

Humans Make Life Tough for Wildlife

As just one species in the complex web of life on this planet, we can't claim to have been very good neighbors or friends to all the other animals and the plants on the Earth. In fact, we can be viewed as being the most destructive bullies around.

We have cut down forests, plowed up the prairies, paved over vast stretches of the land, set forest fires and grass fires, and killed off many species to feed and clothe ourselves, as well as some species just because we could. It would be easy to say that most of the worst of this wanton destruction took place many years ago, and that we wouldn't do all of that any more, but that would not be true. Habitat destruction was and still is the number one cause of species extinction worldwide.

In a 25 year period ending in 2007, the United States lost an amount of farms, ranches, prairies, forests, and wetlands equal in area to the size of Indiana to "development" (suburbs, shopping centers, roads and parking lots)! I suspect that the size of the native habitat loss might have surprised you, but not the fact that it is still occurring. We continue to have to make more room for the increasing population of humans: the population of Texas is predicted to double in the next few decades!

Hopefully, future "development" will eventually become less wasteful of energy, water and land and more environmentally friendly—we do know how to do it.

But there are a lot of other ways where human activity negatively impacts wildlife and native habitat. Mining and pollution of air and water are two such activities.

Strip mining of coal and most all other minerals can be highly destructive to native habitat both in terms of all of the vegetation stripped off the land, but also in terms of subsequent erosion and waste-water that pollutes local streams, lakes and rivers. Underground mining creates somewhat less pollution, but often still produces large amounts of waste.

Oil drilling, production and transportation leads to creation of waste ponds and spills that have led to the destruction of much wildlife, both marine and land-based, as well as contamination of both surface and groundwater.

Burning of fossil fuels not only produces polluted air that affects humans and wildlife alike, but it also pollutes cooling water as well as process water.

No form of energy is free of environmental problems. From mining operations for coal and minerals used in nuclear power and photovoltaic cells for solar panels, to the disposal of waste products, to the alteration and/or destruction of habitat to make room for all of the associated energy related activities, to the vast use of scarce water

resources, all forms of wildlife are, at best, a minor consideration. Even electricity-generating windmills kill birds and bats!

It is easy to point the finger at industry, and it deserves a lot of blame, but we are the ultimate consumers of all this industrial production, and thus responsible for its pollution, and habitat destruction. And that doesn't count the many things we do that directly endanger wildlife. Just count the carcasses along the roadsides to see the effects that modern man's inventions have on wildlife that didn't evolve to evade anything moving at 70 miles an hour. And then of course, there are the many birds that succumb to all of our collective picture windows.

Finally, we have to add the destruction of wildlife caused by our domestic dogs and cats, which, because of their genes and their huge numbers, take a heavy toll on birds and small animals every year.

Now, much of the wildlife destruction I have just described is the result of unintended consequences of our modern way of life, and I don't think anyone would want to go back to living in the 1800s. But certainly, many of our human activities could perhaps be altered to cause less destruction if the impact on wildlife were considered.

Life would be easier for wildlife if we humans thought more about them and their habitats and tried to avoid causing any more problems and destruction than necessary.

Finally, I note the passing of John Coleman. John was one of the first people I met in Kerrville nearly 18 years ago, and I remember many interesting and informative discussions we had and I enjoyed his gardening column in the paper every week.

Until next time...

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