



DEDICATED TO THE WORLD'S CUSTODIANS OF WILD SPACES & WILDLIFE



Frontlines Dispatches From Around The World

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North & South America



There are nearly 3 billion fewer birds in North America since 1970, says a [report](#) in the journal *Science*. More than 90% of this loss—nearly one in four birds—affects 12 bird families, including songbirds like sparrows and warblers. The report also details widespread population declines among hundreds of other species, including those once considered abundant. This signals a long-developing but overlooked biodiversity crisis across North America: Human impacts contribute to extinctions, but little research focuses on declines in abundance within still-common species, with their significant ecological, evolutionary and economic impacts. However, some species, including raptors and waterfowl, showed population gains—probably due to focused conservation efforts and endangered-species laws.

The most widely used insecticides appear to be partly responsible for the dramatic decline not only in bees but also in songbird populations. A University of Saskatchewan [study](#) published in *Science* on Sept. 13 examined the effects of a neonicotinoid pesticide on wild birds. Neonicotinoids are often applied as a seed coating or as a spray on most major crops worldwide.

Florida's endangered panthers appear to suffer nerve disorders, according to a [story](#) in *The New York Times*. The accompanying trail-camera videos, which show several cats staggering horrifically, have gone viral and prompted Gil McRae, director of Florida's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, to say that "While the number of animals exhibiting these symptoms is relatively few, we are increasing monitoring efforts to determine the full scope of the issue."

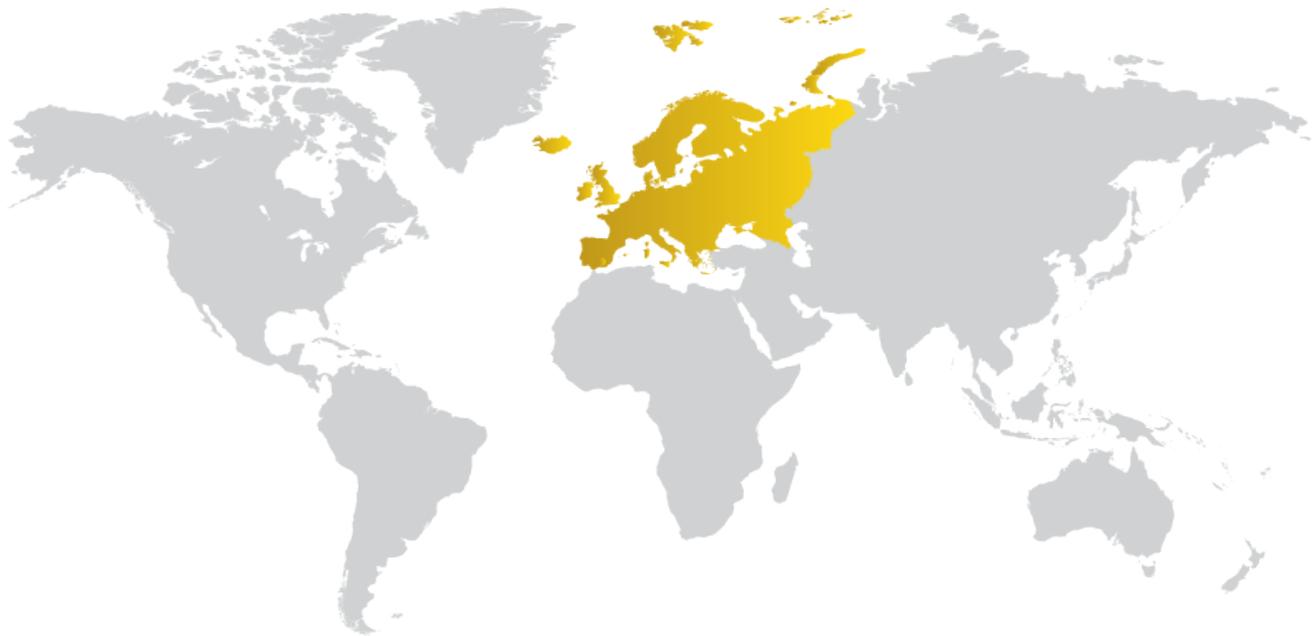
Unintended consequences of human intervention, Chapt. MMVXI: When the Texas Medical Center, in Houston, strung nets in its oak trees to deter grackles, pigeons and other "unwanted" birds, the population of stinging caterpillars increased by 7,300%. According to a Sept. 6 [report](#), Rice University ecologists found that "Chasing away birds that eat insects has created a haven for a flourishing population of *Megalopyge opercularis*, commonly referred to as asp." The caterpillars' venomous bristles cause severe pain in humans; TMC, with 10 million visitors per years, is the world's largest medical center.

North American winters are becoming shorter and warmer, per a [report](#) in *Ecological Applications* Journal. Researchers at the University of New Hampshire examined 100 years of weather data and "found a significant decline in 'frost days,' when minimum temperatures dip below freezing, and 'ice days,' when maximum temperatures never rise above freezing." The implications for ecosystems, wildlife, water supplies, the economy, tourism and human health are potentially severe.

["Solve the biodiversity crisis with funding"](#) is the title of a letter signed by more than 1,600 scientists last month in the journal *Science*. The letter calls on the US Congress to fund conservation programs and highlights threats to biodiversity left unaddressed by decades of severe underfunding of successful conservation laws like the Endangered Species Act. The recent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Global Assessment (IPBES) is the most comprehensive report on biodiversity to date and calculates that around 1 million species are threatened with extinction.

“Conservation is not republican or democrat, blue or red, it’s just the right thing to do for the greater good,” said Tim Brady, President of the Boone and Crockett Club. He applauded representatives from both parties for standing together on full and permanent funding of LWCF, the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The LWCF was enacted by Congress in 1964 to fund conservation and recreational priorities through revenues from oil and gas leases. Since then, the US Treasury has collected \$40.9 billion, but appropriations have totaled only \$18.9 billion; the LWCF is supposed to receive \$900 million annually. “This bill makes this amount mandatory to protect and conserve our national parks, public lands, and our nation’s \$887 billion outdoor recreation economy,” Brady [explained](#).

Europe



The Great British Shooting Show will not take place in Liverpool next year after a spat about hunting. On October 9, the *Liverpool Echo* [reported](#) that “Campaigners had suggested that the event would involve a company advertising ‘trophy hunting’—where people pay to shoot and kill rare animals for fun.” Mayor Joe Anderson and the City Council will debate a declaration of “complete opposition to any form of hunting live animals with hounds or shooting live game, in

the UK or overseas. We note that this is barbaric in all cases, and in many cases also threatens species that are already precarious.” British Association of Shooting and Conservation spokesman Garry Doolan replied that, “Joe Anderson and some members of the council appear to have mixed up trophy hunting in Africa with shooting pheasants . . .” and added, “To state that shooting game in the UK is ‘barbaric in all cases and threatens species that are already precarious’ is a woeful misrepresentation of the reality of ethical, sustainable shooting.” Doolan appears to have missed an opportunity to defend managed trophy hunting for its benefits to conservation.

The European Court of Justice has confirmed that hunting as a “population management tool for strictly protected species is compatible with EU law.” The [case](#) involved Finland’s application for licensed hunting of wolves “to reduce poaching, prevent harm to dogs and improve the general feeling of security of people living near the areas occupied by wolves.” The Finnish court now must approve the hunt also. The outcome may set precedent for the management of other strictly protected species across the EU, especially other large carnivores such as bear and lynx.

The extinction of Iceland’s walrus was “one of the earliest examples of commercially driven exploitation of maritime resources,” [says](#) an international team from Iceland, Denmark and the Netherlands. Scientists used ancient DNA analyses and C14-dating to demonstrate that a unique population of Icelandic walrus disappeared shortly after Norse settlement of the island some 1,100 years ago.

Africa



Texas black-and-tan hounds are now running down poachers in South Africa, according to a September 11 [story](#) on *National Geographic's* website. Unlike dogs that patrol with human handlers, these animals—originally bred to track escaped convicts—work in free-running packs that chase and tree suspects until rangers arrive. Since May 2018, the “hounds have helped law enforcement teams in the greater Kruger region catch an unprecedented 145 poachers and confiscate 53 guns, boosting the overall rate of successful arrests [by a factor of 10] and providing a new strategy to fight poaching in Africa.”

Bones from some 38 lions were seized at Johannesburg Int. Airport in early October and three people were arrested in connection with the shipment, which was destined for Malaysia. The BBC News [reported](#) that 12 packages, wrapped in tinfoil and mislabeled, contained 342 kilograms (750 lbs) of lion bones, which are prized in Asia for their supposed medicinal benefits and to make jewelry.

Northern white rhino embryos have been created in vitro. This “assisted reproduction” by scientists in Italy—working with others in Kenya, Germany and the Czech Republic—“may be a pivotal turning point” for the species, which was down to just two females in 2018. Their eggs were fertilized with frozen sperm from deceased males. The embryos, now stored in liquid nitrogen, will be transferred into a surrogate mother in the near future. The AAAS, American Association for the Advancement of Science, released the [news](#) last month.

Asia



A deer considered extinct in Thailand may not be after all. The wild population of Schomburgk’s deer (*Rucerverus schomburgki*) was thought to have died out in 1932, and the last known animal died in captivity in 1938. However, on August 30 Northwestern University [reported](#) that a pair of antlers with traces of fresh blood on them, found in 1991 and recently re-examined, indicate that the species “survived for at least an additional half century and might still be around today.”

Five Persian fallow deer (*Dama mesopotamica*) were [released](#) into the hills of Jerusalem early this year. The Judean Mountain site is one of Israel's four wildlife reintroduction areas; the fallow deer population there is estimated at 50 mature individuals.

The helmeted hornbill (*Rhinoplax Vigil*), a large and spectacular bird found only in intact tropical forests of Southeast Asia, is being driven into extinction by a sharp rise in poaching and illegal trade in bill ivory and tailfeathers. A *Chang Rai Times* [story](#) reports that poachers kill the female birds and catch the chicks, which are in great demand in China.

Mammoths lived as recently as 4,000 years ago. But then—so a research team from Finland, Russia and Germany [believes](#)—“a combination of isolated habitat and extreme weather events, and even the spread of prehistoric man, may have sealed the ancient giants' fate.” During the last ice age, approximately 100,000 to 15,000 years ago, mammoths were widespread from Spain to Alaska. Due to the global warming that began 15,000 years ago, their habitat shrank dramatically. Mammoths on Wrangel Island, in the Chukchi Sea 350 miles west of Alaska, were cut off from the mainland by rising sea levels; that population survived into the Bronze Age.

Pacific



In Australia, human activity has destroyed more than 7.7 million hectares (19 million acres) of threatened species habitat between 2000 and 2017, revealing critical failures of federal laws. A University of Queensland-led [study](#) found that less than 7% of this destruction was referred to government for scrutiny under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999. The authors studied the distribution of 1,638 species and ecological communities and quantified the loss of potential habitat and communities since the EPBC Act came into force.

Wild-pig hunt boosts morale, feeds crocodiles. In Dingo, in Central Queensland, an inaugural Hogs N Dogs hunting competition brought in enough wild-boar meat to feed 1,000 farmed baby crocodiles for more than three months. According to a [story](#) on Australia's ABC news, the two-day event also "raised spirits in this drought-affected town." Prizes were awarded for the heaviest boar, heaviest sow and most colorful pig. An estimated 24 million pigs in Australia cause more than \$100 million in damage to crops, infrastructure and the environment annually.

World



At least one in five vertebrate species on Earth are bought and sold on the wildlife market, according to a new [study](#). Researchers evaluated the wildlife trade across 31,745 bird, mammal, amphibian and reptile species and found that 5,579, or roughly 18%, are being traded globally—40% to 60% more than previously estimated. The researchers also developed a model to predict which species would likely be traded in the future, a tool that could help wildlife managers become more proactive. The trade in wildlife as pets or for products such as horns, ivory, medicines or meat is one of the most severe threats to plants and animals.

To disrupt the global wildlife trade, estimated to be worth \$23 billion annually, is the goal of an interdisciplinary [task force](#) of conservation, computer-science and business experts from Michigan State University, the University of Southern California, University of Alabama, Colorado State University and Harvard University. “Wildlife trafficking is less understood than drug, small arms or human trafficking,” said a project leader, “but the illicit networks often share a number of the same supply chain characteristics. If we can help develop tools to start

interfering with wildlife trafficking, we may be able to influence other transnational crimes, as well as more effectively hinder global crime networks and corrupt non-state actors.”

Another reason to eat wild game: It reduces the need for mining phosphate. Phosphorous, a nutrient essential to growing food, occurs naturally; long ago, crops were eaten locally by humans and livestock, whose manure fertilized the next round of crops in a closed loop. Today, industrial agriculture requires enormous quantities of fertilizer, including phosphorus, which now has to be mined. This phosphorus (and other substances) is not recycled but largely flushed through runoff into the sea as a pollutant. Engineers at New Jersey’s Stevens Institute of Technology have [determined](#) that phosphate mining could be cut substantially through changes in diet. To produce a pound of beef requires 32 pounds of feed, largely grown with fertilizers; a pound of venison requires no fertilizer.

Global tuna catches have increased by more than 1000% in 60 years, fueled by a massive expansion of industrial fishing. A Canadian-Australian study has compiled the first data set on commercial tuna fishing and finds that the worldwide harvest is “probably not sustainable.” “The continuation of tuna fisheries’ catch, employment numbers and revenue figures at levels similar to the present day depends on the long-term sustainable management of the fisheries and fleets exploiting these stocks and ecosystems, and the cooperation of more than 100 countries engaged in tuna fisheries,” said the lead author of this *Sea Around Us* [initiative](#).

Emmy-winning Israeli film could change what you believe about the hunting industry. The documentary “Trophy” introduces hunters who are convinced that the big-game industry actually protects endangered species. Director Shaul Schwarz explained, in an October 4 [article](#) in *Haaretz*, how he started out by despising animal killers, but walked away with an important lesson: “During my time in Africa, I understood that we need to cause everyone to talk to one another. The environmentalists and hunters need to talk so that there are also wild animals in Africa in the future.”

Scientists are human too and must be “allowed to cry” when witnessing the destruction of the natural world. In a [letter](#) to the journal *Science*, three researchers say it is “dangerously misguided” to assume scientists are dispassionate observers; many experience “strong grief responses” to the current ecological crisis, and there are profound risks to ignoring this trauma. The letter asks that academic institutions allow their scientists to address this grief professionally in order to emerge stronger and better prepared to discover new insights about the natural world.



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