



Wildlife Center Classroom Series Attitudes Toward Wildlife

Wednesday October 12, 2016

Alex Wehrung, WCV:

Good afternoon everyone, and an official welcome to today's Wildlife Center Classroom Series:

Alex Wehrung, WCV



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This discussion is all about the different attitudes people have about wildlife, what factors affect those attitudes, and why wildlife attitudes are so important.

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So! Let's start from the ground up. *Attitude* is defined as "a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person's behavior".

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I think it's safe to say that everyone online today has a positive attitude toward wildlife. Unfortunately, that's not always the case.

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Stephen Kellert, a highly published author at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, is a "social ecologist" who has written a lot of material about the human dimension of environmentalism.



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Some of Kellert's research shows that unconcerned or negative public opinions on wildlife, a growing sense of disconnection from the land, a lack of knowledge, and disregard for the importance of education are all increasing.

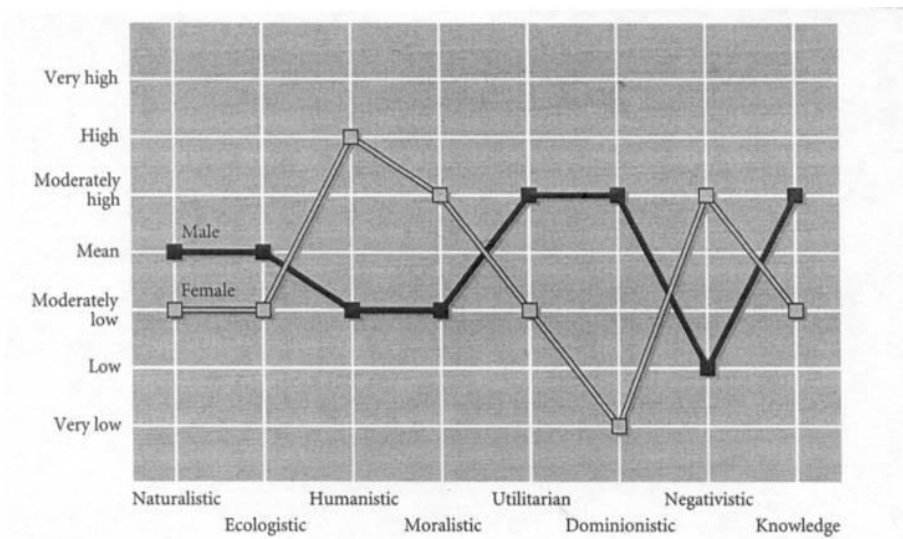
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In Kellert's 2007 publication *Biophilia, Children and Restoring Connections to Nature in the Built Environment*, nine distinct Primary Attitudes are defined:

1. **Naturalistic:** One's primary interest and affection is for wildlife and the outdoors.
2. **Ecologicistic:** One's primary concern is for the environment as a system, for interrelationships between wildlife species, and natural habitats.
3. **Humanistic:** One's primary interest and strong affection is for individual animals, primarily pets.
4. **Moralistic:** One's primary concern is for the right and wrong treatment of animals, with strong opposition to exploitation or cruelty toward animals.
5. **Scientific:** One's primary interest is in the physical attributes and biological functioning of animals.
6. **Aesthetic:** One's primary interest is in the artistic and symbolic characteristics of animals.
7. **Utilitarian:** One's primary concern is for the practical and material value of animals or the animal's habitat.
8. **Dominionistic:** One's primary interest is in the mastery and control of animals, typically in sporting situations.
9. **Negativistic:** An active avoidance of animals due to indifference, dislike, or fear.

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So what gives people certain attitudes? Lots of things: gender, age, race, education level, occupation, income, where you were born, marital status, number of children, etc. This graph from Kellert's publication shows some interesting data on which gender tends to make up the majority of each Primary Attitude:



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Kellert found that in general, women tend to be more sympathetic toward animals, and express greater anti-hunting sentiment than men. Out of all of those factors that influence attitude, education is of particular importance for us at the Wildlife Center of Virginia. After all, our mission is in part to “teach to world to care about and to care for wildlife and the environment”!

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According to a recent research study, we’ve got our work cut out for us. In the study, sample groups labeled statements about animals as either “true” or “false”. Here are the results:

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Americans are the most knowledgeable about: dangerous wild animals (63% correct), pets (56% correct), and domestic animals (53% correct). Americans are the least knowledgeable about: Native predators (47% correct), taxonomic relatedness (38 % correct), and invertebrates (36% correct).

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The most knowledgeable groups consisted of birdwatchers, trappers and hunters, college educated, high-income, members of nature groups, and residents of Alaska and the Rocky Mountains. The least knowledgeable groups had a high school education or less, were >75 years old, <25 years old, and residents of large cities.

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But, wait – there’s more! A 2002 study in school children 4-12 years of age compared their identification and knowledge of native wildlife versus Pokémon characters. Overall, kids knew much more about Pokémon characters (78% correct) than native species (53% correct)!



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These numbers probably sound alarming to us, but remember – knowledge about and attitudes towards wildlife have been constantly changing throughout history, and will likely continue to do so.

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Participating in activities that involve wildlife also influences our attitudes. Surveys show that Americans interact with wildlife in a variety of ways. *How* we interact, though, greatly influences the relationships that we have with wildlife.

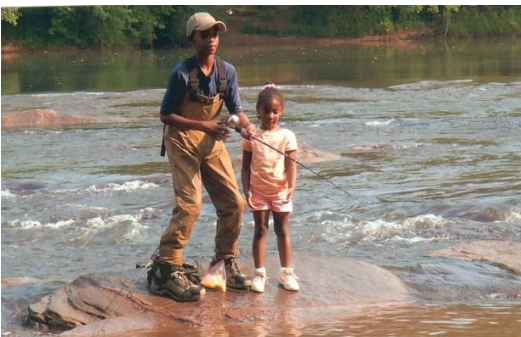
- 78% watch nature shows on TV
- 67% own a pet
- 59% feed birds
- 45% visit zoos
- 44% fish
- 12% hunt
- 11% belong to a conservation organization
- 8% birdwatch seriously

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Research has shown that the *ontogenesis* -- the development of a behavioral feature from the earliest stage to maturity -- of our relationship with wildlife can be traced back to early childhood.

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Up to 8 years of age, attitudes are affected most strongly by basic emotions related to animals (fear, cuddly things, etc.). It is believed that our attitudes are generally crystalized by age 8. 8-12 years of age is often considered to be the most significant period. This is when we acquire “facts” about animals from personal experiences and outdoor interactions.



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Around this age, most negative attitudes are toward predators.

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The knowledge we build during this period is reinforced by books, stories, classroom learning, and TV (13% of children's books have an animal in the title!)



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At 13-16, we begin to grasp broader concepts, abstract ideas, and ethics. Essentially, we begin to understand the complexity of relationships in nature.

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Throughout these life stages, the most influential emotion on attitude is probably fear. Children under the age of ten are the most afraid of spiders, biting and stinging insects, and snakes.

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However, fear has been proven to be a learned behavior – children are not instinctively afraid of animals! Where do they learn fear? By watching their parents and peers, movies, television, etc.

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Education can make a huge difference by creating better knowledge, improved attitudes, a broader tolerance, and an ethic of care and compassion for all forms of wildlife.

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And now, my favorite part: So what? Who cares? Why does attitude matter and why should we study it?

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Attitudes are important because wildlife education and management are the most successful when they connect animals, habitat, and people together as one.

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While many organizations world-wide are doing incredible and meaningful work with wildlife, there will always be a need for public support and funding. Attitude affects the learning process, and pre-conditions interest in wildlife issues and opinions.

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In short, exploring and studying how we feel about wildlife -- and why -- can be one of the most effective ways to create a society that cares about and cares for the connection between animals, habitats, and people.

Alex Wehrung, WCV:

That does it for this WCCS, thanks for joining in on the discussion everyone! I'll be online for a few more minutes before logging off.