



### ***How Our Understand Of Dominance Became Skewed***

In the article “Whatever Happened to the Term ALPHA”, written by L. David Mech, senior research scientist for the U.S. Geological Survey and founder and vice chair of the International Wolf Center, Mech describes how we came to misunderstand the term Alpha.

Briefly what happened was scientists thought, “the wolf pack was a random assemblage of wolves that came together as winter approached in order to better hunt”. Thus scientist “gathered individual wolves from various zoos and placed them together in a captive colony”. Because the wolves came together in an unnatural fashion and were all strangers to each other, natural competitions over resources were the result. This eventually formed a dominance hierarchy, base on who won these competitions. “In such cases, it is appropriate to refer to the top-ranking individuals as alphas, implying that they competed and fought to gain their position.”

Rudolph Schenken, the main behaviorist who studied wolves in captivity, published a paper “describing how wolves interact with each other in such a group, asserting

then that there is a top-ranking male and a top-ranking female in packs and referring to them as the alphas.” Because research was scarce, this paper became a major resource and was cited in many papers. All this research was based on the false assumption that packs formed indiscriminately for the purpose of hunting, which set us up unnatural dynamics.

It was not until the late 1990’s when Mech had lived with a wild wolf pack on Ellesmere Island near the North Pole for numerous summers that an understanding of pack behavior truly emerged. It was discovered that instead of unrelated members coming together for the purpose of hunting, a wolf pack comprised of family groups (set of parents and off spring of varying ages) “formed exactly the same way as human families are formed.” Just like with humans, as pups mature, the parents guide their activities. “The parents then automatically fall into the leadership role in the pack as they guide the pups.” The parents do take on the role of educator as they have a vested interest in having their gene pole survive and it is also advantageous for the pups to take on the role of student as this keeps them alive. The role of a leader or educator is very different than that of a dominance hierarchy in which competition over resources is the sole role.

20 years is the approximate amount of time it takes for new information to work its way from specialists down to the general public and then be accepted as fact. Since Mech’s studies were published in the late 90’s we have a little way to go,

but we are well on our way.

## **References**

L. David Mech. "Whatever Happened to the Term "Alpha Wolf?" International Wolf magazine. Winter 2008

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