



Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance
(307) 733-9417 • www.jhalliance.org

5/20/09 *Jackson Hole News&Guide*

Finding a way to coexist with wildlife

Habituation is not a four-letter word. However, it does evoke a great deal of debate and confusion. If wildlife in our national parks were not at least a bit habituated to humans -- and to roads, trails and developments -- many thousands of acres of perfectly good habitat would effectively be lost for wildlife. Problems tend to arise when wildlife encounter people who thoughtlessly reward them with handouts, or, in the case of some wolves, they become habituated through successful hunts in developed areas. It appears that for some of Yellowstone's wolves, we may be seeing both examples play out -- to the detriment of the wolves.

In the case of the wolf at Old Faithful that developed a habit of approaching humans and even chasing bicyclists, it seems obvious that this wolf has received food rewards and now associates humans with a source of fast food. Whether it is a bear, coyote or wolf, this behavior usually results in the death of the animal because of the risk they pose to park visitors and employees. It is not the wildlife's fault; it is the fault of humans who illegally rewarded these wild animals with fast and easy food.

In the case of the Canyon Pack, it appears that their habituation arose because of the easy hunting around Mammoth, long known for its abundant and habituated elk population. It now appears that there are some people within the Park who think these wolves should be moved or eliminated even though they have shown no aggression toward humans. In this case, the wolves' habituation to humans likely resulted because of the easy hunting of unwary elk throughout the developed area, and not because of direct human food rewards.

Mammoth residents have long been concerned about other wildlife habitually using the area. This makes me wonder if a preemptive, non-lethal solution such as erecting a wildlife-proof fence around the housing and school area might not be in order. Many national parks in Africa do exactly that, fence the people in and keep the wildlife out. It seems such a solution would be far better than risking injury to people and much more compatible with the Park Service mission than moving or removing native wildlife.

There are many groups and individuals working in the region who repeatedly ask private landowners to take non-lethal precautions to avoid conflicts with wolves. Our national parks should be leaders in this effort and set examples we can all proudly follow. This should include a more aggressive campaign to educate visitors and employees of the perils of feeding wildlife. Perhaps humans need to become better habituated to wildlife -- give them space -- not food and keep them wild. If we can't find a way to coexist with wildlife in our national parks, where can we?

Sincerely,
Franz J. Camenzind, Executive Director
Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance