

## *Student Voices*

# Learning never ends, and neither should teaching

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**THERE HAS BEEN** a large push to integrate more science and math into the classroom so that our children can compete in the world market, which is seeing an ever-increasing population of highly educated students from other countries. We read everyday in the newspapers the statistics of slipping academic achievement of American students compared to that of students around the world. So, the push for a more strenuous academic curriculum in American schools should be good for our students and for the nation. With a finite number of school hours, however, the advancement of 1 subject over another means a reduction in emphasis on some subjects. And what happens to those important subject areas, such as natural resources, that have never really been taught in the schools?

What is lacking in our children's education is an understanding of our natural world, with wildlife studies being a subject about which most people are especially ignorant. The people who, every year, are gored by bison in Yellowstone National Park are victims of such a lack of education. Most of the victims of bison attacks thought the animals tame enough to pet. There are also people who live on the cusp of civilization to be closer to nature; yet, they complain when deer and raccoons visit their yards. We as a society think of ourselves as separate from the natural world, including wildlife, but this only causes conflict. As wildlife professionals, we could just write off our children's ignorance about wildlife and how to avoid human–wildlife conflicts as a form of job security. Their ignorance will always produce complaints that we could take care of. Our time, however, would be better spent on other activities, such as introducing the next generation to outdoor activities or monitoring wildlife populations.



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Human–wildlife conflicts will become an ever-increasing problem as our population increases, but I think the problem can be somewhat alleviated by teaching our children about the value of wildlife. Our children need a better understanding of the link between the activities of civilization and how it affects the environment around us. If today's children can be shown that they are an integral part of nature and not merely living in nature-exclusion plots called cities, many human–wildlife conflicts may be avoided. Because our school system is already barraged from every side about what subjects should take precedence, wildlife education may be a task that falls entirely on the shoulders of wildlife biologists.

Children who are taught an understanding of nature by a concerned wildlife professional will be adults who will be more inclined to change their own behavior to mitigate a conflict instead of immediately demanding the removal of an animal. Putting the garbage can in the garage to reduce raccoon damage or planting unpalatable plants to discourage deer would be a natural first choice instead of insisting on trapping or lethal means. I suggest

that the emphasis of our instruction of school children in natural resources should be placed on enjoying our wildlife, while at the same time having a healthy respect for it. The proliferation on television of wildlife programs that depict people constantly handling non-domestic animals does a disservice to the respect that we should have for all wildlife.

I ask that you in the wildlife field take the time to go out to your local elementary and middle schools to teach our children about wildlife. Your supervisors should have no problem letting you off for half a day when you explain how much work you will be saving them 10 to 20 years from now. In fact, they should go along with you to the schools, too. I know this may seem beyond your job description, but please go out and talk to our children once a week, once a month, or even once a year; it will make a difference. \*

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JACOB BLASI is currently a graduate student majoring in wildlife biology at Utah State University. His research deals with human–black bear conflict mitigation in northern Wisconsin. He enjoys being outside and teaching his daughter about the natural world.