

THE BENEFITS OF WOLVES AND DOGS

Disclaimer: This sermon is not for Cat People. If you are satisfied with animal companions that only choose to be companionable sporadically and totally on their own schedule, who meow like a fire siren when you ignore them, who dig their claws into any available body part when they want your attention or to be fed, then turn their noses up at perfectly good cat food, you do not need a dog but may want to consider therapy!

All dogs are descended from ancient wolves, even Maltese, Dachshunds, and Pekinese. It is easier to see with Chihuahuas and most of the larger breeds, but all those cute big and little dogs that are so much more companionable than most cats are all really cousins to modern gray wolves. Dogs were first domesticated somewhere between 14,000 and 36,000 years ago, but wolves have been around at least 300,000 years.

In most of the United States other than Alaska, wolves were hunted to extinction levels. By 1926 Wolves had even been eliminated from Yellowstone National Park. Some 70 years later, beginning in 1995, Canadian Gray Wolves were reintroduced to the park, with 31 relocated by the end of 1996. (*I'm not sure what kind of Visas they had.*)

According to the National Park Service: An estimated 528 wolves resided in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem as of 2015. As of December 2016, there were at least 108 wolves in the park. Eleven packs were noted. In general, wolf numbers fluctuated between 83 and 108 wolves from 2009 to 2016.

There have been several attempts to remove endangered protections from Gray Wolves including the latest attempt announced this week by the Trump Administration to remove national protections and return control of populations to the states. Wildlife conservationists fear this will lead to hunting and elimination of the healthy and stable populations that have been established in the last quarter century. Wolves once roamed thru most of the US, but now are found only in Northern states.

The benefits of Wolves in Yellowstone have been widely chronicled in recent years. The return of wolves as the apex predator has served to balance populations of Elk, to provide food for other animals and birds from their kills, as well as preventing wary Elk from grazing on young trees. The latter has led to a return of Beavers and healthier stands of Aspen, Willow, and Cottonwood. In short, the return of the Wolves has returned balance and health to the entire eco-system that had been missing for decades.

Ranchers do not tend to like wolves, bear, or coyotes, but have particularly blamed wolves for losses of sheep and cows in recent years in the Yellowstone ecosystem. Though the losses are actually much lower than their fears, as also in the cases of reported transmission of Brucellosis from wandering Bison to cows, ranchers want the freedom to kill any animals they think might threaten their livestock.

From an ecological standpoint, it is a miracle that more of the large wild animals have not gone extinct. To preserve enough natural areas to maintain healthy populations of Bear, Bison, Wolves, Mountain Lions, Eagles, Hawks, and other animals has been a huge challenge as human populations have grown and spread. This ongoing conflict between wild animals and people will likely be exacerbated as prime low lying areas are covered by rising sea levels in coming decades. Large human populations in coastal areas will almost certainly need to move inland as sea levels rise, threatening forests as well as their inhabitants. I hope that we will be able to protect enough of the forests to maintain healthy populations of the remaining large animals, but it will certainly be a challenge!

Almost certainly because of their physical similarities to dogs, Wolves have gained a loyal following which has helped to protect them against the demands of ranchers in Western states. But Wolves are only one species that will likely remain endangered for the foreseeable future. All the bigger wild animals except possibly Deer are threatened by the further encroachment of human populations into their territories.

Humans have learned to grow amazing amounts of wheat, rice, corn, soy, and other crops with the help of pesticides, chemicals, and irrigation. But the use of some of pesticides, chemicals, and redirecting water has changed each

ecosystem and in many cases polluted downstream ecosystems. There is a cost to each agricultural innovation and many such innovations have led to losses of habitat or making habitats toxic to many species of animals and plants. Too often in the pursuit of wealth, the dangers to plants and animals has been ignored.

Wolves have held an important place in the animal kingdom for thousands of years, and their restoration in Yellowstone clearly shows how important they may be to the health of the ecosystem. Removal of any species will bring changes, but removing the Apex Predator particularly makes clear how important a species may be. To allow their removal again after they have established stable population levels is ecological insanity.

Humans think they have all the answers and know everything that is needed to successfully operate this planet, but there are still plenty of mysteries and questions to be answered. Rather than cutting science budgets and limiting the exchange of scientific information, we ought to be expanding research into what might make ecosystems healthier and allow a balance between human populations and the rest of the natural world. The Wolves are one species that may help us remember the importance of the natural world.

And then there are their cousins, the dogs. Dogs are hardly foreign to our awareness. They are in our homes, next to our feet, on our couches, sometimes on our beds, and certainly in our families. They comfort us when we are sad or grieving, they love us even when we are not very loveable. Dogs are our friends and often our best and most loyal friends. Okay, they may be distracted by the smell of food or drawn away briefly by treats, or to play with other dogs or to chase a cat, but they will generally come back as long as they know the way. Our relationship with dogs is clearly one of interdependence, and we love our dogs.

Dogs also can be trained as service animals, to help people who are blind or suffer seizures, or need emotional support. Dogs assist police in sniffing out drugs and apprehending dangerous suspects. Dogs also herd sheep and cattle and pigs. They will fetch the paper with only minimal damage for those who read what is left of Newspapers. In rural areas they walk children out to the bus

stop. They help to keep predators away from chicken coops and sheep pens and by their barking have been known to scare away Coyotes and Bear. Dogs are not as effective in herding cats, but in unusual circumstances have been known to maintain friendships with such creatures, particularly if they grow up together.

There are also many kinds of dogs: lapdogs, chow hounds, early warning barkers, chair and couch weights, exercise buddies, alarm clocks, and dream interrupters. They also may be categorized by breeds, of which there are too many to count, going from tea-cup to small horse sizes and weights! Left to their own devices, dogs tend to form packs with a clear hierarchy under the alpha or dominant leader. The leader in our former pack just happened to be the older female Maltese, Toby (for Toe-Biter, though her father Duddly did more Toe-biting) who could put the other dogs in their places with a bark or snarl. Dizzi is the only remaining dog from that pack, and currently Dizzi seems to have worked out a *détente* with Jane's dog, Boomer who is larger, heavier, and younger. It is not entirely clear who the more alpha dog really is between Dizzi and Boomer, but Boomer does back off when Dizzi growls.

Occasionally I imagine a time without any dogs, leaving me freer to travel, but missing the ongoing companionship of a dog or two would leave a gap as well as resulting in fewer walks! I only had one dog growing up. We brought home Flint from my Aunt Margaret's house as a young puppy, offspring of my Aunt's show dog Duchesse and a neighbor who jumped the fence. Flint was a beautiful tri-color collie, long-haired, playful, friendly, and very protective of my brother and me. I was about 4 when we got Flint, who was part of our family for a dozen years and died when I was away at Scout camp.

I didn't get another dog until I was married and we were living in a small town in Colorado, but Aussie, a Blue Healer and Captain Chaos, a Schnauzer, were not great with small children, so after Aussie nipped at toddler Jessica, she went to herd pigs in Northern Montana and Chaos went to a family without any young kids. It was another few years until Jane and I got together and she had (Husky-Shepherd) Thunder for protection that I had another dog. To keep Thunder company, we got (Black Lab Mix) Woof from a work friend in New Jersey, and then Toby from Jane's mother in Florida, and later Casper from the

No-Kill Laing Foundation thru the LA Times, and then Molly Brown, (Toby's younger half-sister) and then Dizzi, the Arkansas Brown Dog. I kept the pack when Jane and I divorced, so she got Boomer in Missouri. I could tell stories about each of those dogs, but we have other things to do today, so I will save them for another time. *(For fairness, I probably should mention that there were also a few household cats at times over the years, but again, stories for another time!)*

My home zoo, the Brookfield Zoo of the Chicago Zoological Society, has had a wolf pack for as long as I can remember, so even though I didn't see wolves in the wild, I have known wolves and dogs throughout most of my life. My life would certainly have been the poorer without the wolves and dogs. Among other things, as a shy introvert, dogs helped me to be more sociable, and I have rarely met a dog who didn't quickly become a friend.

The dogs in our households help to remind us of the wolves and other animals out in the wild. Most dog people I know understand that the health of our planet depends on the health of the animals beyond our doors, that we cannot just take care of the dogs and cats that live with us and forget about the animals out in the woods. We live in an interdependent interconnected world and for each species that goes extinct, there will be a cost to humanity as well as the rest of the world. Humanity may have been in the ascendancy over the last few thousand years, but our offspring will pay the cost if we do not preserve nature and the other species.

Much as the many other current crises may demand our time and attention, I fear that the damage we have done to the natural world may provide the greatest risk to the future of humanity. Flood and fire, drought and storm, rising temperatures and rising seas, decimated forests and polluted streams, acidified oceans and plastic garbage patches, so many things that bode ill for all the life forms on earth. Too many people, too many cars, too much dependence on fossil fuels, and too little awareness of science. We have much to do! May our efforts make a difference!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!