

## RESTORING APPALACHIAN WILDLIFE

**John Davis\***

Cougar, Lynx, Wolverine, Gray and Red Wolves, Elk, Bison, Passenger Pigeon, various freshwater fish and mussel species, and American Chestnut are among the many species that Euro-American colonists have exterminated from much or all of their ranges in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern North America. Short of looking back to the Pleistocene (though that we should do, to see the mammoths and gomphotheres and sloths and 500-pound beavers and lions and other megafauna that might still gloriously roam these lands had early human hunters learned restraint in time), we see that our Appalachian landscapes have been deprived of key species -- particularly, top predators and large herbivores -- that a concerned and informed public would strive to restore.

The reasons for restoration are as many as the creatures we've evicted from their homes, but they may be broadly classed in three realms: ecological, practical, and moral. Lessons from all these realms tell us that we must protect much more land and water and with much greater habitat connectivity if we are to enjoy the fruits of truly sustainable natural and human communities.

Ecology tells us that natural communities start to unravel when predators, pollinators, seed dispersers, excavators (woodpeckers, burrowing rodents), builders (Beaver, Muskrat, birds), or major prey species (including nut-bearing trees) are eliminated. Ecological health depends upon a full range of native species in functional, viable populations.

Practical concerns include unnaturally abundant prey populations, especially deer, now generally lacking their main predators, becoming a menace to gardeners; spread of disease (e.g. Lyme, rabies); proliferation of biting insects (naturally held in check by birds, bats, and amphibians); and diminishment of pollination and other ecosystem services. The loss of music -- bugling Elk, howling wolves, splashing salmon, warbling birds -- is concern that links the practical with the ecological and moral realms.

Morally, the case for inviting back the creatures we've driven away stems from our duty to honor and protect Creation. People of most faiths and ethical frameworks the world over agree in principle, if not in practice, with what we know in our hearts to be true: wild Nature, original Creation, is good and right, and deserving of protection in all its

myriad forms, for its own sake, for our sake, and for the very Creative Force from which this wondrous diversity derives and to which it points.

Bring back the big cats and wolves and bears and buffalo and salmon ... Let's go wild!

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