individual animals in **humane** traps, then fit them with collars containing radio transmitters before releasing them. These transmitters help the scientists **ascertain** the movements of wolf packs. Other observers keep the animals under **surveillance** from aircraft flying overhead.
From their observations, scientists know that a wolf pack usually consists of five to fifteen animals. The pack may need anywhere from forty to four hundred square miles in order to maintain itself. The area they require depends on the number of wolves in the pack and the amount of game available. In their continual search for food, wolves demonstrate tremendous stamina; they can maintain a steady pace for hours at a time if necessary. They show amazing intelligence as they work in close cooperation with each other while hunting. Their prey includes elk, moose, caribou, and deer. By culling herds of old or sick animals, wolves perform a valuable service: they strengthen the herd by leaving more grazing areas for the remaining animals. If a herd becomes much reduced, wolves will desist from preying on it until its size has increased to a normal level.

Wolves usually mate for life. They are very protective of their young, caring for them until they are fully grown at about two years. A strict social order is maintained within the pack. All defer to the leader, who alone decides when and where to hunt.

Scientists have observed that wolves communicate in various ways. Whimpering indicates restlessness or hunger; snarling is used to put members of the pack in their place if they become too assertive. A snarling wolf is like a parent chastising an unruly child. And what about the howling in the night that struck terror into the American settlers’ hearts? It was probably a warning to other wolves that their scent had been detected and that they were invading territory that was already occupied. It did not mean that an attack on humans was imminent. As a Canadian trapper is once supposed to have said, “Anyone who says he’s been et by a wolf is a liar.”

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. How do wolves keep herds of deer and other animals healthy?

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2. How have the actions of humans toward wolves changed in the last thirty years?

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3. What is the meaning of **discredited** as it is used in the passage?
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4. How might the mother wolf who had her pup taken away have communicated that she was **restive**?
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5. Why would it be inaccurate to say that all members of a wolf pack treat each other as equals?
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6. Why might it be **irrational** to fear wolves today?
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7. What is the meaning of **chastise** as it is used in the passage?
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8. Why were people’s **forebodings** unnecessary when they heard wolves howl?
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9. How do researchers **ascertain** information about wolves today?
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10. Why do you think **surveillance** of wolf pack movements would be easier in winter?
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11. Why are tales like “Little Red Riding Hood” unfair to wolves?
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12. What is the meaning of **lurid** as it is used in the passage?

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13. What is one possible reason for wolves howling?

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14. What is required of a **humane** trap for catching wolves?

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15. What physical quality do wolves have that makes them good hunters?

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**FUN & FASCINATING FACTS**

• One very well-known line of poetry is Alexander Pope’s “To err is human, to forgive divine.” However, what he actually wrote was, “To err is humane, to forgive divine.” In the early eighteenth century, when the line was written, human and humane did not have separate meanings. This is no longer the case. Human refers to any quality—good, bad, or neutral—associated with human beings. (The human voice has a range of about two octaves.) Humane is restricted to those qualities that express sympathy for other creatures. (The law requires the humane treatment of animals in captivity.)

• In Greek mythology, the three fates were goddesses who controlled the length of human life. They were Clotho, who spun the thread of life; Lachesis, who measured its length; and Atropos, who cut it. The Greek word for thread is stemon, which passed into Latin as stamen, the plural of which is stamina. Those who lived a long time were believed to have lengthy stamina, or “threads of life.” Because people who lived to an old age were believed to have physical strength and endurance, stamina came to have these meanings. Note that although stamina is a plural form in Latin, in English stamina is treated as a singular noun.