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Opinion

Do Wildlife Matter?

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Opinion

In today's complex landscape, there is increasing competition for available space and resources. Global human population growth and associated landscape change, intensify space demands, resulting in the allocation of human priorities. At the 22nd Annual Conference of The Wildlife Society, held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, wildlife professionals grappled over these challenges and the inevitable question of whether wildlife matter within our present-day convoluted world. Currently, there is a myriad of inter-related issues that we now face: human overpopulation, unsustainable lifestyles, large-scale factory farming of animals, vast monoculture landscapes, an alarming rate of global biodiversity loss, shrinking fresh water supplies, global climate change, and desperate human poverty. The Center for Biological Diversity (2014) indicates we are now experiencing the worst loss of species since the time of the dinosaurs, 65 million year ago. If the current rate of biodiversity loss continues, we will experience one of the most extreme extinction events since the age of the dinosaurs, primarily attributed to human overpopulation and overconsumption Wilson [1]. Even the concept of what is natural in today's global landscape has us in debate. It is difficult for us to define what the term natural means any more. Many different groups have varying definitions of what nature is and we seldom even agree on how to define the term. There is no question that humans leave large footprints wherever we go. As Jennifer Wolch suggests, many contend that development makes use of "empty" land, improving the converted spaces Wolch [2] into the seemingly best use, not recognizing these "empty" spaces as critically important ecologically and biologically diverse environments.

Further, we struggle with human population growth. The global human population is presently just under 7.3 billion people, projected to climb over 9.8 billion by 2050 (UN, 2017). Just ten thousand years ago, 99% of the earth's biomass was made up of free-ranging wild animals Tuttle [3]. Today, humans and the animals that we raise as food make up 98% of the global biomass, with free ranging wild animals making up only 2% Smil [4]. Hand-in-hand with increasing human populations are all the associated decisions made with respect to land-development and infrastructure that are influenced by job markets, hospitals, education institutions, real-estate, house-hold preference, highway placement, among other variables Alberti [5]. Beyond the areas that have been heavily developed, are the areas set aside for food production. Vast mono-cultured landscapes have replaced natural ecosystems that once contained thousands of plant, insect, and vertebrate species Wolch [6]. To keep up with our human overpopulation and in many case overconsumption, 70 billion farmed animals are reared annually worldwide with more than 6 million domesticated animals are killed every hour for food Goodland [7]. Livestock and their by-products account for at least 51% of all worldwide greenhouse gas emissions Oppenlander [8]. While research and documentaries surface and we hear these alarming statistic we, all too often, become de-sensitized to what they are truly saying. We are left with this global phenomenon where there is hardly anywhere on earth where humans have not influenced the land, water, or atmosphere. Globally, we are changing landscapes at a rapid rate. As a result of these changing landscapes, humans and wildlife are competing, more than ever before, for space and available resources. As we entertain the idea of co-existing species within this shifting mosaic, unavoidably, we must consider human ethical positions toward animals and human wildlife value orientations. Without question, there is a wide spectrum that exists spanning from total domination to total protection, and we often struggle within these extreme ethical positions with respect to animals Kellert [9] If we collectively suggest that wildlife matter and accept that landscapes are changing, we are drawn into thinking of new ways that species (human and non-human species) can co-exist, giving rise to a re-definition of space and place, such as biophilic cities Beatley [10] or the zoographies Calarco [11].

This competition over habitat and natural resources inevitably results in conflict between wildlife and people. Human-wildlife conflict is increasing world-wide both in terms of frequency and severity (Madden, 2004). Further, research has noted that public attitudes toward wildlife have shifted in the latter portion of the twentieth century away from utilitarian, use-based perspectives toward a protectionist orientation with respect to wildlife Manfredo [12]. Such protectionist orientation creates challenges for wildlife managers called upon to reduce human-wildlife conflict. Moreover,

animals evoke strong human emotions that can be both positive and negative in nature. Human-wildlife interactions are typically emotionally-charged events Hudenko 2012. Work has begun to explore the role emotions play in influencing human perspectives toward wildlife. Many of our automatic emotional bodily responses are shared with animals and we are able to recognize their emotional expressions as closely related to our own. Our human tendency to anthropomorphize animals and to create human-wildlife interactions may be partially explained by our perceived ability to recognize in animals' emotional responses as similar to our own Jacobs [13]. This is something that Charles Darwin noted in the 19th century in his text titled The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals, 1872. Resultantly, in many cases, we end up facing wicked problems. The "Wicked Problems" are technically complex, with no single universally acceptable solution, as each different outcome and strategies for achieving results are viewed differently by different stakeholders, based on their respective emotions and values [14]. If we collectively agree that wildlife do in fact matter, then we have our work cut out for us in identifying viable management strategies among all of these inter-related dynamics. Such an undertaking will call upon expertise from a wide range of professionals, including architects, economists, land-use planners/developers, philosophers, politicians, religious leaders, human dimension specialists, traditional biology and ecology scientists, social scientists, anthropologists, cultural geographers, among many others. Within this era of globalization are many competing interests and knowledge bases, including nature lovers, conservation agencies; activists, capital investors, extractive agencies, Indigenous experts, scientific researchers, among many others. We therefore, need more tools in our tool kit than ever before. Consistent with the biological world, the human world we live in is constantly changing, with members of the population represented in various and evolving ways with increasing diversification. We need to aim for a vision to adopt methods to encourage a diversity of opinion, thereby enhancing research, management, and policy development that identifies and resonates with a broader spectrum of the human population.

Our landscape use challenges are global in nature. Given the unrelenting scale of many current issues such as climate change and of factors contributing to it, we need to be cognizant to think beyond the local to global perspectives. We need to adopt, as Leopold suggested, a "Land Ethic" Leopold et al. [15] and look beyond our own boarders, calling upon an international knowledge base. Looking internationally presents challenges; however, given an engagement in discussions that reach beyond the boundaries of local / regional ethics, means we need to grasp the spatial and temporal complications that come with understanding our environmental crisis outside of a local, or regional grid. Such an earth-scale perspective, a "global" perspective, all too often amounts to the increasing hegemony of Western, chiefly American, models of thinking. Concepts of scale are certainly complex. Of paramount importance are considerations of social justice. Social justice is intertwined with environmental justice with many of global population having lost hope. As Jane Goodall suggests, by helping people, we help the environment, and in turn help wildlife. When nature suffers, we suffer; when nature flourishes, we flourish Goodall et al. [16]. There is immense strength in individual choices which makes large collective change possible. So, given increasing competition among a myriad of landscape use possibilities, do wildlife matter? If wildlife do matter, human priority shifts are imperative, with a dire need for inter-related and cooperative energies aimed toward ecological sustainability [17-20].

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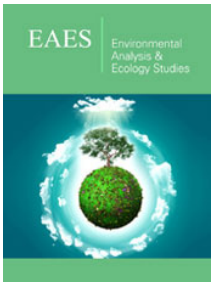

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