

A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

Providing Positive Wildlife Viewing Experiences

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"Joy in looking and comprehending is nature's most beautiful gift."

—ALBERT EINSTEIN



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The mission of Watchable Wildlife, Inc. is to enhance, elevate, and promote wildlife viewing and nature appreciation for the benefit of society, while building community awareness, understanding, and is and support for the conservation of the wildlife and habitats upon which these activities depend.

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THE POSITIVE WILDLIFE VIEWING EXPERIENCE

The wildlife watcher slows down and quietly discovers a wild animal without altering the animal's behavior. As a result of this rewarding experience, the watcher gains a greater appreciation of the natural world.

How do wildlife viewing professionals help people cross the line from passive observers to participants in a way that honors the wild in wildlife? Where, too, is the line between a positive and a negative viewing experience? What makes a viewing experience life changing? Have managers gone too far in making sure viewers distance themselves from wildlife with the repeated messages of "Observe from a distance" or "Use binoculars to get close to wildlife?"

Facilitating a positive viewing experience takes matching the audience to the right experience, managing people on sites or on tours, designing facilities that include natural barriers, blinds, remote cameras, boardwalks or discovery trails, and educating viewers. Case studies include wolf watching in Yellowstone National Park; bat watching at Selman Bat Cave in Oklahoma; sandhill crane viewing blinds on Nebraska's Platte River; day-in-the-field programs of the Owl Research Institute in Montana; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Sea Smart public awareness campaign.

What's the ultimate goal for wildlife viewing providers? This handbook challenges professionals not to separate people from wildlife, but to connect watchers with wildlife in a positive way.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| FOREWORD | 4 | Stream Profile Chambers | 37 |
| PREFACE | 5 | Viewing Blinds | 39 |
| INTRODUCTION | 6 | Case Study: Photographer Blinds—Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex, California | 40 |
| Defining a Positive Wildlife Viewing Experience | 7 | Case Study: Building Landowner Relations—Mobile Viewing Trailer, Colorado | 41 |
| WHO ARE THE WILDLIFE WATCHERS? | 8 | Case Study: Platte River Sandhill Crane Viewing Blinds—Nebraska | 42 |
| Experience-Based Wildlife Viewing | 8 | EDUCATING VIEWERS | 44 |
| SPECIAL CHALLENGES: ETHICS, IMPACTS, AND FEEDING | 10 | Overview | 44 |
| Shades of Gray: The Most Right Thing | 10 | Case Study: Wildlife Watch: A Wildlife Viewing Skills Workshop—Colorado Division of Wildlife | 45 |
| Loving Wildlife to Death?—Viewing Impact | 12 | Hands-on Education | 45 |
| The Wildlife Feeding Predicament | 16 | Case Study: A Day in the Field—Owl Research Institute, Montana | 46 |
| Case Study: Education Campaign—Center for Wildlife Information | 19 | Ethical Dilemmas in Wildlife Viewing | 46 |
| Case Study: Putting a Lid on Handouts—Glacier National Park | 20 | Code of Ethics-Why Have One? | 47 |
| PLAN FOR THE POSITIVE VIEWING EXPERIENCE | 21 | Case Study: American Birding Association—Code of Birding Ethics | 49 |
| A. How Many Wildlife Viewers?—Managing People | 21 | Case Study: North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA)-Principles of Ethical Field Practices | 50 |
| Encouraging Ecotourism | 23 | Catchy Public Awareness Campaigns | 51 |
| Case Study: Close-up Coexistence With Bears—McNeil River State Game Sanctuary | 24 | Leave No Trace example | 51 |
| Case Study: Bat Viewing Trips—Selman Bat Cave | 25 | Case Study: Sea Smart-National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) | 52 |
| Case Study: Wolf Watching—Yellowstone National Park | 26 | Writing the Positive Wildlife Viewing Message | 53 |
| B. Designing Facilities | 28 | Case Study: The Concise Marketed Viewing Message—California Department of Fish and Game | 54 |
| Overview | 28 | Examples of Wildlife Viewing Messages (by species) | 55 |
| Site Selection | 29 | CONCLUSION | 57 |
| Facility Design: Where to Begin | 29 | REFERENCES | 58 |
| Restoring and Enhancing Your Site | 29 | APPENDICES | 59 |
| Case Study: Comprehensive Planning for Responsible Viewing—Chatfield State Park | 31 | CONTACTS | 64 |
| Trails | 32 | INDEX | 66 |
| Natural Barriers | 33 | | |
| Boardwalks, Observation Decks, and Towers | 33 | | |
| Binocular Loans and Mounted Spotting Scopes | 36 | | |
| Remote Cameras | 37 | | |

FOREWORD

Several years ago, one of Colorado's most articulate wildlife researchers said, "Wildlife management is a luxury to an affluent society. We are not necessary."

After thinking about this for some time, I have come to the conclusion that wildlife management and wildlife managers are indeed a "luxury to an affluent society"—if we see our goals, objectives and outputs as hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing opportunities. If, however, we recognize and employ recreational hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing as powerful tools to conserve wildlife for people today and for future generations, then our profession and our efforts are no longer a luxury. Wildlife agencies must use their unique responsibility to produce sustainable recreation as the trailhead to promote awareness, understanding and caring for wildlife and wild places.

We know a lot of people watch wildlife. Although studies don't always agree on numbers or percentages of populations, they all indicate a large active participant rate from very diverse segments of the public. Studies also indicate that a lot of people who don't watch wildlife express an interest in doing so. Effective wildlife viewing efforts offer a wide range of viewing experiences for diverse audiences. All successful viewing has three indispensable parts, and all must be explicitly considered in the development of wildlife viewing:

- They are Fun. People watch wildlife because it is fun, an enjoyable form of outdoor recreation that is done as a primary activity or as an enhancer of other outdoor activities, such as auto touring, hiking and camping.
- They offer a Learning Experience. People expect to learn something from their interaction with wildlife and are receptive to learning when they are enjoying the experience of seeing wildlife.
- They incorporate and demand Ethical Behavior. It is clear that wildlife viewing is not synonymous with nonconsumptive viewing, and wildlife viewing can be very detrimental to wildlife if not carefully managed.

Wildlife resource managers have long recognized the importance of hunting and fishing to give up-close, personal contact with wildlife and wild places that start people down the trail to appreciation, understanding and conservation. Wildlife viewing offers the same opportunities to a much more diverse constituency. But, agencies have been slow to recognize the potential of wildlife view-

ing to meet the needs of an increasingly sophisticated constituency. Things are changing. In small ways throughout the continent, I am seeing the first emergence of wildlife viewing management as a professional discipline. The problem is that agencies have virtually no experience in addressing this new stakeholder, and there is very little literature describing how to manage wildlife and people to produce sustainable viewing benefits. We hope this book will help.

—BOB HERNBRODE

PREFACE

For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I know I would never see it again?"

—RACHEL CARSON, *THE SENSE OF WONDER*

A coyote feasts on an elk carcass not 50 yards off the road in Yellowstone National Park. The animal appears oblivious to the passing vehicles. A pair of ravens waits its turn. We drive by, then turn around and park for a moment to watch. As soon as our car comes to a stop, the coyote trots off. The ravens flush. Our presence has just caused wildlife to change its behavior. How many of us have had some experience where our zeal for viewing intrudes upon a wild animal's space? As I put together this handbook, I realized that it helps to approach the whole subject of planning for positive wildlife viewing with empathy. I wager that we all have a basic desire to see wildlife up close and personal. That desire can sometimes lead to stressing wildlife, despite our best ethical intentions.

Observe from a distance that's safe for you and for wildlife. Use binoculars. Allow wildlife to behave naturally. We recite this message to visitors perhaps with-

out considering the implication that we may be asking people to keep nature at arm's length at all times. We even go further in some situations by setting viewing distances enforced by the power of law.

How can we advocate viewing from a distance when our most memorable wildlife viewing experiences might have happened up close? A hummingbird hovers within inches of a red sweater, attracted by the vivid color. A hiker almost steps on a fawn curled in tall grass, then bends close and looks for a few moments before leaving.

How can we tell people never to change an animal's behavior when we left the house that morning and interrupted a robin pulling a worm from the lawn? Simply sharing in a

landscape leads to disturbance. Walk along a beach and sandpipers scatter. Canoe down a river and ducks lift off a sandbar. Cross a woody draw and deer burst from the brush.

The assignment for wildlife viewing professionals is to facilitate positive, memorable experiences that keep disturbances to a minimum. A positive experience refers both to the watcher and the animal being watched. The presence of the watcher should be a neutral influence upon the animal. Awareness of human presence is acceptable, but changing natural behavior is not.

A memorable experience most often comes from close-up viewing. "Close" does not have to be physically close to a wild animal. Touching an hours old wolf track can be close, too. Discovering an owl feather in a park natural area and leaving it for the next person can be intimate and memorable.

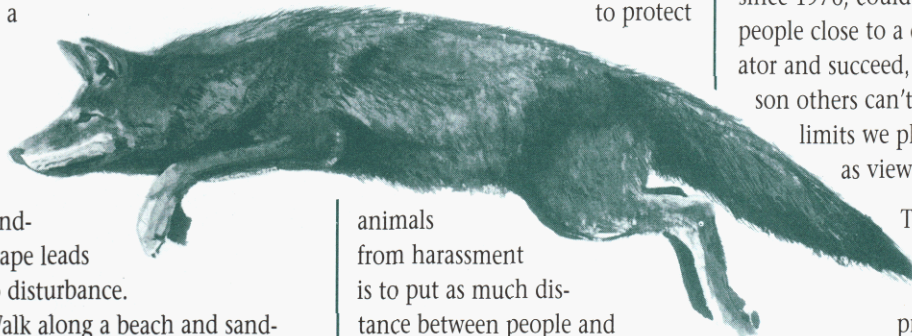
As managers, we have to look at the sustainability of viewing wildlife, especially as the interest in wildlife watching continues to grow exponentially. While the interest grows, our society as a whole increasingly lives in artificial and urban environments. This phenomenon places an added importance on facilitating wildlife viewing experiences that put people in touch with "real" wildlife in real nature.

The easiest solution for wildlife viewing professionals trying to protect

two angles: How close can a wildlife viewer get to an animal before there is a disturbance, and how close does a viewer need to be for a positive, satisfying viewing experience?

At McNeil River State Game Sanctuary in Alaska, a limited number of wildlife viewers can watch brown bears fishing for salmon at not much more than a bear's length away, with no artificial barrier. The bears are habituated to the presence of these people in a carefully managed viewing area, but continue to fish and play, and accept the viewers' presence as they would that of a squirrel in a tree or a moose walking by. Humans are viewed by bears as a neutral part of the landscape, not as a source of food or a threat. If Larry Aumiller, sanctuary manager for McNeil since 1976, could dare to place people close to a dangerous predator and succeed, there's no reason others can't challenge any limits we place on ourselves as viewing managers.

This handbook is meant to help wildlife professionals find creative ways to move people close to wildlife in a way that is sustainable. In some cases, it means admitting that in one area our impact may be greater on animals than without some kind of viewing program. Those choices must be made deliberately, after much thought and planning, to meet a larger goal of connecting people to nature. Our greatest task is to help people cross the line from passive observers to active participants in conservation.



animals from harassment is to put as much distance between people and wildlife as possible. Excessive problems by a minority of users often lead to a heavy-handed approach toward all viewers. The easy solution risks losing a potential constituency of conservationists, because they are never given the chance to discover the thrill of being close to wildlife in the wild. We must look at the question of proximity to wildlife from

INTRODUCTION

The tools and strategies found in this handbook represent a first step in assembling current information, case studies and sources to foster an exchange of positive wildlife viewing solutions among wildlife and land managers, naturalists and tour leaders. The examples are representative, but not comprehensive. All information fits under four categories: audience, special challenges, planning and education. The handbook furthers the efforts of Watchable Wildlife, Inc. in working to ensure that wildlife viewing is carried out both responsibly and successfully.

Watchable Wildlife, Inc., the national nonprofit organization formed in 1999, is dedicated to helping communities-rural and urban alike-benefit both economically and socially from wildlife viewing. That success is linked to the ability of wildlife viewing providers to satisfy the expectation of watchers without jeopardizing wildlife. To succeed takes both strategic planning and education that can help shape expectations.

NatureWatch: A Resource for Enhancing Wildlife Viewing Areas, edited by Wendy Hudson of the Defenders of Wildlife (1992), helped launch the selection and responsible development of wildlife viewing areas. That book unfortunately is out of print. This is the first publication since *NatureWatch* that is aimed at the providers of wildlife viewing, rather than "how-to" messages for the general public.

Much of the early work examining what makes wildlife viewing a positive or ethical experience comes from the National Partners in Watchable Wildlife, an informal consortium of natural resource agencies and conservation groups that now serves as an advisory board to Watchable Wildlife, Inc. The national partners have long wrestled with how to promote and manage wildlife viewing programs as a conservation strategy, while protecting wildlife and habitats from the ever increasing numbers of mostly well-intended viewers.

The annual Watchable Wildlife Conference (sponsored first by the National Partners and, starting in 2001, by Watchable Wildlife, Inc.) has served as an international forum for debating the question of responsible, ethical wildlife viewing. Sessions have included "Ethics from Behind the Lenses: Sensitivity to Wildlife Needs Comes First" (Montana, 1992, the first annual conference) and "Walking the Tightrope: Visitor Needs Vs. Wildlife Needs" (California, 1996 conference). The 1999 Watchable Wildlife Conference in Florida offered two in-depth sessions with experts to examine the questions of how close is too close for wildlife viewing: "Birdlife and Ecotourism: A Mini-Symposium to Establish Acceptable Ethics for

Waterbird Viewing" and "Marine Mammals and Ecotourism: A Mini-Symposium to Discuss Appropriate Guidelines for Viewing Marine Mammals in the Wild."

Several publications pass on responsible, satisfying wildlife viewing tips to the public. The National Partners in Watchable Wildlife produced a brochure, "*The Ultimate Guide to Wildlife Viewing*" (see Appendix A). State and province wildlife viewing guide books feature sections on observation tips or ethics. A poster, "NatureWatch Tips" resulted from a partnership of the Forest Service, Center for Wildlife Information and National Forest

Foundation (contact Kimberly Anderson in references). The wildlife viewing guidebooks promoted by the partners as a way to create a network of viewing sites across North America each contain a special section on safe and

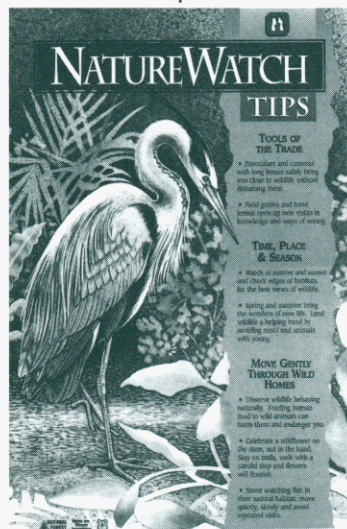
responsible wildlife viewing.

Watching Wildlife by Mark Duda (1995) passes on safe and responsible viewing messages to the public, as does the companion video, *Watching Wildlife: A Guide to One of America's Most Popular Activities*, produced by D.J. Case & Associates (1995). Another book, *Loving Nature...the right way: A Family Guide to Viewing and Photographing Scenic Areas and Wildlife*, by William W. Hartley

(1996), provides specific tips for responsibly photographing and viewing wildflowers, insects, amphibians and reptiles, birds, mammals and underwater life. In addition, a nonprofit organization, the Center for Wildlife Information, based in Missoula, Mont., teaches proper etiquette around bears and other wildlife through brochures and videos.

Are wildlife viewing professionals succeeding in these efforts to foster a constituency of respectful, caring wildlife watchers? What's the best avenue for our message? Are we sure we're delivering the right message? How can our planning, programs and facilities provide the best possible viewing experience that's both ethical and enjoyable? This handbook strives to answer these questions mostly through sharing on-the-ground case studies and examples.

The working title of the handbook originally contained the word "ethics." The choice was made to drop the term in favor of "positive wildlife viewing." Professionals in the field of watchable wildlife are used to seeing the phrase "wildlife viewing ethics" and, similarly, "viewing etiquette." However, when extending efforts to the public, the meaning of the word "ethics" can become charged. Ethics also sounds weighty and uninviting to visitors. "Positive wildlife viewing" focuses on the memorable experience. An experience could be ethical without satisfaction to the viewer. Professionals need to do both. While playing down the use of the word, ethics are central to the philosophy that drives efforts for positive viewing experiences.



Defining a Positive Wildlife Viewing Experience

“For observing nature, the best pace is a snail’s pace.”

—EDWIN WAY TEALE

No matter what values or background individual wildlife viewers bring to the field, it is helpful to attempt to define an overall positive viewing experience that rings true for most people. How individual viewers achieve this experience could vary immensely. For instance, a person who grew up around bald eagles scavenging on the docks of Alaska would probably not be moved in the same way by this species as an urban viewer seeing a bald eagle in the wild for the first time.

With that caveat, here’s a suggested definition of a positive, wildlife viewing experience for both watcher and wildlife:

The Positive Wildlife Viewing Experience: A Definition

The wildlife watcher slows down and quietly discovers a wild animal without altering the animal’s behavior. As a result of this rewarding experience, the watcher gains a greater appreciation of the natural world.

For the manager, agency or trip leader charged with encouraging or managing wildlife viewing, several factors combine to define a positive viewing experience:

Positive Wildlife Viewing Success for Managers: A Definition

Wildlife watchers depart with a memorable, enjoyable and educational experience. The wildlife continues to feed, rest, nest and otherwise go about daily living without stress or interference with its ability to survive. All wildlife viewing facilities minimize and concentrate impacts. The viewers come and go without altering the habitat. The local community and landowners see viewers as respectful and desirable visitors. Ultimately, managers hope to facilitate an experience that leads wildlife watchers to want to learn more, and to take informed action on behalf of wildlife and habitats.



CHUCK BARTLEBAUGH, CENTER FOR WILDLIFE INFORMATION

As the wildlife watching clientele grows and habitats do not, providers of the watchable wildlife experience need a greater tool chest than ever before. Each tool must work to ensure a positive viewing experience that keeps the wild in wildlife, while meeting the needs of people from all walks of life and levels of outdoor experience.

