

Peter Gros on Preserving Wild Nature

by Sandra Murphy

Peter Gros, co-host of the original *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* TV show, wildlife expert and environmental conservationist, now educates groups of young people that spend more time on their handheld devices than they do outdoors. His message impresses upon the next generation the importance of wildlife and open spaces as they gift us with heartfelt awe and balance, and engage us with nature to offset manmade lives.

His 30 years of field experiences include serving as a wildlife lecturer and licensed U.S. Department of Agriculture exhibitor. An active member of the American Zoo and Aquariums Association and the Zoological Association of America, Gros is also on the board of directors of the Suisun Marsh Natural History Association and a trustee for the Cheetah Conservation Fund. He lives in Seattle and spends time in national forests when not speaking to groups.

Which animals are most often displaced by development so that we now share space with them?

Deer, raccoons, alligators and coyotes are common neighbors, depending on where you live. The deer population used to be controlled by natural predators like wolves; without wolves, deer can overpopulate.

The best thing to remember is that animals go where there's a food supply. Gardens attract deer; cat or dog food left out



brings raccoons. Coyotes and alligators must lose their fear of humans in order to eat. Don't feed, tease or interact with them. Take photos from a distance. Call your local government animal agency for help or referral to a licensed animal rehabber before "rescuing" an abandoned baby; mothers often spend periods of time away hunting for food.

Why are some animals in danger of being killed on sight?

We react to snakes, wolves and bats from a place of unfounded fears: snakes don't have facial expressions, are seen as cold or slimy and move quickly; wolves are dangerous; bats can tangle in your hair. These are all tall tales. Animals want to avoid us.

We've reacted to our own fears with needless snake roundups, bounties on wolves and panic when a tiny bat swoops by. Historically, there have been no attacks on humans by wolves, and reintroducing them into Yellowstone National Park has restored a natural balance. Snakes keep disease-carrying rodents away. Bats use their radar to steer clear.

We need to understand each animal's purpose and place in nature. Feeding wildlife corrupts natural behaviors and removes their fear of humans. When we deem them a nuisance or inconvenient, we treat them like they're disposable and have no value. It's better for everyone to enjoy the fact that animals are there and keep our distance.

Who else is working to educate people about the importance of wildlife and habitat?

Zoos used to be concrete-enclosed collections of animals. Now they are education centers, offering enrichment programs and improved natural habitats to keep the animals active and interested. Waterfalls, swimming pools, trees, puzzles and toys that prompt animals to mimic hunting behaviors help keep a resident animal's mind and body active.

Breeding programs help maintain endangered species. We're able to study and learn about a species while caring for them. One breeding program I worked with focused on spotted and striped big cats: the leopards and tigers. In another, we used incubators to hatch eggs among a threatened ostrich population. In Big Sur, California, condors have been raised with puppets so they wouldn't imprint on humans before being released. Nature and science centers across the country are also teaching people about the importance of animals.

What makes you hopeful for the future?

Each of us can make a daily difference in preserving our natural world. I've been fortunate in being able to showcase wild animals, help endangered or protected species and share what I've learned in educational forums.

Good news includes sighting of the black-footed ferret, once thought to be extinct. Mountain lions are recovering. We are learning from past mistakes. A big lesson is that what nature provides isn't in endless supply, so we must be wise and frugal with all of our natural resources.

What are you most passionate about?

No one should have a wild or exotic animal as a pet. The animals I show to audiences were bottle-raised or rescued. They can't be released and so have become animal ambassadors. When people see them, they better understand the importance of nature and wildlife to people and the planet. I'm passionate about preserving wildlife and open spaces.

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