

Suffer the animals

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

Attributed to Mahatma Gandhi

The articles in this semi-themed ‘Animals’ issue convey a sliver of the suffering, death, and extinction that plague animals. Their plight speaks to the rupture and alienation of much of humanity from Earth’s community of life. To paraphrase Gandhi, the baseness of global civilization and its moral decay are evident in the downfall of animals in our time.

In witnessing the violence against animals, we are compelled to part ways with the platitude that our broken relationship with nature can be roundly gauged by our carbon footprint. The enclosed images of snared animals in South-East Asia’s forests, for instance, expose that at a deeper level the ecological crisis is entangled with something akin to ‘soul loss’ in the human condition. That loss is exhibited in the unnerving widespread brutality that is perpetrated, and tolerated, toward animals. It is also evident in certain ‘solutions’ people conjure for ecological dilemmas. One example is the grotesqueness of breeding tigers in captivity and slaughtering them for their body parts, as a plan for ‘saving tigers’ in the wild. Another example is rationalizing trophy hunting (to indulge rich people’s sick thrills), as a strategy for funding ‘carnivore conservation.’ How many petty mind-games can human supremacy spin in its scramble to camouflage its viciousness?

For years, academics (and others) debated the merits and demerits of the wilderness idea. Getting lost in heady thinking can be a surefire way to lose touch with the factual.

More than idea, wilderness is *reality*: the place, among other important things, where the wild things or wild animals live. Defenders of wilderness have always simply pled: Leave wild places and beings alone. Stop shooting wild animals, snaring them, culling them, commodifying them, eating them, managing them, turning them into refugees, and stealing their homes. Just stop.

The global poaching (bushmeat) crisis is emptying Earth of the exquisite being and creative presence of animals. This crisis is about heart-wrenching cruelty and human blindness in inflicting it. It is also about the hallucination that eating ‘wild meat’ displays status and confers strength. Yet censure reaches beyond the poacher–criminal syndicate–consumer nexus. The poaching crisis incriminates global civilization for failing to prevent this disaster, prosecute perpetrators, institute legislation with teeth, enforce meaningful punishments, generously staff and support Earth keepers (like rangers), and educate the public about the sourcing of wild meat and the perils of wet markets. A civilization that contemplates colonizing Mars but remains impotent before the bloodbath of animals is damaged in ways that run dark and deep.

Even as population naysayers continue denying the repercussions of over-population, Africa’s animals are spiraling into endangerment and extinction. Yet inapt political tactfulness – given that high fertility rates in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere are largely due to oppressive patriarchal norms (see Engleman [2016]) – turns a blind eye to the ruins that rapid human population growth contributes. As Tarik Bodasing explains herein, Africa’s large carnivores are losing homes and lives. Ninety percent of cheetahs’ historic range is

Eileen Crist

About the author

Eileen has been teaching at Virginia Tech in the Department of Science and Technology in Society since 1997. She has written and co-edited numerous papers and books, with her work focusing on biodiversity loss and destruction of wild places, along with pathways to halt these trends. Eileen lives in Blacksburg, VA, USA.

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gone. Trends are becoming similar for lions, leopards, and wild dogs, as well as for Africa's herbivores like elephants and giraffes. Beyond Africa, most big wild animals are in trouble: they need large-scale geographical space, which humans are taking, and they are being slayed, to boot.

As ecocentrics, we often find ourselves rehearsing the argument that non-human beings, and the places they inhabit and co-create, have value in themselves (*intrinsic value*). That is, they have majesty, dignity, intelligence, agency, meaning, vitality, lives-to-live and things-to-do in themselves. It is sad that any of this needs to be stated. Why is humanity failing to recognize that Earth takeover is deathly wrong?

Livestock numbers keep climbing, tracking growing human numbers and *per capita* wealth. The latter two trends are damaging enough – driving ecological drawdown and pollution – yet their *product*, which is fueling more carnivory and animal-product consumption, makes everything worse. By everything, I mean killing wild animals, occupying habitats (for grazing and feed), overdrawing freshwater, spewing greenhouse gases, felling forests, unleashing pesticides, fertilizers, and toxic manure, and emptying the seas. I also mean rising rates of heart disease, cancer, zoonoses and obesity – a bill of ill health that will help bring global society, sooner or later, to its knees. Additionally, I mean the unconscionable treatment of animals in factory farms to ramp up and cheapen disease-causing products, thus sponsoring disproportionate morbidity and mortality among the underprivileged. From those who do not have it shall be taken – but ultimately it shall be taken from all.

Overall, we pay little respect to nature, implement 'solutions' as unethical as the problems, devalue wilderness, mute root causes, overeat animal products, kill and extinguish wild animals, overbreed and abuse farm animals, and keep championing 'traditional medicine' as if it has not become inveterately toxic in a world of beleaguered life. Yet we must simultaneously acknowledge the commitment of millions of people to heal Earth and our relations with non-humans and one another. We can remember with gratitude the rangers who have died in the line of duty, most murdered by poachers – over 1000 people in the past decade (Global Conservation, 2018). We may thank the efforts of countless environmental artists to awaken our senses to both despoliation and beauty, through works such as "Seasick" and "Reciprocity Mandala" in this issue. We can salute the scientist-activists exposing crimes against the planet and offering genuine solutions.

We are not only fighting for Earth and for survival. We are fighting for the wholeness of the human soul. Shamans

of diverse cultural traditions have regarded 'soul loss' as occurring when some part of our being takes flight through severe trauma or shock.¹ That ruptured part becomes the 'shadow.' As humanity broke covenant and assumed lordship over Earth, we lost friendship with animals and contact with our animal being. That soul loss underwrites the mass killing and torturing of animals, as well as the collective dissociation from such transgressions. It is as though the human shadow is seeking to erase what we ourselves have lost.

Calling the lost fragment of our soul back begins by listening to animals. They have so much to teach us. It begins also by returning to our animal bodies and selves. These realignments will bring us back to our senses, literally and figuratively. Listening to animals, we revive the admiration and esteem we spontaneously feel for them. Wild animals glisten with raw vitality and intelligence. Barry Lopez (1998: 1) called that animal-shine "numinous". Wild animals, he wrote, "riveted my imagination," for they "seemed to tremble in the aura of their own light." "Holding their gaze" (if we have such fortune), we see "the intensity and clarity [...] associated with the presence of a soul." In the eyes of domesticated animals – who are also numinous if more homely – we see the vulnerability of creatures who depend on us completely. They deserve only our care. Looking at our own animal selves in the mirror, among other things we might note the conspicuous absence of fangs and claws. Therefore, let's put the meat aside or indulge it infrequently.

If we admit how deeply we love animals, including ourselves, and call our animal soul home, many things will fall into place. ■

Notes

- 1 For contemporary renderings of ancient shamanic views about soul loss and soul retrieval, see for example Wangyal (2002) and Ingerman (2011).

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