



The Lone Wolf

There are many ways to learn and understand the behaviour of wolves. One of the best ways to learn is from the people who have lived with wolves for thousands of years.

Seven-thirty in the morning, May 26, 2000, Great Bear Rainforest on British Columbia's coast – our first field day for the Rainforest Wolf Project began. In a fourteen and a half ft. boat, Lone Wolf and I explore a 60,000 km² wilderness searching for his ancestors. We had sped north up Deer Pass from the village of Bella Bella, following the shoreline. We were silent, both shy as a result of our differences in age (24 years) and cultures (light years). That morning, we shared the same enchantment with the glistening ochre of the passing shoreline which was crowned by swaths of pristine green forests above. With no trip plan, we pattered into an unnamed bay we now refer to as Starr Bay in Lone Wolf's honour.

As we threw the anchor to go ashore and look for wolf signs, the bay erupted in howls. From behind an estuarine island trotted two wolves, both as red as the algae that graced the water's edge. The female (which we now know has mothered pups for at least 5 of the last 6 years) looked at us, squat urinated, scratched her feet, and walked away at a demonstrably casual pace. In the first hour of our trip we had already witnessed something very magical.

Chester is known as Lone Wolf to his friends. He understands wolves. For years, he would roam far and wide over his territory, often alone and often hunting deer or fishing for salmon. From the onset, we at the Raincoast Conservation Foundation planned on working closely with local First Nations people. Folks from Bella Bella knew Lone Wolf was the clear choice for a Heiltsuk partner.

Lone Wolf is a skilled tracker and outdoors person with the keenest of eyes and sharpest of wit. More than once, we'd be skipping along the water by boat going 20 knots and he'd casually say, "I guess you'll probably want to slow down to take a look at that there wolf...". I'd throttle down and sure enough Chester had again spotted a rainforest wolf that had escaped my detection. He is equally nonchalant during the handful of perilous situations we have encountered. One that stands out is his wolf howl in response to a particularly close encounter we had with a bear. Even before its crescendo, Chester's howl had apparently sent a signal of warning so effective that it turned the bear around and sent him scurrying out of sight.

Lone Wolf is admirably serious about his wolf studies. Over the years, Chester has revealed to our team dozens of wildlife trails, "wolf highways" as he calls them, which weave

through the ancient rainforest valleys of Heiltsuk territory. When collecting hair for genetic samples, Lone Wolf will curl up in a freshly used wolf bed for an hour, painstakingly collecting every last follicle. When he returns alone from sampling, his notebook is without exception filled with detailed records of what he has observed, always above and beyond our requirements for data collection. He observes what we, as so-called western scientists, have not been trained to detect: the tiniest of hairs brushed off a wolf's back by branch overhanging a trail, a slightly-chewed stick left behind by an easily distracted pup on the move, even the smell of a bear that had recently passed through the area. His intrinsic and acute awareness of what surrounds him does not come at a cost in speed; dressed in jeans and an old pair of gumboots, he maneuvers effortlessly through the thick coastal rainforest vegetation, an environment that bogs down most people.

Lone Wolf's skills reflect not only his own



extensive experience but also that of his ancestors. For millennia, some say since the beginning of time, the Heiltsuk have shared their territory with wolves and other rainforest life. It follows that Lone Wolf would inherit the expertise that had allowed his people to live so successfully in their wilderness home.

While searching for wolves in this wilderness, Chester – a member of the Wolf Clan - is truly seeking his ancestors. In an important creation story* of one of the founding Heiltsuk tribes, a wolf fathers the first children of this group.

An ochre colour is prominent in the art that adorns the rock faces along the inlets of Heiltsuk Territory. As we idle our boat up to one of these rock faces, Lone Wolf reminds us that this is how his ancestors had marked their territories, much like the wolves mark theirs. It's one of the Heiltsuk's most skilled archaeological field workers, Lone Wolf likely knows more ancient cultural features in Heiltsuk territory than anyone. From leading us to traditional house sites that the forest is reclaiming to pointing out living cedar trees with their bark stripped off to be made into clothing, Chester is always educating us about traditional links



to the landscape. With a subdued modesty, Chester shares with us secrets about wolves that science cannot even ask, never mind answer. In short, Lone Wolf's insights, through his Traditional Ecological Knowledge, have made enormous contributions to our scientific research efforts and conservation for wolves.

However, modest and quick-footed, Chester could not avoid worldwide recognition for his contributions. Lone Wolf has gestured prominently in several wolf television documentaries, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) recently acknowledged him and his outstanding efforts in animal protection and advocacy were recognized at the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa in late 2004. Appearing most distinguished in a traditional Heiltsuk vest, Lone Wolf received this accolade beside Dr. Jane Goodall, the famous primatologist, who was also honoured. Closer to home, Chester is respected as the wolf person in Bella Bella, fielding all the questions and stories about the elusive visitors that roam the hills not far from the village.

Lone Wolf remains in the village this winter. Like winters past, I return to the university, buried in statistical esoteric, attempting to further my understanding of wolves. Meanwhile, by following in the footsteps of his ancestors through the light winter snow, Chester continues to learn about these amazing creatures in the field. I look forward to the next field season when I can yet again walk with him through his territory, the rainforest of beautiful coastal British Columbia.

*Story belongs to T'sumklaqs (Peggy Housty) of Bella Bella.

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