Spotting the Bias in Project WILD

Project WILD is an environmental curriculum focusing on wildlife. The membership of the primary sponsors (The Western Association of Fish and Game Agencies and the Western Regional Environmental Education Council, or WREEC) consists primarily of western state wildlife personnel. In each state nationwide, the state wildlife department is approached by WREEC to buy into Project WILD for $7,000 and to purchase Project WILD guides at $3 each for free distribution to teachers.

Project WILD, at first glance, may please you. Several of the lessons, such as "Autumn on a Tidal River," "Honey Weathers," and "Environmental Barometer" are well worth using. Sometimes humane educators who have seen merits in Project WILD ask me why animal welfare organizations spend energy combating the program. And why just Project WILD? Why isn't there a formal campaign against some of the much more blatantly biased materials that are out there?

The answer is manifold. In each of the thirty-three participating states, Project WILD workshops are given under the direction of a state agency (the state wildlife agency, sometimes in conjunction with the state department of education); and these workshops are largely, if not entirely, financed by state funds. This lends Project WILD a credibility that many other such curricula lack. Because of this state involvement and the use of public funds, Project WILD is widely distributed and made available at no cost to teachers. Such state involvement might be appropriate and even commendable were Project WILD the objective environmental/wildlife program it is promoted to be. But in its actuality, at least third-party materials contain inaccuracies and biases that lend support to pro-hunting/trapping arguments. As Ted Levin (a New Hampshire naturalist) wrote, "Project WILD authors are trying to advance hunting and trapping; they should lay their cards on the table, instead of beating around the bush."

Not everyone, however, immediately recognizes the widespread bias in Project WILD. (I certainly didn't when I first examined the program.) Perhaps this is because many of the lessons are good, the Project WILD workshop is fun, and the workshop materials assure us participants that the activities are not biased. Moreover, some of us, almost without thinking, inject a humane emphasis into a lesson and are not fully aware that such an emphasis is missing from the particular lesson as written.

But partially it is our own lack of knowledge about wildlife issues (or lack of time to research these issues) that prevents us from spotting some of the biases. How many of us know, for example, that the Kaibab deer study referred to in "Carrying Capacity" has been thoroughly discredited by Graeme Caughey, a prominent biologist? How many of us have the expertise to know that deer have reproductive responses that can serve to help prevent the kind of continual, dramatic ups and downs represented in the "Oh Deer!" game? How many of us know that the oscillations in the boreal populations described in that same lesson are not typical of most wildlife populations, but only of some species in extreme habitats? How many of us, when playing the fun game "How Many Bears Can Live in This Forest?" stop to realize that adult bears rarely, if ever, starve to death, as is portrayed in the game?

And lastly, perhaps some of the biases do not become apparent until one has time to sit back and reflect on the cumulative effect of some of the most popular Project WILD lessons. For instance, after completing "Oh Deer!," "How Many Bears Can Live in This Forest?," "Habitat Lap Sit," "Carrying Capacity," "Classroom Carrying Capacity," "Checks and Balances," and "The Hunters," one is left with the impression that all wild animals routinely experience sudden and complete food shortages and subsequent starvation, going immediately from that to famine with no chance to adapt to a decreasing food supply. And one is led to conclude from the Project WILD lessons that a main purpose of hunting and the activities of departments of wildlife is to save these animals from starvation. There is no indication in the activities that recreational hunting occurs simply because people want to do it and are willing to pay well for their "sport."

The Best-Kept Secret

Eight major animal welfare organizations, including The Humane Society of the United States, presented a lesson-by-lesson critique of Project WILD to the Project WILD steering committee responsible for revisions. And although some changes have been made in the latest edition of Project WILD, the majority of the suggestions from the animal-welfare organizations were not incorporated. Virtually all of the suggestions for correcting the inaccuracies or misleading omissions in the lessons dealing with animal populations, carrying capacity, and animal starvation. In fact, the new revision contains two new examples of dramatic fluctuations in animal populations, despite the expressed concerns about the misleading nature of such isolated examples. It is interesting to note that the Project WILD steering committee appears determined to hide what might be labeled the best-kept secret about wildlife: that most hunted species experience natural limiting factors, which serve to prevent dramatic overpopulation and subsequent starvation.

Implications for Teachers

We teachers know how to deal with bias. But we can't combat bias that is kept secret. Each state should send a clear message to the Project WILD steering committee that they will refuse to purchase guides that contain inaccuracies and hidden biases. Teachers need to make it clear that they are not interested in such materials. Let your state wildlife department know this. Voice your concerns to your local school board and to your state department of education.

And finally, if you are using Project WILD, please order A Humane Teaching Guide for Project WILD from NAAHE. Teach your children about natural limiting factors. Let them know that hunting in the United States is primarily done for recreation, for sport. Let them know that wildlife belongs to all of us, not just to the 8 percent of the American public that hunts. And take a look at the new wildlife packages, available soon from NAAHE. These are wildlife materials that teach about life for the wild... all the wild, including those captured as exotic pets, those trapped for fur, those hunted for sport, and others that have little or no voice in Project WILD.

Patty A. Finch

New Teaching Materials Available Soon!

NAAHE is pleased to announce the coming release of three new teaching aids sure to make your students wild about wildlife!

A Humane Teaching Guide for Project WILD

For teachers who have attended Project WILD workshops and are concerned about the biases and inaccuracies in the Project WILD curriculum guides, NAAHE has developed A Humane Teaching Guide for Project WILD. This guide provides a lesson-by-lesson analysis of Project WILD with specific suggestions on which lessons to delete and how to improve particular activities. It is applicable to both the elementary and secondary Project WILD programs. Available early in 1986. Order HE 1004 $3.50

Born Free, Stay Free

For the elementary level teacher, Born Free, Stay Free will add an exciting dimension to your subjects. This teaching packet on captive wildlife is the first in the Sharing Our Lives With Wildlife series. The Born Free, Stay Free packet is filled with work sheets, clip art, and lots of ideas for bulletin boards and teaching centers — and each unit is curriculum blended, designed for teaching with your regular classroom subjects! Available in early 1986. Order HE 1042 $5

Level A: preschool and kindergarten

Order #  Name of Item
Level (K-3)  Quantity  Price

Mail to:
Name ____________________________
Grade ____________________________
School or Organization ____________________________
Address ____________________________
City ____________________________
State ____________________________ Zip __________

Your canceled check is your receipt. Thank you.

To order the above materials, fill out this form. Enclose with your check and mail to NAAHE, Box 362, East Haddam, CT 06423. Be sure to make your check payable to NAAHE (The National Association for the Advancement of Humane Education).