
The Muskrat Conundrum

One of my favourite natural history books is “Monster of God”, by David Quammen, subtitled “The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind”. It tells the story of man’s relationship with big, fierce animals, the ones that can kill and eat us. To illustrate his story, Quammen draws on four examples, three of them mammals (Romanian bears, Russian tigers and Indian lions). He describes the threats to these species, the conflicts that arise where humans and large predators live near one another and the efforts of conservationists.

Many large predatory species have now been driven to the edge of extinction due to habitat loss caused by human encroachment and poaching, but things were very different in our shared past. There was a time when we lived in both fear and awe of large predators, which were always near us, and not only in our dreams - or nightmares. In some parts of the world, large predators are still part of the ecosystem and that shared history continues, but these parts grow fewer and farther apart by the day. Our willingness to accept the danger presented by wild animals has waned and our ability to eradicate the danger has grown boundlessly. It’s probably true that in this way the world has become a safer place for us. But what have we lost along the way? David Quammen quotes biblical and classical examples, such as Job, Leviathan and Beowulf to illustrate the role of large predators in our art

and our stories, in the “jungle of our mind”. But we need only switch to a nature TV channel to realise how we’re still fascinated by big cats or sharks. But, whilst in the old days we might run into these monsters during a walk to the next village or while herding the cattle, large predators are now mostly encountered in zoos or in children’s books. Nature has, for the most part, been tamed, especially in our part of the world, and space for wild things to live in is much reduced.

I was born and grew up on the Veluwe, the forested heart of the Netherlands. To call it a wilderness would require a considerable stretch of the imagination, but when we went on walks when I was little, the mere possibility of a sudden and unexpected encounter with wild boars was an exciting part of the experience. I was instilled with respect for these animals by the knowledge that they could and would defend themselves, in other words, by the potential danger they presented. Their wildness lends a special quality to the forest in a way a deer or squirrel, though wonderful creatures in their own right, never can. And today a walk on the Veluwe means a walk in wolf country and, even though the chances of seeing one are minute, just knowing that they are there is exciting. But not everyone is happy about the wolf’s return. Some feel that the wolf does not belong here and that there is no place for it among us. In Germany, the Cabinet has approved a bill that will relax

the rules for culling wolves that have become 'problematic' and there are some who are strongly in favour of similar legislation in the Netherlands. In other words, while European protection has undoubtedly had a very positive effect on the wolf population in Western Europe and the general attitude towards wolves has improved, there are still those who take issues with the presence of wolves.

There are two articles in this issue of *Lutra* about other large predators that are present in, or near, the Netherlands: the golden jackal and the lynx. While the authors of the article about the first species conclude that the Netherlands could potentially support a sizeable population of golden jackals, those of the latter find that the fragmented forests of the Netherlands cannot support a viable lynx population. But the discussion about wolves tells us that it not just about these animals finding sufficient space to live in our fragmented landscape, but also about us giving them a place in our hearts and minds.

Also in this issue of *Lutra* is an article on damage caused by muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*). Coincidentally - and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly - there is a chapter in "Monster of God" called "The Muskrat Conundrum", in which Quammen describes the work of Paul Errington (1902-1962), an American wildlife biologist. During his youth, Errington spent much of his time as a fur trapper, but he later became a scientist and, among other things, studied muskrats and the predation of muskrats by minks (*Mustela vison*). Muskrat fur at that time was a staple of the fur trade, and so minks were unpopular with the industry. Errington's research showed that mink predation was unimportant as a factor limiting population size of muskrats. Muskrats are territorial and their population dynamics is density

dependent. The number of muskrats in any given habitat is restricted by how many territories fit into it, which in turn depends on the availability of food and denning sites. Muskrats with a well-situated territory are by and large protected from predation. Their dens provide protection, their food is nearby and the routes between the two provide sufficient shelter. Muskrats without a territory or with one that is suboptimal are not so lucky and run a much greater risk of predation. In other words, the haves and have-nots of the muskrat society are defined by their territory or lack thereof and the have-nots are more likely to suffer predation. Quammen proceeds to draw a parallel with the relation of man with large predators and wonders whether it "... is inevitable that the costs exacted by alpha predators be borne disproportionately by poor people ...while the spiritual and aesthetic benefits of those magnificent beasts are enjoyed from afar." The question of how to better distribute the material, spiritual and aesthetic benefits is what he calls the Muskrat Conundrum and this brings me back to the return of the wolf in the Netherlands. If we cannot tolerate the presence of wolves in the Netherlands, how can we expect others to do so? Or ask Russians to live with tigers, Indians to put up with lions or Romanians to share their land with bears? We all benefit from afar from the existence of these phenomenal creatures in this world and it is no more than fair that we also share some of the costs by allowing the return of some wildness to our lands.

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References

- Quammen, D. 2004. *Monster of God: The man-eating predator in the jungles of history and the mind.* W.W. Norton & Company, New York, USA.