

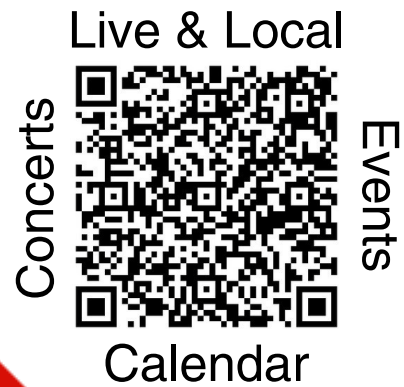
Cortes Island **Resonance**

Written by Roy Hales

Sabina Leader Mense
and the Wolves of Cortes:
A Story of Coexistence



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Sabina Leader Mense and the Wolves of Cortes: A Story of Coexistence



On the wild, forested shores of Cortes Island, a unique relationship has taken root—one of deep respect and mindful coexistence between humans and wolves. At the heart of this ongoing effort is Sabina Leader Mense, a biologist, educator, and champion of wild creatures whose vision helped shape a community-wide approach to living alongside apex predators.

Sabina's journey with Cortes Island's wolves began in 2008, during a time of tension and uncertainty. A rise in wolf sightings—some of which border on confrontations - raised 'alarm bells' across the island. Rather than respond with fear, Sabina called for conversation, understanding, and action rooted in respect.

The Call That Changed Everything

In 2009, Sabina reached out to Bob Hansen, a human-wildlife conflict specialist with the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. She'd heard about his *Wild Coast Project* and believed Cortes needed something similar.

Hansen remembers the moment vividly. "I was hesitant. We were laser focused on our park, but Sabina was persistent," he recalls. Eventually, Hansen and Conservation Officer Ben York agreed to travel to Cortes. What followed was a landmark community gathering at Linnaea School, where over 150 residents showed up to discuss the wolves.

Out of that meeting came the *Cortes Community Wolf Project*, and with it, a shift in thinking. Sabina worked with Hansen and York to create the *Learning to Live with Wolves on Cortes Island Primer*—a five-point guide for preventing conflict and preserving the wolves' wild nature'. It emphasized human behavior: don't approach, don't photograph, don't let curiosity endanger these animals.

Keeping Wolves Wild and Wary

"Our role is to teach wolves to be wary," Sabina often says. "We don't want them to trust us. That's how we keep them alive." She has long championed "no interaction" as a core principle. If you see a wolf up close, don't admire it, don't snap a photo—yell, wave your arms, and send it away. Wolves learn quickly, and every interaction reinforces a behaviour. If they become habituated to humans, it puts them at serious risk.

Sabina cites the tragic case of Takaya, a lone wolf that became famous on Vancouver Island. After years of being photographed and admired, Takaya lost his fear of humans and was ultimately killed by a hunter. “That’s what happens when wolves are no longer wary of us,” she says. “The onus is on us to behave in ways that don’t put them at risk.”

Education, Action, and the Power of Community

Under Sabina’s leadership, the community embraced this message. She had been working with the Friends of Cortes Island (FOCI) on projects like foreshore monitoring, since 1995. Sabina used that connection to educate residents on how to secure livestock, manage dogs responsibly, and respond to wolf sightings appropriately.

The Cortes Community Wolf Project is supported by conservation officers and biologists, endorsed by FOCI and continues to play a critical role in community safety and wildlife health. FOCI website posts a primer on how to “keep wolves wild and everyone safe,” reinforcing Sabina’s long-held belief: the more consistent humans are, the more predictable—and safe—wolves become.

One of the primer’s messages is leashing dogs. Wolves view free-roaming dogs as intruders or prey, but a dog on a leash is clearly associated with a human, and that drastically reduces the risk of conflict.

Sabina calls it “the power of the leash.” And she’s clear about the consequences of inconsistency: “If we let our dogs run free and then leash them when we see a wolf, it sends mixed messages. Wolves are smart—they’re watching us. They’re learning all the time.”

Bob Hansen calls Sabina an inspiration, “She is a champion—relentless, organized, and absolutely committed. Cortes has become a model we now share with other communities.”

Wolves on the Move

Back on Cortes, the wolves continue their quiet passage through the island’s forests and trails. At the 2024 Wildlife Coexistence Gathering on Cortes Island, Sabina reported there are seven adult wolves with pups.

They rarely travel as a full pack—on the coast, their prey is smaller, and even a single wolf can take down a deer. With wildlife cameras now in place, researchers can track their movements and behaviour without human contact.

“Wolves have their own culture,” Sabina says. “They teach their pups how to behave, and that includes how to interact—or not interact—with us. If we’re clear, they’re clear.”

She warns that wolves are under pressure. Their habitat is shrinking. Housing development and road expansion are slowly encroaching on areas that were once safe corridors. “We’re squeezing them,” she says.

“And large carnivores like wolves, bears, and cougars—they’re the first to feel it.”

Walking Together, Apart

What sets Cortes apart is the community-wide agreement to walk separately, but together with its wild neighbours. Wolves, after all, are always watching. As Bob Hansen puts it, “They’re studying us more than we study them.”

When asked if there’s ever a time that humans and wolves can share space comfortably, Sabina offers a firm answer: “Yes—but with zero interaction.

We're guests in their territory, not the other way around."

She urges visitors and residents alike to respect the boundaries. "Your home, your livestock enclosures, the public spaces—we define those as our territory. Everything else? That belongs to the wolves."

A Living Legacy

Seventeen years after her initial call to action, Sabina Leader Mense remains a central figure in Cortes Island's wildlife story. Her tireless work, rooted in science and deep respect, has shaped a model of coexistence that continues to inspire far beyond the island's shores.

From community workshops to predator-safe fencing, from wolf tracking to public education, her legacy is woven into the landscape—one that still echoes with howls in the distance.

"We can't manage wolves," she says. "We can only manage ourselves."

And in managing themselves, the people of Cortes have shown that living with wild wolves isn't just possible—it's powerful.

Learning to Live With Wolves

The Cortes Community Wolf Project lists five guidelines for peacefully co-existing with wolves:

1. Never feed wolves - It is illegal and completely irresponsible to feed wolves as it endangers you, your fellow community members and the wolves!

Take care not to leave meat or seafood scraps out near your home or in your compost pile. Dispose of these responsibly; dig into a pit or feed to the crabs.



2. Do not feed deer or raccoons - they are prey species of wolves. Food conditioned deer and raccoons **WILL** attract wolves to your doorstep and your neighbours. Be responsible to yourself and your community.

3. Keep yourself safe - HAZE WOLVES! when you encounter them in a residential area i.e. near your home, your neighbour's, the community halls, stores, schools etc. Wave your arms to make yourself look bigger, shout loudly and use noisemakers.

Let the wolves know, in no uncertain terms, that they need to respect you and you will not tolerate their presence in this place! Use your most aggressive body language; take on the alpha role.

Take an airhorn and/or bear spray along as an extra precaution when hiking alone off the beaten track or working the beaches at night.

4. Keep your pets safe - Dogs must be leashed when walked; unleashed dogs are seen as prey by wolves. Take an airhorn and/or bear spray along as an extra precaution when walking dogs, as dogs are a magnet for wolves. Wolves view all dogs as a territorial threat.

Ensure all pets are secured overnight in sturdy, predator proof kennels outside or kept inside your house at night.

Keep outside pet feeding areas clean; never leave uneaten food in them. *Do not take your dogs with you when hiking in natural areas frequented by wolves i.e. Carrington Bay, Von Donop Inlet, Hank's Beach, Marina Island, etc.

5. Practice good animal husbandry - Ensure all livestock are secured inside sturdy, fenced (min. 6' high) enclosures by day and predator proof shelters by night. Free-ranging livestock are seen as prey by wolves.



Photo Credits:

(First Page) Working on a wolf project - courtesy Bob Hansen's presentation at the 2024 Wildlife Coexistence Gathering on Cortes Island;

The cover image for Learning to live with Wolves on Cortes Island - courtesy FOCI

Cortes Island **Resonance**

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Visit Cortes Currents: www.cortescurrents.ca

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Cortes Island Resonance

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Amplifying local voices and environmental themes through eight original reports promoted and distributed at Cortes Island's Village Commons Summer Concert Series 2025.

Environmental Reports

1. Restoring Life to Dillon Creek
2. Friends of Cortes Island at Mansons Landing Provincial Park
3. 30 Years of Foreshore Monitoring on Cortes Island
4. European Green Crabs Reach Cortes Island
5. Sabina Leader Mense and the Wolves of Cortes
6. Species at Risk
7. The Call That Changed Everything – Western Screech Owl
8. The Story of the Island's Streamkeepers

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