



## Wolves in the Neighbourhood

*Naukan People – Siberia, Russia*

In Western culture, old children's tales depict wolves as evil and dangerous beings; and although there is no doubt that they are fierce animals, it is nevertheless true that this reputation is undeserved. This is also conveyed by the stories of other peoples of the world who have had more direct and prolonged contact with wolves.

Not even a century ago, in the village of Nynyamo in the far eastern territories of Siberia, an old man of the Naukan People told an ancient story of wolves, which he said his grandmother had told him. According to the story, in the Enmelenskaya tundra, there lived a humble reindeer herding family with a certainly meagre herd. As they had no neighbours, they could not mix their reindeer with other herds to make them grow and improve their living situation, but at least they had just enough to feed themselves with meat from the reindeer and clothe themselves with their skins.

The only neighbours they had in the desolate arctic expanses were a pack of wolves, whose den was on the slopes of a high mountain in the direction of the sea. But, strangely enough, although the old shepherd's herd grazed in the vicinity of that mountain, the wolves had never attacked his reindeer and the family had come to regard the wolves as good neighbours, so much so that whenever they slaughtered one of their reindeer, they always left them fresh meat in the vicinity of the den, to let them know that they appreciated their restrained attitude.

However, in order to keep the reindeer from wandering off into the tundra, the herdsman's two sons looked after the herd during the day and he himself came to replace them as night approached.

One day, the two sons came running to the family hut, their eyes misty with tears.

'Two wolves have scared off the reindeer and we have not been able to catch up with them! They have disappeared!' They said, their faces stricken with worry.

The herdsman equipped himself with his best warm clothing and provisions, and set off in search of what might be left of the herd. Following their tracks, he soon discovered the half-eaten carcasses of two reindeer, while nearby, the rest of the small herd wandered about in confusion.

The man regrouped the animals, loaded the two carcasses of the dead reindeer onto the sledge and returned home. Once there, the four members of the family skinned the carcasses and prepared the meat, and then the herdsman loaded the meat from the two reindeer back onto the sledge and headed for the mountain where the wolves had their lair.

'Hello! Is anybody here? –he said, raising his voice as he reached the immediate vicinity of the den– Two of my reindeer were killed by the wolves... and I thought maybe we could share them out ... After all, what difference does it make now!'

At the entrance to the den, he thought he caught a glimpse of two glowing eyes, and a moment later he heard:

'Please step into our home.'

The herdsman entered and was greatly surprised to see the spacious interior of the den, which was very well lit. It almost looked like a hut.

'I am very sorry for what my sons have done to you,' said a large, almost white wolf with a grey upper back, humbly. 'I have told my sons to leave your reindeer alone, that your herd is small and we all deserve a livelihood. But my sons do not listen!'

The wolf was silent for a moment, looking into the herder's eyes, sympathetically, and added:

'Yes, it was my sons who attacked and scattered your reindeer. Please sit here with us. My sons are about to arrive.'

Not much later, the herder heard a rustling outside and, shortly afterwards, two young wolves entered the den.

'What have you done?' the adult wolf snarled, making the herder's skin crawl. 'How many times have I told you to leave this man's herd alone? Why did you have to cause so much trouble to this family? Or are you so cowardly that you dare not go far from home to forage for food?'

The two young wolves lowered their heads and hid their tails between their legs, knowing that, in front of their father, there was no other option but submission, and even more so knowing that they were guilty of not having followed the instructions of their elders.

But that submissive attitude did not placate the big wolf.

'Didn't this family bring us food every time they butchered one of their reindeer? –he shouted at them amidst a thunderous growl– Is this how we treat good neighbours?'

The herdsman was impressed with the fury of the wolf's rebuke of his sons.

'Now then,' continued the adult wolf, 'tonight you are going far away to the north, where that rich reindeer herder lives. He has a huge herd, and he hardly pays any attention to it. So, you will go there and drive a good herd of reindeer up here ... but not too many! Don't exceed the limits! ... so that they will join the herd of this family.'

And he added firmly:

'This is my word!'

And after politely saying goodbye to the herdsman and asking him to wait at home for developments, he turned to his sons and said to them:

'Now, eat well, disguise yourselves and leave!'

The man returned home and told his family what had happened, and that same night, as the first light of dawn broke over the horizon, the herder's wife awoke to the faint sound of distant footsteps. She got out of bed quietly and looked out of the door of her home. Suddenly she opened her eyes in disbelief: a large herd of reindeer was approaching the hut, led by two wolves who, like sheepdogs, would not let them leave the herd.

At that moment, the herdsman joined his wife at the door of the house, and he could still see the two wolves walking away towards the mountain.

'These reindeer... are they ours now?' asked the still astonished woman.

'Our own reindeer, the ones that survived, are among them,' replied the man. 'The wolves have gathered them up and brought them to our doorstep.'

That same evening, the family butchered two reindeer and took them, already cleaned, to the neighbouring wolf family. And so they did every time they had to slaughter reindeer for food and clothing, and the wolves never again attacked the herding family's flock.

Eventually, other poor herders with small flocks would come to the Enmelenskaya tundra to join their herds with that of the family, so that all the herders could benefit from the large flock that had appeared there overnight.

'The coastal people began to visit the reindeer herders,' the Naukan elder from the village of Nynyamo always concluded his story in this way. The herders gave them meat and hides and the coast dwellers brought them seal gut rainwear, boots, thongs, and the blubber of sea animals. The sons of the reindeer herder grew up, married, and many children were born to them. In the tundra the number of herders increased.'

And the man always ended his story by saying:

'I've heard this tale from my grandmother.'

All the while, among the wolves of the region, it was passed down from generation to generation the story of how the wolves never starved again in the Enmelenskaya tundra. □



Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda, from a story by the Naukan elder Ykaluk (2023).

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## Comments

As Alexander Dolitsky credits in his magnificent book, *Ancient Tales of Chukotka*, this story was told in 1971 by a 65-year-old Nynyamo villager, Ykaluk, a man who spoke the Naukan language. His story was recorded on a magnetic tape recorder and translated into Russian by G. A. Menovshchikov, with the help of Ykaluk's daughter, Alma Ykaluk-Ivanova.

The Naukan People is one of the three cultural groups – Chaplino, Sireniki and Naukan – into which the Yupighyt Peoples or Yupiks of Siberia are usually divided. They are so called because they are closely related to the Yupik People of Alaska, who are in turn related to the Inuit People of northern Canada and Greenland. All of them speak the so-called Eskimo-Aleut languages, although one of these languages, that of the Sireniki People, became extinct with the death of its last speaker in 1997. However, these languages are in serious risk of extinction because they are only spoken by the older members of these ethnic groups and, as with the Naukan language, many of them are not taught in schools (Naukan Yupik language, 2023). In fact, the Naukan language was spoken by only around 70 people in 2010 (ELP, s.f.).

Archaeological evidence indicates that the Naukan people have inhabited the Chukotka Peninsula by the Bering Sea for about 2,000 years, long enough to know their wolf neighbours and appreciate their presence.

Unfortunately, and perhaps due to biased traditional narratives, which resulted in a clear prejudice against the wolf in Western societies, controversy continues to arise today whenever wolves are reintroduced into their former ecosystems. An example of this can be found in Spain, where in 2022, farmers in the Castile and Leon region challenged the Constitutional Court for annulling some sections of a law that sought to safeguard wolf hunting north of the Duero River and allow, in the words of the farmers themselves, 'the wolf to drive them out' (Francés, 2022).

It is clear that there is a great deal of ignorance in certain sectors of society about the true role that wolves play in ecosystems. In this respect, we suggest the study of what has happened in the ecosystem of Yellowstone National Park, in the United States, since the wolf was wiped out in 1926 and since its reintroduction in 1995 (Cutanda, 2023; Hope, 2023; One Minute Explore, 2021).

We would like to express our warmest thanks to our collaborator Martí Plá, for his magnificent work in the search and selection of Siberian stories, among which this beautiful tale was found.

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 8a: Support international scientific and technical cooperation on sustainability, with special attention to the needs of developing nations.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 9b: Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 15c: Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

Principle 16f: Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

