

Humans, Wild Animals, and The Near Future

One day in the 1950's while riding my horse as a teenager on The Divide rounding up cattle, I approached one of our ponds at the head of Bear Gulch. Unexpectedly an ancient species, an adult cougar, loped up over the pond lip, looked at me, proceeded to take a good long drink, and then loped away without looking at me again. In the city where I now live residents are enthralled by the presence of wild animals in our midst. We have had a mamma black bear with two cubs in tow in our back yards, we have serenades from a coyote pack every evening in the summer, a family of 3 bob cats walking on our fences, beavers damming up nearby creeks, grazing deer, roosting eagles, wild rabbits, racoons, and a profusion of song birds. In fact there is more visible wildlife in our urban neighborhood than I ever saw on the ranch. City people admire wild animals and tolerate them to such a high degree that the animals have come to trust the area as safe habitat. However, in most of the world humans do not value wild animals and extinction is in the future for many species.

Wild mammals are now just .007% of the Earth's total biomass. Of all mammal biomass, wild animals are only 4.2% compared to 35.9% for humans and 59.9% for livestock. Before the year 1492 there was little livestock biomass in the Western Hemisphere and vastly fewer humans than today. It is reasonable to assume that wildlife biomass at that point far superseded human biomass. Presently wildlife populations worldwide are estimated to have declined 69% between 1970 and 2018 (this figure varies depending on species and location). More than 41,000 species are currently threatened with extinction. In the last 300 years humans have shown by their behavior that wildlife is expendable and only valued as an economic, industrial resource (whale oil, beaver hats, buffalo hides, trophy hunting, chemical spraying) . Now in the 21st Century we are at a planet wide precipice and confronted with a moral decision: is there a non-economic, intrinsic value to wildlife? Will humans accept reserving habitat on the planet for wild animals? Or will we build bigger zoos so our great grandchildren can see what existed in the recent past?

The Earth has never, ever been static nor predictable. Six hundred fifty million years ago the planet may have been covered with a sheet of ice a half mile thick, 330-370 million years it was covered with plant life and sea life, 200-250 million years ago there were jaw dropping dinosaurs and reptiles, and so on. The planet has seen the rhythmic rising of hot house climates only to then decline into ice house environments with five mass extinction calamities tossed in. So should we just shrug and let the sixth mass extinction go forward? It is obvious from past geologic history that the human species will also go extinct at some point, but do we really want to accelerate to that next hot house fate by pumping as much CO₂ and methane into the atmosphere as possible?

It really comes down to rational science versus pandering to our irrational egos. Can we forego the need for the social reinforcement that comes with owning the biggest gas guzzling vehicle possible or do we go with a small electric car that will not impress our social group? Do we forego some of our intense consumer habits and instead support wildlife habitat? A hard choice

for many people who are living in the era of the greatest ego reinforcement period since Earth formed... mass advertising and ever-present click bait, social media.

One of these choices between wildlife and economics is currently being debated in the County: the relationship between wolves and livestock. Recently the Chieftain ran an article on another calf kill by wolves in the County. As a rancher's son I know how upsetting this is to the rancher involved; every summer on The Divide we had animals that were probably killed by cougars, although we didn't know for sure. Another Chieftain essay by a hunter and fisherman criticized the degradation to land and water habitat caused by livestock. A few years ago I visited the back hill at the old ranch on Prairie Creek. Cattle had not been grazed on the hill that spring (as my father always did every spring) and the grass was thick, tall, and luxuriant. I was stunned, I had never seen the grass like that before. This set me to reflecting on the way the valley was before livestock were introduced in the 19th century. My conclusion was that we have gone too far away from the natural ecology of the valley and canyons. We press the land too hard to make us money.

The problem with focusing all of our attention on the wolf's re-introduction is that it is a highly romantic, emotional issue and distracts us from the larger and more pragmatic issue of stopping permanent, catastrophic changes to foundational environments: warming of the oceans, melting of the polar ice caps, thawing of the permafrost, and destruction of rain forests. If these environments reach the tipping point you can never get back to the Garden of Eden ever again (unless you are willing to wait a few million years after humans themselves are extinct).

Myself I would prefer that we spend our personal energy and institutional resources doing everything we can to stop the broad decline of more important keystone environments instead of focusing on a single mammal, wolves. Let the affected rancher deal with the predator wolf(s) in question and leave the other wolves be. The other wish is that humans generally accept that wildlife has as much right to sit at the table on this planet as humans have, so there has to be a decline in both livestock and human biomass compared to wildlife. Let's scoot over and make room at the table for wild animals.

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