

Somebody, Please Stop Us

Issue #3



This is the third issue of “Somebody, Please Stop Us,” so it’s probably time to take stock and reflect. When I showed my wife the first issue, she said, “It sounds like you’re writing from the point of view of the Russian proletariat.” I laughed; not exactly what I had been going for. But upon re-reading, I did see some primitivist sentiment and, yes, maybe an attempt to give the underclass a voice.

While people may shake their heads at Mamdani’s proposal to start government-run grocery stores in NYC, I think this could work. I’ve been in many neighborhoods that are food deserts: a dollar store and a couple of fast-food restaurants may be the only things those folks have. Americans shouldn’t have to ride a bus for 45-minutes to get fresh fruits and vegetables.

It’s similar to the housing issue. The government tries to incentivize developers to build low-income housing, but the builders and investors know where the money is. So, we end up with a bunch of high-end condos and people get priced out. Gentrification continues; the middle class and wealthy get close proximity to the city and the poor can sit in traffic or commute long distances.

But I don’t pretend to know all of the issues facing poor people. These are the ones that I have seen firsthand, but the problems are far beyond this. The breakdown of social structures; substance use; lack of support; lack of community; lack of education and healthcare; trauma; crime; desperation and poverty; hopelessness. It’s a long list. But a key thread in all of these items is the question—*who is looking out for you?*

That feeling of isolation can be pronounced, especially in high-tech developed societies. Japan and the U.S. have high depression and anxiety rates. Ironically, while the tech companies trumpet “connection” and social media, many of these platforms are anti-social and keep people in their silos. We need to open our minds and

hear different voices from our own—stop searching for ammunition that reinforces our own entrenched beliefs. In this spirit, I decided to check out a book written by a hunter as the subject of this issue.

Anthropocentrism and Human Exceptionalism

I've been reading the book, *Eating Aliens* by Jackson Landers. It's about eating invasives. I got interested in the topic after visiting New Haven, CT and reading about a sushi restaurant that had pioneered an invasives menu. This topic is at the nexus of hunting and ecology—something that I find fascinating because it raises so many ethical issues regarding the land, animals and our place among both.

I'm not done with the book, but so far, it's been one hunter's expedition across the South, hunting various invasive species and eating his kill: black-spiny tailed iguanas, green iguanas, pigs and armadillos... that's as far as I've gotten.

I have objections to Landers' approach, although I do think he has a novel idea. Firstly, it's clear from the prose that Landers enjoys killing wild animals, so his attempts to portray himself as an ecological hero really don't resonate for me. There are contraceptive darts and food that can sterilize an animal for 1-3 years; there's also the introduction of predators. So, the idea that hunters *must* kill non-native animals is a suspicious hypothesis. I guess we're supposed to be impressed that someone with an AR-15 can take out a pig in a field. You can tell he thinks of himself as a kind of modern-day Hemingway. Secondly, Landers (so far) has not critically examined the overarching thesis of his book: *if an animal or plant did not naturally grow/evolve in a particular region, it shouldn't be there*. There's quite a lot bundled into that statement. After all, humans are invasives. Taken at face value, we shouldn't be here. We originated from Africa and the Middle East, the cradle of civilization. But with anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism chugging along in the background, we

rarely turn the camera on ourselves. These non-native animals and plants are here as a result of our actions. On page 52, Landers mentions how a storm that impacted a Florida zoo in 1924 led to the release of a few nine-banded armadillos and the population grew from there. This is just one of many problems with zoos—the possibility for unintended consequences. Teaching our children that it's normal to view animals behind bars or in tanks is an odd ecology lesson. You can talk biology to school children all day, but if you're presenting the animals in enclosures, there's another message that is being received.

This issue appears among land conservation groups as well. Some organizations take a passive approach—they acquire land that is important habitat and essentially leave it alone. In general, this yields fantastic results, just as when we create sanctuaries in the oceans—everything starts to grow and flourish again. Nature has an uncanny ability to regenerate, but we are pushing it to the brink. Then, there are groups (and government) that actively manage lands. They study and intervene and hunt and spray chemicals. But the thing about tinkering is that once you start, you generally have to continue. If your goal is also self-perpetuation, this tends to be okay. When you don't spend the money, you don't get renewed next year. Grant projects, in particular, tend to involve lots of management. You must show how the ecology was “changed.” It's just not as sexy to say, *well, I wanted to obtain a conservation easement or other protection to let the land or ocean return to its natural state.*

The real problem with invasives is that we've removed their potential opportunistic predators (although the U.S. National Park System still has some carnivores left). It's not *always* a problem that life forms are moving around the globe. Humans have been moving around the world for centuries. But the killing spree against carnivores really touched off in the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s. As a result,

the fauna (and flora) of today is a manipulation created by human intervention (the flow of “streams” in Central Park can be altered with the turn of a handle). Our landscape has been changed forever, not just by hunting, but also by the introduction of GMOs. Carnivores were decimated because they competed with us for resources. But humans’ ire wasn’t just reserved for carnivores. Herbivores like the docile North American mammoths were also hunted en masse. While it’s sad to think of gunning down carnivores, it is even sadder to think of the gentle trusting animals that we just walked up to and killed like the Dodo, passenger pigeon, Steller’s Sea Cow, Great Auk. Human population is at the core of so many ill practices like factory farming, clear-cutting the rainforest and bottom trawling or longlining: entanglement, ingestion and broken monofilament lines create ocean plastic and suffering for marine animals. Floating fish factories, like mini-cities on the water, process and refrigerate on board while fleets scan with sonar. Massive nets and lines drag in everything including non-target species and disrupt the ecology of the seafloor in the case of trawlers. Fishing has become less about technique/skill and more about technology and money.

One might say, well, isn’t it more honest to kill what you eat? I am sympathetic to this point of view. If our population were lower and we killed for subsistence—to feed our family or communities, one could probably justify it. But given the size of the world population, and cultural resistance to vegetarianism/veganism, corporations will tell us that mechanized mass killing strategies are the only way to meet consumer demand. When we grab a packet of meat (it’s “beef” or “protein,” not “cow”) that has been deboned with the blood drained out, wrapped in plastic, it hardly resembles its former self. We’ve applied efficient capitalist production techniques to life and it’s a bad fit. The animal has been bred and grown for this one purpose—to feed us. If we compare this to hunting with high

technology, we see that the strongest of the pack may be taken, interfering with natural selection. Landers' would, of course, say, *good!* But in nature, it's the weakest that are killed. Or, we can end up reeling in pregnant marine life so that one kill, now becomes the loss of hundreds, hurting a species as a whole. At the core of these animal ethics discussions, is usually the hunters and perhaps the general public saying it's the species numbers that count, whereas folks like myself believe individual animals have value. I know we've been taught to turn this sentiment off, this feeling or emotion we might have for "the other," for animals. But I still have it and I think it's worth cultivating in our children for a better, more humane, world. I often find myself sitting around the dinner table, wondering, is it possible that this person smiling at me, chewing on factory farmed meat, has not thought about these issues? This person who is so kind to his or her children, so kind to their pets and perhaps works in a helping profession? We have normalized eating factory farmed meat. It's as normal as taking a drink of water or breathing the air. To face this corruption is to implicate grandma and grandpa, mother and father, brother and sister. It's to implicate your culture. It's to implicate ourself and our past. Understandably, most people choose to look away and come up with justifications. We are in the world and must survive, too, right? Or maybe we give thanks to the animal; don't waste anything; honor, respect what we've taken. Maybe we search out cow, pork or chicken that lived a free life until a sudden quick end. Or perhaps we come to realize that we can live in peace with animals, that it's not such a big sacrifice, that many good alternatives exist—hundreds of wonderful vegetarian or vegan dishes.

Will humans ever learn to exercise restraint? If we keep denying the problem, probably not. If we continue to perpetuate a false sense of conservation via zoos and aquariums, showcasing animals in prisons and tanks, then no. *Here are your "wild" animals, kids. Isn't it great?*

Look at the colors. See how IT moves. The objectification started in the grocery store continues. *Can you imagine that lion on the prairie?* Never mind that big cats in the wild have been decimated or that elephant tusks are harvested for ornaments to put on the mantle or that pangolins and rhinos are slaughtered in service of baseless medicinal claims. When will “raising awareness” give way to action?

Animals have really gotten a raw deal from humans. Factory farms: pig castration, constant impregnation of cows for milk production ending in death, selective breeding to create chickens with giant breasts, highly disturbing methods of confinement and slaughter. Animal experimentation because we need to increase our already long lifespans by pioneering critical drugs, we’re told... maybe, but we have to check our ethics at the door to discover them. We’ve literally carved up the world with our roads and urban sprawl dripping into habitats, which become grass monocultures or paving. As humans expand, cities fill with waste calling cockroaches and vermin, then we spread poison (during the 1968 NYC trash workers strike, garbage covered the rooftops; it was a rare moment of recognition for New Yorkers who suddenly realized, *my trash does not disappear magically*). Raptors ingest the sickened rodents and fall ill. Flocks of birds are ground up in airplane engines (many U.S. airports were permitted for wetlands in our wisdom) while animals are slammed into by cars on the streets. Our concern? *How is the car?* In our youth, we might feel shock at this. As we age, we come to accept these daily tragedies.

As a final word on the invasives issue, there is another core flaw in Landers’ book. Pets. Cats and dogs are “invasive” animals. If Landers were really to carry out his hypothesis in full (that is, all non-native animals should be killed), then all of our cats and dogs would be eliminated, too. This is fascinating to consider. At the center of this issue is how we categorize animals. In truth, there is no 1)

livestock, 2) wildlife, 3) domestic. There is every variation of all three blending into each other. Could a pig be a pet? Of course. Some wild dogs can breed with domestic dogs. People have “wild” birds as pets. These distinctions we’ve made are really just *a way for us to talk about life forms*. There is nothing inherent in the life form that earns it this label or classification. If an animal accepts food from a human, is it domestic? Humans can form relationships with any type of animal if the situation is right and we understand how to reach or communicate with the animal. There have been remarkable instances of human-animal friendship documented across the globe by researchers, scientists and explorers. All of this leads me to the conclusion that I’ve been hinting at throughout this discussion. That is, animals are moving across the Earth just like humans. I acknowledge the human desire to play “balancer” and try to “fix” everything. In some cases, there are interventions that are warranted, though killing or spreading chemicals is generally not the way. If we want to nudge species in the right direction and make room for biodiversity, we can do that with contraception (food or darts), which can last multiple years. But these animals are here and they deserve our consideration and our compassion. If we really were serious about biodiversity and letting many life forms thrive, we would limit our own population: Support efforts at population control like women’s right to choose and support gay culture, and the choice to *not* become a breeder. Or, we can keep shooting things and pretending we’re making a difference.

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