

Keeping Captive Wolves Busy

Environmental Enrichment at the Trust

Wolves in the wild have large territories and although in captivity this cannot be achieved it is still important to give them sufficient room to hunt, play, run as well as space away from each other. At the Trust the enclosures are between one and two acres each and only house small packs. The packs are tight family units which interact well. There is a limited level of aggression within each group which is normal and is needed to make the pack stable and content. During the breeding season the aggression levels naturally increases.

Enclosures should ideally be large enough to allow wolves to chase each other, at full speed, and also for the wolves to chase any small animal or bird that ventures in. Our wolves are often clocked running up to 25 - 30 miles an hour. This helps keep them in peak condition with good muscle tone and healthy bones. Although wolves have a tendency to travel the same paths in their enclosures, as they would in the wild, our enclosures stay relatively green and mud free even in the wet weather apart from the main entrance in and out of the yard areas and the well-worn paths. The wolves use the whole of the space provided but tend to have their favourite resting spots. Depending on the time of year, wolves have a tendency to disperse themselves when sleeping during the day and lower ranking wolves in breeding season like to keep a low profile. As our wolves are socialised it means they have a tendency to run up to the fences to see who is around and also show their natural behaviour out in the open. They choose to ignore, greet or hide away from visitors and handlers. More often than not they choose to greet and every visitor to the Trust is guaranteed to see wolves.

It's not just space a wolf needs, what you put in their space is also important. They need a rich variety of objects and areas so that they have choice. Of course they do need simple open areas which are open to direct sunlight too as wolves love to sunbathe. Within our enclosures we have platforms for them to jump on and greet people. The platforms are sometimes two tiered or have rope boat fenders attached to them from poles so the wolves can chew. Other structures in the enclosures include log and brush piles. These are good for the insects and birds but also provide objects to be chewed and climbed on, hidden in or played around. Mounds are also provided to allow the wolves to get up high and see the whole of the site and they are often seen either sitting or sleeping on top of them. They are also good vantage points for howling. One mound even has a concrete tunnel leading to an underground den and the wolves often play around the entrance or use it to guard themselves from mock group attacks.

Wolves love water and ideally all our enclosures would have wolf-proof ponds in them. For now water troughs are situated by the fences for ease of refilling and to give visitors endless entertainment watching the wolves jumping in and out and sometimes dragging each other in too. In the summer it helps keep them cool and in the winter the ice gives them something else to chew on and play with. The pond in the bottom enclosure is regularly used by the wolves to swim, or paddle in or to drink from and can also be used for food trails, using the waterfall as a good hiding place. Cover from bad weather and the provision of shade is also important, so many trees have been planted as well as wooden kennels provided. These are also both sources of play and chew objects. Kennels with raised beds and straw bedding are provided overnight so they can get out of the elements if they choose. Grass cutting is kept to a minimum within the enclosures to ensure

habitat for wildlife as well as cosy hideaways for the wolves. However, a track is usually cut around the enclosure so the wolves still have a race track to run, which they use to the full.

Within each enclosure there is a holding pen. These pens enable us to carry out maintenance work when required in the main enclosure or temporarily to separate an ill or injured wolf without breaking the bond between the pack. This still allows the wolves' access to a large grassed area which helps keep their stress levels down. If not being used, the holding pen is left open as an extension to the enclosure.

There has been a long-standing debate regarding whether socialised or un-socialised wolves have a better life. At the Trust we firmly believe that socialised wolves are happy, healthy, have minimal stress and that socialisation does not interfere with natural behaviour, apart from removing their fear of humans. It enables them to live in bigger enclosures, receive veterinary attention, often without sedation and enables them to visit different places without causing stress; in fact they seem to thrive on the variety. The one down-side to socialisation is that human contact needs to start before the cubs' eyes are open meaning they must be taken away from their mother at a very early age. However, the majority of wolves at the Trust were either rejected by their mothers or were surplus to requirements, so socialisation was the alternative to a much worse scenario. Cubs are introduced at an early age to many different situations and experiences, so become accustomed to our visitors and new places quickly. Mental stimulation is provided in a variety of ways. Wolves are crepuscular, meaning they are active at dawn and dusk and our management allows for this. During the day they have down-times but also perform a limited amount of ambassador duties. They may go on a walk with visitors or a student might be doing non-invasive research which could involve food, scents or noises. We also complement this type of activity with food trails or problem solving treat balls in the shape of melons or pumpkins; they might even get meat or fish versions of ice lollipops in the hot summer months. Of course, the best form of mental stimulation and comfort is to be part of a stable pack and we try to ensure our wolves remain within a pack for the duration of their lives. For example when Mosi deposed Mai and tried to force her from the pack it was our duty to intervene and remove Mai to ensure her safety. We were then left with the problem of a lone female wolf who was just 5 years old at the time. It would have been unfair to allow Mai to live the next 10 years of her life alone so we carefully sourced a suitable wolf from another collection, a younger male, Motomo, and the pair were successfully introduced.

As the keepers of captive wild animals it is our duty to ensure they are kept as naturally and as stress-free as possible. This is greatly helped by an understanding of their behaviours and natural cycles.



Left to right – Tundra with her hessian sack, Pukak and Massak with a stuffed pumpkin, Tala with a decorated Christmas tree.