

Ashes of Eden

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It is a tragedy that humanity's greed is circulating sustenance from the very earth that kept them safe. In particular, poaching wildlife not only violates ethical duties towards Mother Nature but also has very serious implications for the environment. What we don't seem to understand is that we hurt ourselves along with hurting the Earth. Poachers run amok in today's society, ignorant of the social and environmental problems associated with their "hobbies." Thankfully, existing legislation has made important strides to limit the hunter's hindrances. Alas, a substantial gap remains, placing the burden on the people to band together and maintain ecological balance. So, to repair ecosystems, the United States of America should extend wildlife protection laws, protecting animals and humans alike in the process.

In general, poaching refers to the illegal killing and/or trafficking of animals. Hunting and poaching are two different things entirely: you can only hunt a non-endangered animal if you have a license, whereas poaching involves the illegal killing of any type of animal. Whether or not hunting is unethical is a different topic altogether. Animals deserve to be left alone, but hunting is an old tradition, so it'd be difficult to erase it altogether. Additionally, some professions depend on hunting for a livelihood. That said, poaching is completely off the books, as it is an illegal and unregulated form of murder that only satiates the perpetrator's malice. Poaching can be viewed as a byproduct of the increased regulations towards hunting. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen some of the most liberal legislation towards many fields. For hunters, this means giving the right to decide on "proper" situations to hunt to environmental activists who would probably support animal rights. In other words, their hunting capabilities

will ultimately end up being limited because of the law. Of course, disoriented by the decision, some hunters would take to illegally killing animals for their profit.

Over time, the United States has enacted progressively stronger pieces of legislation intended to curb the exploitation of wildlife. At the cusp of the 20th century, the Lacey Act of 1900 was put in place. This is the nation's oldest wildlife protection law, aiming to prohibit the trade of plants, marine life, and wildlife that were illegally taken or sold. This act in itself does a lot to restrict the growing side of hunting at the time. It laid the groundwork for how the US government should treat cases involving illegal trafficking of wildlife. This law was the first real opponent of poaching, a rivalry that would unravel into a series of complications a century later. Next, the Endangered Species Act of 1973 continues the fight against poaching by offering government-insured protection for endangered species. This law made it illegal to hunt certain species without explicit authorization. Although this law is obsolete by today's standards, it helped the country when it was passed, resulting in the safety of some endangered wildlife. Finally, there was the most recent End, Neutralize, and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2016. Being the most modern, the END Wildlife Trafficking Act had the most reach, enhancing the USA's capabilities to deal with poaching internationally. Over the last 100 years, poaching has been identified as a serious issue, and the US government is taking strides to go against it.

All three of the aforementioned acts are significant for wildlife protection, but they each come with some caveats. In general, the result of all three acts was a rise in poaching activities to "rebel." Law enforcement has done more than enough for those sorts of issues, however. More importantly, there are significant drawbacks associated with the acts at a national level. Firstly, take the Lacey Act; for an act from the early 20th century, it is progressive. But with no updates,

that same act today allows for only *reactive* enforcement. That is to say, they target traffickers after the animals have already been sold. This creates an opening for traffickers to forge false documentation, which may end up fooling authorities and resulting in a successful trafficking situation. Next, the Endangered Species Act of 1973 suffers as well; the limited scope of the Act only protects the animals directly listed on the document. This is still a step in the right direction, but to properly combat poaching, the USA needs a leap. Finally, even the recent END Wildlife Trafficking Act comes with stipulations: the international focus can only be performed with cooperation from foreign countries. Some countries with admirable relations with the USA would be willing to provide their help, but others would close their doors and ignore the poaching issue. Taking into account political relations, especially after proxy wars and trade embargos on a global scale, it's safe to assume more nations would refuse than accept the help.

So, what can be done? These acts are severely limited, but they are a strong start. To start with, expanding on these acts may save some endangered species. For example, another act, the Big Cat Public Safety Act, which serves to prohibit private ownership of large cats, could be extended to all exotic wildlife. Expanding the scope of the act would not only help more animals but also stop poaching in those respective areas. Any poachers who disregard this act would be met with more enforcement. As of now, perhaps from a lack of personnel, there has been a lack of manpower enforcing the environmental acts and lawsuits. To combat this discrepancy, each state can mobilize its own Environmental Enforcement Section. Reorganizing personnel structures to that extent would be a challenge, but it is worth it to help our environment. Next, the penalties for wildlife poaching must be substantially enhanced. Stricter sentencing, heavier fines, and mandatory service could all deter future instances of poaching.

Perhaps the quintessential solution is education. Instead of keeping the environmental decay hidden from the masses, governments around the world should take initiative and tell the people what is going on. Several groups and communities would be willing to alleviate some of the stress on the environment as a whole. Specifically, volunteers would love to help out with animals. Investing in advertisements, public awareness initiatives, and PSAs can inform citizens of the environmental and legal consequences, inspiring them to help negate wildlife exploitation. The biggest misconception right now is that destroying wildlife and ecosystems is some sort of abstract threat. In reality, it is everything else. Humanity's fate is intertwined with that of the planet. Healthy ecosystems provide fertile soil, stable climates, and clean air for humanity to indulge. Killing animals vital to that very ecosystem will therefore end up hurting humanity. Before the present, some legislation has attempted to cover this issue—namely, the Lacey Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the END Wildlife Trafficking Act all demonstrate that meaningful action is possible. These acts are unpolished diamonds in the rough, and with some refinement, they may evolve into the gems that save the world.

Until that happens, it falls on the people to stand up and help their environment. For millennia, humanity has been the master of its environment, abusing the animals, manipulating the land, and indulging in its fruits. This lifestyle of greed led to the dire situation we find ourselves in presently: a damaged ozone layer, more endangered species now than ever before, and climate change on the rise. As it turns out, humanity is not some godlike being above nature—humanity will face repercussions from Mother Nature because of the actions they take towards it. Poaching wildlife led to damaged ecosystems, hurting our food supply. Creating factories polluted the air, trapping poisonous gases in our cities. It's easy to forget about the fundamental truth when so much of our lives is lived away from nature, but that same truth will

come back to haunt us. Thus, the time for complacency is over. It can't just be an "option" to save the environment. It must become a priority. The health of the planet is the health of humanity. By safeguarding wildlife, we will take the first step in saving the world.

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