

Bright Lights, Big Predators



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IT was tea break one afternoon this past May, in a business park in Mumbai, one of the world's most crowded cities. The neighborhood was chockablock with new 35-story skyscrapers adorned with Greek temples on top. On the seventh-floor deck of one building, 20-something techies took turns playing foosball and studying the wooded hillside in back through a brass ship captain's spyglass.

They were looking at a leopard, also on tea break, up a favorite tree where it goes to loaf many afternoons around 4:30. That is, it was a wild leopard living unfenced and apparently well fed in the middle of the city, on a dwindling forest patch roughly the size of Central Park between 59th and 71st Streets. When I hiked the hillside the next day, I found a massive slum just on the other side, heavy construction equipment nibbling at the far end, and a developer's private helipad up top. And yet the leopard seemed to have mastered the art of avoiding people, going out by night to pick off dogs, cats, chickens, pigs, rats and other camp followers of human civilization.

Welcome to the future of urban living. Predators are turning up in cities everywhere, and living among us mostly without incident. Big, scary predators, at that. Wolves now live next door to Rome's main airport, and around Hadrian's Villa, just outside the city. A mountain lion roams the Hollywood Hills and has his own Facebook page. Coyotes have turned all of Chicago into their territory. Great white sharks, attracted by booming seal populations, cruise Cape Cod beaches with renewed frequency. And in a kind of urban predator twofer, a photographer in Vero Beach, Fla., recently snapped a bobcat grabbing a shark out of the surf.

Predators are living among people partly because they have fewer alternatives. The land area consumed by cities and suburbs has increased substantially over the past century and the rate of expansion is accelerating. Worldwide, urban acreage will triple in the first three decades of this century, consuming an additional 500,000 or so square miles of land, much of it in areas that are now critical wildlife habitat in Africa, China and India. That leopard on a hilltop in Mumbai didn't move into the city. The city rose up and engulfed its world.

Many species are also getting used to the idea that humans do not necessarily pose a threat. It helps that we no longer automatically shoot predators on sight, or put a bounty on their heads. Prey species like elk and deer have in many cases also learned to prefer cities and suburbs because the relatively open habitat provides a margin of safety from predators. Predators naturally follow. During moose calving season, for instance, grizzly bears frequent the backyards of Anchorage.

Are humans equally capable of adapting? Stan Gehrt, an Ohio State University biologist who studies Chicago's population of about 4,000 coyotes, says complaints have tapered off as city residents have become accustomed to their new neighbors. The coyotes don't bite or threaten people, though they can be aggressive toward dogs. (When there is a human on the other end of the leash, this can be alarming, he acknowledged. But dogs in Cook County, which includes Chicago, bite about 3,000 people every year.)

The situation in Mumbai is more complicated. The city's 21 million people have

encircled and encroached on a national park, where about 35 free-roaming leopards live. Mumbai's leopards can of course kill people and have done so a half-dozen times since 2011. But one man who survived an attack at a village inside the park said his family had no plans to move out to the grim little high-rise flats the city offers as an alternative. It would mean too many bills and too little space: "Where will the chickens go?" Instead, people adapt, he said. "In the night the leopard is the king. He can go anywhere."

The city at large has so far also held to the belief that the leopards should continue living where they always have. In the past when people spotted a leopard in the neighborhood, a wildlife biologist told me, they called park officials demanding its removal. But researchers there have demonstrated that removing and relocating leopards simply leads to more attacks, as the confused animals try to find their way in new territory, and as other leopards with less experience at negotiating human-dominated habitat take over their old territory. Now people phone demanding a workshop on how to coexist safely with leopards. Last month, the park issued a pamphlet of camera trap photos and names for all 35 leopards. (Your new neighbor is named "Mastikhor." It means "mischievous.")

If you are thinking, "Wait, that's just nuts," think again about the nature of risk. We have learned to protect and restore rivers in our cities, says Adrian Treves at the University of Wisconsin, even though floods sometimes destroy homes and drown people. We cherish trees on urban streets and in parks even though branches sometimes fall on our heads. For that matter, we let cars dominate city streets, though they kill more than 4,700 pedestrians in the United States every year (and many times more in India).

Rivers, forests and cars all justify themselves by being useful one way or another to humanity. What good are predators? Clearly, a lot of people struggle with this question, particularly certain philosophical sorts who preach the genuinely nutty idea that we should eradicate predators because they are cruel. But scientific research has repeatedly demonstrated that losing predators leads to a cascade of unintended (and often cruel) effects. Unchecked by predation,

herbivores graze the habitat to bare dirt. The water table drops. Species vanish. Ecosystems collapse. Entirely apart from their ecological usefulness, we should value predators for their stealth, their skill, their speed. A world of sheep might sound like someone's idea of heaven. But it would be a deadly dull place to live.

Couldn't we at least keep the excitement out of our cities? That would require preserving large areas of habitat, and habitat corridors, in the countryside, and nobody appears to be willing to pick up that tab.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund, paid for from oil industry royalties, has served for 50 years as the nation's single most effective tool for habitat protection. But Congress allowed it to expire for the past two months, then patted itself on the back for reauthorizing the fund on Friday — at half the budget Congress allowed in 1965. Make that seven percent of the original budget, adjusting for inflation. We seem to be incapable of leaving existing protected areas intact, especially as the human population quadruples from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 11 billion by the end of this century. Instead of celebrating the protected areas where the world's last major tiger populations survive, for instance, India (population 1.2 billion) now seems intent on running highways through them.

So we should hardly be surprised that predators and people wind up living side by side in cities. Cities have always been the salvation of the homeless, the unwanted, the wretched and the despised. The difference now is that these refugees come to us not just on two legs, but on four.