

# RESEARCH IN REVIEW

---

## Wildlife Through a Child's Eyes

---

by Bill DeRosa

Zoos, wildlife television programs, movies featuring wildlife, and wild animal toys are very popular with children. This seems to indicate that children have a general interest in and affinity for wildlife. Recently, a research study conducted by *Weekly Reader*, has provided further insights into what children think about wild animal issues.

The *Weekly Reader National Survey on Wildlife* was conducted during the week of October 31, 1986. The project surveyed nearly 400,000 students in grades two through six nationwide. Students were given questionnaires asking them to comment on nine different wildlife-related topics: feelings about specific animals; activities involving animals; careers with animals; animal protection laws; hunting, fishing, and trapping; scientific study of animals; efficacy of preservation practices; destruction of habitats; and wildlife in the future.

### What Were The Results?

The *Weekly Reader* study generally confirmed the belief that most children have a high degree of interest in and concern for wild animals. However, student interest in reading about animals and in animal careers tended to decline steadily with age.

The children surveyed also indicated a high level of concern for the protection of wildlife. For instance, the vast majority of students in grades 4-6 (results for lower grades were not given) were opposed to destroying animal habitats for the benefit of people, and opposed to the killing of animals for scientific study or museums. Nearly all 4th-6th graders felt that laws protecting the bald eagle were "very important." However, much smaller majorities of students thought it was important to have laws to protect other animals such as wolves, sharks, grizzly bears, and coyotes. A slight majority of students felt that there should not be laws to protect rattlesnakes. This finding agreed with further results which indicated that children hold bats, spiders, and rats in low regard compared with rabbits, horses, and deer.

Regarding the issues of hunting and fishing, a large majority of students in grades 2-6 did not think hunting for fun was okay. Most students also disapproved of fishing for fun, though not as many as disapproved of hunting for fun. Most 2nd-6th graders, however, thought that fishing for food was okay, and many thought that hunting for food was okay. When children in grades 4-6 were questioned about trapping to make money, a large majority disapproved.

### Implications And Discussion

Overall it may seem that since children, according to the *Weekly Reader* study, already have a fairly high degree of interest in and concern for wildlife, humane education efforts need not focus on this topic. A closer look, however, reveals areas in which educators have the opportunity to substantially increase children's positive attitudes toward wild animals. For example, the fact that student interest in wildlife tended to decrease with age suggests that special efforts are needed at the upper elementary grades to make children aware of animals and the problems they face. Humane education lessons that take developmental considerations into account (e.g., that older students tend to be more oriented toward factual knowledge about animals rather than emotional attachment) may be particularly appropriate in this case. In addition, the study suggests that greater efforts are needed to help develop more positive attitudes toward traditionally maligned animals.

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the hunting and fishing section of the study because the distinction made between hunting for food and hunting for fun is ambiguous. It is not clear, for example, whether hunting for food is intended to mean true subsistence hunting (a very rare practice in the United States today) or simply eating the product of a day's sport hunting (a much more common practice). Thus it is not clear whether the children's responses indicate that (1) they feel it's okay to hunt only to keep from starving or (2) they feel it's okay to hunt as long as the animals are eaten, even if the primary motivation is recreational. Nor is there any indication of whether the children's responses are based solely on the fact that animals are killed by hunting, or if they are also concerned about the number of animals wounded, and habitat manipulation to benefit hunted species. Therefore, it is important that teachers who include activities about the ethics of hunting in their humane education curriculum be sure that students are well informed about the nature of hunting as it is practiced today.

What the *Weekly Reader* study does clearly suggest is the complexity that is necessarily involved in teaching children about social issues. As evidenced from the opinions expressed in the students' responses, children are quite willing to make the jump to (in the terminology of Bloom's Taxonomy) the evaluation stage of learning without having experienced, for example, the knowledge and comprehension stage. Indeed, the *Weekly Reader* study states that wildlife is a subject about which children may have limited personal knowledge, but often have strong opinions. It is the job of humane education to help children develop the critical thinking skills necessary for arriving at *informed* opinions. Such a process necessarily involves providing children with the facts about today's important animal-protection issues.