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Wildlife Depletion: Now and Then

The human race has always upheld a certain fascination with the wildlife we find on planet earth. We take pictures of them, tell stories about them and showcase them in menageries and zoos. However, our desire to capture and in some cases tame wildlife must be held in check. Throughout history, multiple examples exist in which human populations have depleted wildlife populations and driven certain species to extinction. Looking at specific examples in ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and even in our current American society, we can discover lessons about wildlife management from the mistakes the human race has made in the past.

1) In both ancient Greek and Roman societies, wildlife was put to use in various ways. While agriculture and domesticated animals were prevalent in Greek and Roman culture, wild animals still caught the attention of these societies. They were revered, honored, but at the same time killed more often than not. In general, wild animals were used for mainly hunting purposes and entertainment.

In ancient Greek and Roman societies, hunting was often viewed as a purer way of life and a way to be closer to nature. It was a sport that was believed to be practiced by the gods themselves. In fact the gods played a large role in hunting practices in these societies. The association of gods with certain animals, such as the association of Athena with owls, meant that certain animals were classified as sacred, and therefore off-limits for hunting. This way of thinking meant that there was a general respect for the lives of many animals and, for a time,

kept hunting practices in place that were less destructive to wildlife populations. Some of these practices included avoiding killing pregnant females, as this was believed to offend goddesses such as Artemis. The practice of letting pregnant females live had the added effect of helping reproduction rates. In addition, gods such as Zeus were often believed to take the form of different animals, which added to their sanctity. Birds were believed to even show the intent of the gods through their movements and flight patterns (Hughes 1994). All of these factors made animals very precious in the eyes of humans and helped their preservation in many cases.

In order to help preserve sacred animals, groves called *hiera temene* were established in order to ensure that places existed in which hunting was not allowed. These *hiera temene* were sacred precincts to the gods and were enforced by law. In these sacred groves, hunters were not allowed to enter with their weapons or dogs and special permission was needed in order to make a sacrifice to the gods. Should hunting be practiced in such groves, divine intervention was expected and it was believed that hunters would be punished by the gods themselves (Hughes 1994). This ensured population growth and protection within these specific areas.

Still, outside of sacred groves hunting remained a great part of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. In certain areas people hunted to feed their own families. In other areas that were more populated with wildlife, wild animals were hunted commercially. In markets citizens could buy wild meats, feathers, ivory, and animal skins set up for trade by professional hunters. Many products from the sea, such as shellfish were also readily available through trade (Hughes 1994). This commercial aspect of hunting played a large role in provided ancient Greek and Roman civilizations with important natural resources, but this was not the only service hunting provided.

While hunting providing food and natural resources, it was also used as military training, especially in places such as Sparta. In fact, hunting was often considered a form of warfare in artwork. The sport of hunting used many of the same skills that were used in warfare, and therefore was extremely comparable in these societies. The capture of wild animals also aided military events directly. Animals such as elephants were captured and used in combat in hopes that more powerful steeds would give a larger advantage (Hughes 1994). While this use of hunting was often used for non-domestic expeditions, hunting was used on a local basis as well.

In addition to its use in military training and food procurement, hunting was also used for agricultural purposes. Certain predatory animals were often killed in order to protect farms and livestock. In fact, certain animals such as wolves, jackals, bears and foxes were extirpated in order to protect agriculture. Even certain birds were killed if they competed for the same vegetation that domesticated animals ate (Hughes 1994). While these and other hunting practices played a role in wildlife depletion in Greek and Roman civilizations, nothing can compare to the amount of animals lost for entertainment purposes.

In Greek and Roman societies, the prevalent fascination with wild animals led to their use in a variety of entertainment areas. In many cases wild animals such as bears were tamed and taught tricks to be exhibited. Cockfights and dogfights were also common in this time period. Often, domesticated animals were goaded to fight each other for human entertainment (Hughes 1994). While these forms of entertainment were prevalent in Greek and Roman society, perhaps the most famous use of animals for entertainment purposed was in arenas.

In Roman arenas, mock hunts were held and the amount blood from the animals was so great that it often stained the arena floors. Arenas were commonly used for the execution of

criminals by wild animals that had been goaded or starved. Rare creatures were also exhibited in these arenas, but even these exotic animals were mutilated at the end of their exhibition. In the late Roman Republic, these killings only increased in number as emperors tried to gain popularity through entertainment. New technologies, such as cages and elevators to bring animals into arenas, made these killings even easier as time went on (Hughes 1994). While these arenas provided the people of this era with much entertainment, it had several consequences.

Through these activities of hunting and entertaining, wildlife populations suffered greatly. Many species declined in population sizes and some even went extinct. Lions for example had been depleted by the 1st century B.C.E. Lynxes, wolves, jackals and bears were limited to the mountains by this time as well. Island fauna such as dwarf elephants were especially impacted by human action. Large wildlife were cleared from the more accessible areas for arena use. These decreasing populations had many affects on ancient Greek and Roman society. The extirpation of mosquito-eating fish led to the presence of more mosquitoes, and therefore more malaria became present. Prices for meats and other animal products also increased as the supply decreased (Hughes 1994). From these consequences, we can identify just how important wild animals were to Greek and Roman societies.

While Greek and Roman civilization revered many exotic animals, they also played a key role in their depletion. Still, because the human population during this time period was much lower than our current population, many species were able to return to their previous numbers. With our current population however, we must be more careful with our wildlife use than the Greeks and the Romans and use their situation as an example in our modern society.

2) In our current society we are constantly discovering new species throughout the globe. However, we are also depleting many of our wildlife resources at the same time. If we do not keep ourselves in check, we are likely to drive many species to extinction through hunting and habitat destruction. Still, as the conservation movement increases, we have been able to revitalize many species of animals. One such species, the American Bison, followed a pattern very similar to those wild animals in Greek and Roman civilizations.

The American Bison is one of the few large animals to survive the Pleistocene Overkill (Moyle and Orland 2004). Due to this, this species is one of the few remaining evolutionary links to the Pleistocene era, which lasted from 1.8 million years ago to 1,550 years ago. Since that time, this species has been quite prevalent in the United States, and only two centuries ago, thirty-sixty million of these animals roamed the North American continent (“Bison” 2011). However through a combination of Native American hunting practices and the movement of new settlers into the western parts of the United States, the population was reduced nearly to extinction.

Before settlers came to dominate bison hunting practices, Native Americans hunted them for food and other products, just as the Greeks and Romans hunted their local wildlife. In Native American folk tales, it was foretold that bison would spring forever and were an endless resource (Brink 2008). Due to this belief, they did not have many hunting management practices in place, other than being sure to use every part of the bison they killed so as not to waste what the animal was providing them with. The bison could be used for everything from clothes, to tepee covers. While much hunting was done on foot for a while, Native Americans learned how to use horses in hunting practices by the 1800’s, which gave them an even greater

ability to hunt bison (“American Buffalo: Spirit” 2011). However, their great dependence on bison turned out to be their downfall after settlers began to arrive in the western United States.

As settlers arrived to the western region of the United States, they came across two obstacles: the Native Americans who wanted to keep their land, and the bison that competed for space and land with domesticated animals (Brink 2008). The United States government found a solution to take care of both of these issues at the same time by encouraging bison hunts (“American Buffalo: Spirit” 2011). This would not only reduce bison populations, but it would also deprive Native Americans of food resources and make them more willing to give up their land. From this point forward, these settlers would continue to have an impact on the depletion of bison in the United States.

Settlers brought with them many problems including new diseases, domesticated animals, and most importantly for the bison, guns. In the early 1800’s guns began to be used in bison hunts and made killing the bison much easier and more efficient (“Our Magnificent” 2010). In fact, guns were so effective that train companies would offer tourists a chance to shoot bison from the windows of the train without stopping to pick up the carcasses of the animals. As in the Roman arenas, these massive killings served for entertainment purposes only. There were even bison killing contests held, in which hundreds of bison were killed with each contest (“American Buffalo: Spirit” 2011). The bison in this region were killed in such high numbers that by 1820, they were extinct anywhere east of Mississippi (“Our Magnificent” 2010). By 1880, Native Americans could not find enough bison to sustain themselves and many were forced to move to trading posts and live semi-sedentary lifestyles (Moyle and Orland 2004). By 1906 only 1,000 bison remained in captivity and in the wild (“Bison” 2011). However hunting was not the only factor leading to the depletion of bison.

Aside from mass hunting raids, bison hunting was also increased due to industrial interests. In fact, in 1830 bison hunting became a chief industry of the plains. Bison hides were found to be attractive robes and were used for belts for machinery. Between 1871 and 1875, 1.5 million skins were shipped east from Kansas for these purposes (“Our Magnificent” 2010). This only increased the massive slaughter of these animals. If this hunting had continued, the bison would have followed the path of several species in Greek and Roman civilization and been driven to extinction. However over time Americans became more and more concerned with the survival of the bison species, and it is through this concern that we have revitalized the species.

Through conservation efforts, the American Bison are no longer considered threatened (“American Buffalo” 1998). While herds are not as large as they used to be, 200,000 bison now roam freely (Freedman and Duncan 2011). Unlike in Greek and Roman societies, in which the lower human population and civilization declinations led to the restoration of wildlife populations, governmental efforts have been key in the bison revitalization efforts. In 1894, Congress enacted a law stating that bison hunting in Yellowstone would be illegal. In 1992 the Interior Department of the Environmental Protection Agency began the Great Plains Partnership, which allows bison to roam national grasslands on all sides to the United States borders (Matthews 1992). There are also plans in place to buy local ranches to increase public land that can be used to restore bison populations. It is estimated that given enough space, the bison will double in population size will double every four to five years (Samuels 2011). These efforts have all helped bison come back from the brink of extinction and have returned them to their former glory.

While there still exist several issues involving bison renewal, including the simultaneous renewal of timber wolf populations that eat bison, the species is still growing sufficiently (Matthews 1992). Still, we must continue to be cautious about are habitat destruction practices in order to ensure that this iconic species remains in good size. As in Greek and Roman civilizations, we have driven this species to the brink of extinction for hunting, economic, and entertainment purposes. It is important that we realize that we have the power to completely deplete species like the bison, and with that knowledge, keep our consumption in check.

Conclusion

In Greek and Roman civilizations and even in our American society it is clear how human actions can have a large impact on the survival of wildlife. We value wildlife for aesthetic reasons and for natural resources, however we must keep ourselves in check in order to ensure that we do not drive the species we value to extinction. In both ancient and modern times we have taken wildlife for granted, assuming it would always be a renewable resources. However, we must keep in mind the lessons that can be seen in the history of the Greeks and Romans and the bison if we wish to keep our wildlife from facing extinction.