

We are who eats us: A cultural argument to protect large carnivores

From [Andrea Natan Feltrin, EcologicalCitizen.net](https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net)

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Large carnivores occupy a significant place in our culture and psyche, embodying qualities like wilderness and strength; yet they also stir primal fears. These animals, with their evolutionary adaptations of sharp teeth and claws, are often seen as the man-eating monsters of our darkest nightmares. The key challenge is how modern Western societies, used to a semblance of safety, can coexist with these ancient rivals. The future of our interactions with these impressive creatures hinges on this delicate balance.

Natan, a PhD candidate at the University of North Texas, specializes in environmental ethics and multispecies justice. His work, rooted in his studies at the University of Milan and research on beaver reintroduction at the University of Stirling, focuses on rewilding and ecological coexistence.

Images from Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe...

<https://www.lcie.org/Large-carnivores>



Wolf - *Canis lupus*. Photo © John Linnell/NINA



Eurasian lynx - *Lynx lynx*. Photo © John Linnell/NINA



Brown bear. Photo © Stefan Widstrand



Iberian lynx. Photo ©



Wolverine - *Gulo gulo*. Photo © Arild Landa/NINA



Golden jackal. Photo © Andrea Bonetti Nestos

In this article, I explore Europe's partial success in enhancing wildlife conditions, while pointing out its shortcomings. I examine the continent's inadequate commitment to a globally oriented conservation effort, and the escalating challenges of coexistence with non-human species, particularly large carnivores. I will argue that living alongside large predators necessitates a profound shift in our cultural perspective – a move towards an ecocentric ethic, which would acknowledge humans as integral members of the biological community. This would recognize our status as animals amongst other animals, and thus entities that are ontologically consumable within the carbon cycle.

Through dedicated conservation initiatives, Europe has made significant progress in the resurgence of its large carnivore populations, once on the brink of extinction. The continent, excluding Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, now hosts approximately 46,000 large carnivores. This recovery is exemplified by the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), with numbers exceeding 17,000, and the wolf (*Canis lupus*), boasting a population of over 20,000 within the European Union. Additionally, the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) further enriches Europe's biodiversity with around 9,000 individuals (all figures from <https://www.lcie.org/Large-carnivores>). These statistics highlight the efficacy of wildlife conservation efforts throughout Europe and the potential to overcome cultural resistance toward these iconic species (Patkó, 2020).

In addressing wildlife management, Europe's progress in conservation presents a complex picture. While achievements in local wildlife conservation are noteworthy, they often obscure a broader issue: the displacement or 'outsourcing' of wealthy nations' ecological footprints, particularly to the Global South. This displacement results from globalization, which tends to shift negative environmental impacts and extractive activities to less affluent regions. These regions, often rich in biodiversity and home to the remaining primary forests, are disproportionately affected. The preservation of large fauna emerges as a global concern, accentuated by challenges such as habitat destruction and the bushmeat trade (Ingeman *et al.*, 2022). These issues signal Europe's participation in a wider international conservation effort. However, this engagement unveils a paradox: Europe's efforts to reduce its ecological footprint locally, by outsourcing resource extraction, inadvertently harm ecosystems in regions with lax environmental regulations. The situation highlights the need for a conservation ethic that transcends national borders – urging Europe and other Western regions to support wildlife flourishing globally, not just within their own territories.

Europe's shift towards a model promoting multispecies coexistence is highlighted by demographic changes and legislative advances, notably the EU's *Nature Restoration Law*. This legislation requires restoring substantial parts of Europe's natural habitats by 2030, aiming to revive all degraded ecosystems by 2050 (European Commission, 2020). While Europe's commitment to enhancing human-wildlife relations, aiming for a balance between human safety and wildlife needs, is recognized, conflicts between these imperatives continue to rise. However, true coexistence does not entail completely eradicating conflicts, which would imply either total control over or removal of wildlife, or nearly complete human withdrawal from natural landscapes. While some human retraction is vital to prevent species extinction, as proposed by Half-Earth ethics (Wilson, 2016), societal adaptation to cohabit with significant wildlife is indispensable for fostering a thriving multispecies ecosystem. This involves a delicate, ongoing effort to reinterpret and navigate the intricate, and sometimes violent, interactions between humans and other formidable animals, including large carnivores. Such an approach necessitates moving away from an anthropocentric viewpoint, and fostering a more balanced, though complex, cohabitation with our other-than-human neighbours. Accepting ecological discomfort is, I would suggest, part of making this ethical transition (*cf.* Tokarski, 2019).

Traditionally, assessing the recovery of large carnivore populations requires an understanding of ecological sustainability as well as the social capacity to accept these animals, identifying a balance point where the population size of these carnivores is sustainable but not perceived as excessively abundant. Within this framework, conservation efforts are often narrowly interpreted as merely ensuring the survival of these animals, without affording them the freedom to truly flourish.

This approach results in a scenario where, instead of enabling these carnivores to thrive, we confine them to a state of mere existence under human-defined conditions, thereby depriving them of their natural autonomy and opportunities for genuine well-being. This issue becomes particularly salient in discussions about cohabiting with large carnivores, as prevailing public attitudes and misconceptions can hinder their prospects for a flourishing existence. The core problem is the discrepancy between ecological needs and societal willingness to accommodate them. While conservation efforts must

consider people's perspectives and tolerance levels to ensure local support and prevent retaliation (e.g. via poaching and poisoning), it is alarming and ethically unacceptable that conservation goals are often established based on a 'minimum viable' population size. This is especially concerning given human reluctance to share space on a planet already inhabited by over eight billion of us.

Europe's declining human population presents a unique opportunity to reclaim areas for large carnivores and other wildlife. This requires policies that move away from incentivizing human population growth, towards a more ecocentric and wildlife-inclusive approach. It is crucial to adhere to the principle that while human justice is essential, it should not overshadow the responsibility to decolonize nature from human supremacism. Freeing up space for wildlife, if executed appropriately, will not necessarily exclude interactions between humans and other-than-humans everywhere. While a complete division of space may be necessary in some areas, it risks further alienating us from the multispecies community. Thus, we must confront the challenge of addressing our fears, lack of knowledge and superstitions regarding large predators in order to share spaces with wisdom.

Large carnivores occupy a significant place in our culture and psyche, embodying qualities like wilderness and strength; yet they also stir primal fears. These animals, with their evolutionary adaptations of sharp teeth and claws, are often seen as the man-eating monsters of our darkest nightmares. The key challenge is how modern Western societies, used to a semblance of safety, can coexist with these ancient rivals. The future of our interactions with these impressive creatures hinges on this delicate balance. In many parts of Western Europe, the idea of sharing space with large predators has been largely forgotten. In areas like Britain and Ireland, the reintroduction of wolves is almost taboo, driven more by deep-rooted fears than by realistic risk assessment or economic concerns.

The *Life Ursus* project in Trentino, Italy, is a poignant example of the difficulties of coexistence. This initiative successfully revived the local bear population from near extinction. However, the public's initial enthusiasm turned into widespread 'bearanoia' – particularly after a tragic incident where a runner was fatally attacked by a bear, marking a significant moment in the complex and often contentious human–large carnivore relationship. This incident intensified the debate on coexistence, demonstrating the challenges and fears surrounding the reintroduction and management of large carnivores in human-dominated landscapes. For this particular bear – likely acting to protect her cubs – the unjustifiable outcome was a life in captivity as an alternative to an equally nonsensical death penalty.

While lack of knowledge about animals' needs and ethology contributes to incidents such as the one mentioned, it is also essential to acknowledge our ontological vulnerability, as animals among other animals. We must move away from irrational notions of seeking 'vengeance' every time someone is hurt in a human–wildlife conflict. Like philosopher Val Plumwood (2012), we must learn to forgive, accept and even advocate for the lives of non-humans that threaten us, especially when we step out of urban contexts.

Understanding society's ambivalent attitude towards large carnivores necessitates a collective introspection to fathom the deep-seated origins of our emotions, both fearful and admiring, towards these magnificent beings. Some emphasise their cultural origins, and point to the fact that our narrative traditions, particularly those influenced by monotheism, have played a significant role in perpetuating negative stereotypes of various carnivorous species, with the wolf serving as a prominent example (Rao, 2018). It is undeniable that the shift from paganism to monotheism in Europe brought about substantial changes in how Europeans perceived the natural world (Brunner, 2009; Pastoureau, 2011).

It is worth noting that alongside Christianity, the Roman Empire, with its Colosseum, gladiatorial games and public executions of both enslaved humans and other creatures, has had a profound influence on shaping the Western mind-set of dominion over the natural world. This Romano-Christian attitude, later reinforced by the mechanistic worldview of modernity, contrasts starkly with the perspectives of many Indigenous cultures, where, at least before colonization, reverence and mutual coexistence with powerful carnivores were possible. However, it is crucial to avoid idealization, as even in the Pleistocene humanity contributed to wildlife extinction in multiple regions worldwide, resulting in the shrinkage of the megafauna (Dawson, 2016).

It seems likely that there exists a foundation to our attitudes to large carnivores that predates culture itself. In his book *Hunter and Hunted* (2002), Hans Kruuk argues that the human fascination with, and fear of, carnivorous animals can be traced back to our evolutionary history as both predator *and* prey. As Hart (2005) notes, *Homo sapiens* did not begin as a dominant species capable of taming the environment and driving large animals to extinction.

This perception of humans as ‘killer apes’ emerges from masculinist and anthropocentric illusions, rather than aligning with the reality of our evolutionary history. Our tendency to harm wild animals may not stem from an innate desire for violence and destruction; rather, it is more likely that this widespread behaviour arises from our inherent *vulnerability* – as a species that spent a considerable time on the menu of more powerful creatures. This unease, deeply rooted in the history of our species, no doubt contributes to the enduring popularity of the horror movie trope of the unstoppable giant man-eating creature.

We thus find ourselves entangled in an intricate interplay of biology and culture, where ancient emotions, though less relevant in our hyper- technological era, persist in guiding our storytelling and reinforcing these irrational fears. In the midst of the Sixth Mass Extinction, where electric fences, lethal weapons and secure houses offer protection, it is striking how we often harbour more anxiety about relatively harmless animals than we do about car accidents, which pose a much greater threat. It seems that facts sometimes lose their significance when we are faced with the mere idea of being preyed upon, regardless of how remote that possibility may be.

The question then arises: How can we cultivate a culture of coexistence between species if we cannot tolerate the possibility of being preyed upon by another animal in the 21st century? The stark truth is that if we choose not to eradicate all bears and wolves from Europe, there may come a day when a human becomes the subject of a predatory attack. While animal experts often reassure the public that ‘normal’ large carnivores would not view us as prey, the reality is that ‘normal’ large carnivores are undoubtedly capable of preying on humans. Our belief that we ought to exist outside the food chain is rooted in the arrogance of human exceptionalism.

The famous pun of Ludwig Feuerbach (1960) has it that “*Der Mensch ist, was er ißt*” (“we are what we eat”) – but I would add that *we are what eats us*. That is, our identity as a species has been profoundly shaped by the presence of formidable predators who coexisted with us for extended periods. Recognizing this fact can inspire us to seek new narratives that promote a different kind of coexistence between species. Coexistence is not a predetermined outcome; it demands ongoing reflection and comprehension.

In a genuinely ecocentric society, encounters with wildlife on a flourishing planet are inevitable, as the aim is to have thriving and abundant populations of wild animals. Embracing these encounters, acknowledging our role within the circle of life, capable of both inflicting and enduring harm, becomes not just an ethical imperative but a spiritual necessity.

At times, we grapple with a profound philosophical and existential dilemma due to our deeply engrained human exceptionalism. We often disregard the idea that we can be not only subjects but also a source of sustenance and energy for other living creatures. This awakening is exemplified by the experiences of individuals like Plumwood (2012), who survived three crocodile attacks during a canoe trip in Kakadu National Park in northern Australia, and Nastassja Martin (2021), who endured a harrowing bear attack in the Kamchatka mountains on the borders of Siberia. Through their philosophical pursuits, these women have challenged the established assumptions of Western anthropocentrism, which place humans beyond the food chain and inherently untouchable.

To achieve a state of coexistence and solidarity with other-than-humans – with large carnivores in particular – it is essential to recognize in a constructive, non-vindictive manner our own fragility and vulnerability as animals among animals, terrestrial beings among terrestrial beings. This acknowledgment is crucial for dismantling the species barrier we have erected, allowing us to remember that we are an integral part of nature – and therefore able to be consumed by it. The COVID-19 pandemic should serve as a stark reminder of our inescapable interconnectedness – that there is no way for *Homo sapiens* to avoid participation in the intricate web of life, whether through encounters with tigers or with viruses. This underscores our inescapable interconnectedness, which we can choose either to embrace, or disregard to our detriment.

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