

## CHAPTER 6

### Crimes against Nature

There's a story I love that dates back to 1932. It's about a farmer on Maryland's Eastern Shore who loved Canada Geese. He left part of his corn crop unharvested each year so the big birds would continue to come to his land as a haven in winter.

As the story goes, the farmer became very ill at age 85 and asked to spend his last days at home with his family. Children and grandchildren cried at his bedside as he lay dying. They knew the end was near, and they waited for him to awake so they could ask him one last question.

"What can we do for you, Granddad?"

He replied, "What time of year is it?"

"Thanksgiving," they said.

"Ah, yes, the time when the wild geese come back. Look out the window and see if they are back in the field."

The grandchildren looked and said, "Yes, Granddad, they are back."

"Good," he said, "something is still right in the world. The geese are still migrating. If you want to help, carry on in my behalf so the geese will always have this sanctuary."

And he closed his eyes and peacefully passed away.

The farmer's wish became a reality one year later, as the marshy wetlands near his farm were purchased by the U.S. Interior Department and set aside as a permanent, protected wildlife habitat called the Blackwater Wildlife Refuge. [Today, the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, is a major stop on the Atlantic Flyway.]

I cherish this story because I experience such joy each time I return to the Blackwater Refuge. The honking of the big birds as they fly into the area is a special part of nature's music. Today, more than 50,000 wild geese, ducks, and swans winter on the refuge. The endangered bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and red-cockaded woodpecker are at home on the refuge, along with the red fox, blue herons, white-tailed deer, muskrats, raccoons, opossums, skunks, and nutria.

The Blackwater Refuge is just one of the more than 450 refuges permanently set aside for wildlife throughout the United States. [As of 2007, that number has increased to more than 540.] Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, more than half of them host endangered species, animals in severe and imminent danger of disappearing forever off the face of the Earth.

About 350 animals are on the Interior Department's official endangered species list. We know that 75 percent of this total was hurt by destruction of their habitat caused by lumbering, fires, farming, suburban sprawl, highway construction, and dam building across rivers and marshes. Water and air pollution and hunting also harmed these creatures. [As of 2007, there are 374 animals and 866 invertebrates listed. Over 45 animals have been removed from the list.]

We need more Blackwater refuges and must join together to champion wetlands acquisition and preservation, and to restore areas damaged by pollution. Halting all hunting in key marshlands will also help. We must act decisively, and soon—or there will be nothing left to protect.

How did we reach this frightening place, where our whole planet is truly endangered? Well, for millennia, the varieties of animal and plant life have been abundant on our Earth. Man has hunted and killed animals for food and sport, assuming that the supply is endless. Forests

have been decimated for building homes, roads, and cities. Today, as overpopulation stresses our environment more than ever, we must ask ourselves at what price our “progress” has been made.

The scientists’ forecast for planet Earth is ominous. There are warnings that a million species of animal and plant life will be lost in the next 12 years unless we turn this trend around fast. A million species—it’s almost an unimaginable loss. [About 1.75 million of the estimated 13-14 million animals on Earth have been documented by scientists. As of 2007, of the animals studied, almost 6,000 worldwide are endangered.]

But this natural holocaust should come as no surprise to anyone who has been following the news for the past 20 years. Chemical and industrial pollution is poisoning our lakes, streams, and the air we breathe. Oil spills are killing animals by the thousands and plant life, too. Rain forests are being cut down for development at an alarming rate. The loss of wetlands to development has taken away the habitat of many animal and plant species. Acid rain, the greenhouse effect, nuclear wastes, all threaten to destroy us; and the list goes on.

Air pollution, too, threatens our planet’s life. Ozone pollution can cause eye irritation and respiratory illness in terrestrial animals. Acid rain causes permanent damage to fish. Toxic concentrations of metals and ozone pollution are having severe effects on aquatic ecosystems. Fish and invertebrates are dying because of increased aluminum in the water and ozone pollution.

Pesticides, fertilizers, and herbicides are causing death among birds and other animals. Their use has increased in the last few years, and they are finding their way into food and water supplies.

And, of course, any form of pollution or over-development that causes the destruction of habitat threatens the entire ecosystem—starting with the plants at the bottom of the food chain and going right to the top, to us.

### ***“I Just Wanted to See Something Die.”***

You’d think we’d learn, but the human species does not seem to get the message. As the environmental devastation continues, we help it along with a thriving “sport” called hunting. Endangered animals are poached for their horns or ivory. Others are hunted for trophies, their heads with horns or antlers proudly displayed on the hunter’s walls. The horror of hunting reminds me of a particularly apt quote:

*Wild animals never kill for sport. Man is the only one to whom the torture and death of his fellow creatures is amusing in itself.*

*—James Anthony Froude*

Tragically, our national parks and wildlife refuges are open to hunters whenever a population of animals is declared by wildlife managers to be too large. The multi-million dollar hunting and fishing industry takes full, lusty advantage of the situation, not just through legal hunting and fishing but also through poaching. Illegal killing of animals keeps our game wardens and other officials working overtime. As reported in *Defenders* magazine (May/June 1988, “Yellowstone’s Poaching War,” by Todd Wilkinson), the bloodthirstiness of the poachers is appalling.

Jackson Hole warden Doug Crawford told Todd Wilkinson, “It goes back to the days of Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest. People believe it is their God-given right to take the King’s game.” It is estimated that 99 percent of poaching cases do not involve hunting for food.

Game management specialists tell sordid tales of bears, swans, deer, and bald eagles being shot and just left to die. One warden says, “It’s scary. I always ask the suspects what motivated them to fire upon animals. One guy told me, ‘At that moment I just had to kill something.’ Another said, ‘I just wanted to see something die.’”

In Alaska, big game hunters operating under the authority of legal trapping permits have used airplanes to spot wolverines, wolves, and fox. Once the hunters sighted their quarry, they would land and shoot them. Fortunately, this practice is banned for shooting wolverines and fox, but was allowed to continue in some areas for wolves.

To satisfy an inconceivable lust for killing, men have hunted some animals to extinction and others to severe endangerment, where the only surviving members of that species are in national parks and zoos.

While laws to protect wild animals are on the books, the vastness of our wild lands poses a tremendous law enforcement problem. The Greater Yellowstone area alone covers four million acres of wilderness. Poachers can easily escape the grasp of park officials. Few are arrested; even fewer are sentenced to prison terms.

All over the world, the poaching problem is fueled by an incomprehensible desire for exotic animal products. In America, poachers who sell exotic animal products are after trophy-class bighorn sheep, bear claws and gall bladders, bald eagle feathers, and live falcons. There are actually individuals who collect these “world-class trophies” and will pay thousands of dollars for them, as if they were buying works of art.

In Africa and Asia, the problem is even more severe. Illegal trade in rhino horns has reduced the population of black rhinos to only about 4,000. The demand for ivory has led poachers to undertake extraordinary measures, including the murder of wildlife officials, to get at their prey. As a result, the elephant population in Africa has declined 36 percent in the last six years. [Today, that number has increased to 50 percent.] It is estimated that 89,000 elephant tusks entered the trade illegally in one year. [Today, it is estimated that 240 tons of ivory enter the market yearly. This figure represents the killing of more than 23,000 elephants.]

Is there hope that we might end poaching? Here in America, the answer is “yes”—if we as a nation are willing to make a sizable investment. It is estimated that it costs the Fish and Wildlife Service at least \$200,000, plus the full-time use of an undercover officer for at least a year, to infiltrate just one poaching ring. In developing countries in Africa and Asia, such investment may not be possible. We can only hope that, with assistance from international organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and others, these nations will find a way to preserve their extraordinary natural wildlife legacies.

### ***Peril in and on the Seas***

Marine animals, too, face the grave dangers of pollution and hunting. The great oceans provide no relief from the human-created problems that plague earth-bound creatures.

Pollution in many forms threatens to destroy our oceans and the creatures inhabiting them. Today, marine animals must contend with a new threat, courtesy of our throw-away society: plastic debris. Annually, many thousands of animals, including whales, porpoises, sea turtles, seals, sea birds, and fish, fall victim to discarded plastic products, which they sometimes eat, thinking, for example, that a piece of Styrofoam might be a delectable morsel of fish. The

animals also become entangled in old fishing gear, strapping bands, plastic six-pack holders, and other types of plastic trash. After becoming entangled, the animal may then drown, strangle, be unable to eat or swim, or die from plastic-induced cuts that become infected.

Chemical pollution from a multitude of sources is also choking off life in the oceans, bays, and rivers. The oil spill in Alaska is a particularly disastrous example. Current estimates now put the number of birds killed from this spill at 13,000. They died from being oiled directly or from eating food or water that had been oiled. Between 4,000 and 6,000 otters died. Deer, ducks, puffins, and other creatures have also suffered and died from this act of negligence. Even though thousands of people worked to save these animals, nothing could be done. There is no way to measure the damage this one spill caused to the environment.

Like their land-animal counterparts, marine creatures must also contend with man's hunting and harvesting efforts. Some animals, including several species of sea turtles and whales, have been pushed to the brink of extinction because of carelessness or greed on the part of commercial fishermen.

Though not yet threatened by extinction, dolphins may soon be on the endangered species list because of fishing abuses. Dolphins have been historically treated as friends by fishermen, who used them as indicators to locate schools of yellowfin tuna, which, for reasons still unknown, swim beneath the herds of dolphins. In the 1960s, the fishermen began using new technologies—giant hydraulic power blocks, big nylon nets, speedboats, helicopters, and a method known as purse seining. Using this method, a herd of dolphins is sighted and rounded up by speedboats with loud, whining engines powerful enough to interfere with the dolphin's sensitive sonar communication system. Sometimes fishermen throw small explosives in the water, too. The dolphins are boxed in by the mass of tuna below them. The purse seine net surrounds and tightens around them and they are smashed together, allowing the fishermen the ability to catch a large number yellowfin at one time.

It is estimated that about seven million dolphins have been killed in tuna fishing in the last 25 years. This practice is used only in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean from mid-California to mid-Chile. The tuna caught in this area supply only about five percent of the world's tuna catch. The other 95 percent is caught without killing the dolphins.

The greed for whales has caused dramatic declines in the world's population of blue whales, the largest mammal ever to live on the planet. Now so few of these mighty animals remain that it may no longer be possible for them to reproduce effectively. Other once-common whale species are also severely threatened, including the humpback and right whales, species which once populated every coastline.

The international conservation community asked whaling nations to stop all whaling activity. But even when the nations agree to do so, such treaties are difficult to enforce. For example, though Japan signed an agreement to phase out their whaling, there are still reports of whales being taken by the Japanese, who claim these animals are to be used for research.

### ***Is There Hope?***

Where there is still life, there is hope. Where animals have already been lost to extinction, hope is gone forever. But we must continue to struggle to preserve what we have left, the beautiful flora and fauna of this once-pristine Earth.

As a society, we need more acquisition, restoration, and protection of key habitats. We need to rally around legislation that will preserve our wild lands and keep the poachers away

from innocent wild animals. We need to speak out for conservation at every possible opportunity.

For the animals now on the endangered species list, we can still hope. Zoos are attempting to breed many of these rare and endangered animals successfully. However, this can only be done in very small numbers, and certainly it is no substitute for the natural state of the Earth, in which animals could live undisturbed in their natural habitats.

As the Defenders of Wildlife ask, “How in the world will tomorrow’s children know the wonder of wildlife if there’s no wildlife left in the world?” I hope you will join with me to make sure that your children and their children will be able to witness the great array of wild animals—and, indeed, to make sure that there will still be a healthy environment for animals *and* man for generations yet to come.