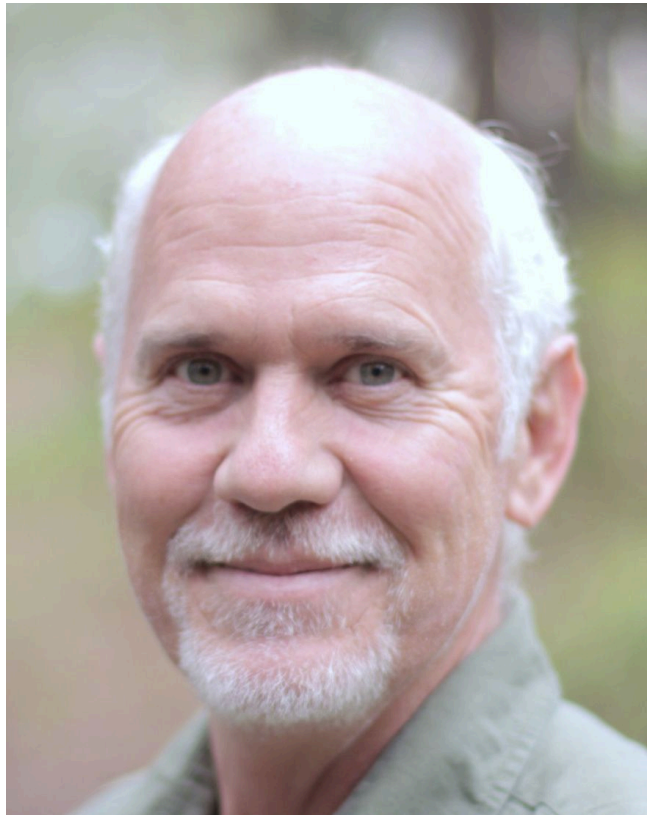

In My View: Can nature survive humans?

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It seems like every week I read a story about an animal species that is threatened or endangered. In most cases humans are the cause. Either through negligence or intentional harm, humans have created an imbalance of our natural ecosystems. Habitats have been altered and the environment is often poisoned by human activities.

Species will try to adapt to the changing environment, sometimes at the expense of other species. It is survival of the fittest in the wild kingdom. Nature can be harsh, but humans are the worst. There are limitations to how quickly a species can evolve to survive in a changing world. Sometimes humans must help correct the damage.

Today, I will share stories of seals, condors, and eagles which all have their own unique challenges to survive.

Baby Seal Pups

I started thinking about the effects of humans on changing habitats, when I read a story in the Times Standard (12/20/23) about baby seals that have been found on the beach with their heads torn off. No one knew what was causing this until a Ph.D. student got video of a coyote dragging a harbor seal pup and beheading it.

They speculate that this might be a return to a habit that existed when large predators from coyotes to grizzly bears freely roamed the California Coast before they were hunted by ranchers to protect their livestock. With fewer predators, seals and sea lions got more comfortable having pups on the beaches rather than on offshore rocks and sandbars.

In the early 20th century, state funded bounty hunters decimated harbor seal populations to protect fishermen from competition. The seal population bounced back with the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972. Over time the species will adapt to this new threat. The seals that raise pups offshore will have a higher rate of survival.

There may be consequences for the coyotes too. Marine mammals sit high on the food chain, so their tissues collect high concentrations of mercury which is emitted from coal fired power plants and deposited in the ocean. Humans have badly disrupted this ecosystem through willful extermination and negligent poisoning.

El Condor Pasa

Condors are facing similar impediments to their recovery as a species. The Yurok Tribe has initiated a program of breeding captive condors and reintroducing them into the Klamath basin, to repair past devastation of the species caused by errant humans. Even today, condors still face direct and indirect threats by people.

In 1967, California condors were listed as endangered. In the 1980's, California condor numbers reached a low of only 23 individuals worldwide. Intensive recovery and reintroduction efforts over the past three decades have brought the California condor population up to approximately 400 individuals.

In 2022 a condor was shot and killed near Hollister, California. This callous disregard for life is beyond my ken. California condors are protected by the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Taking, shooting, injuring, or killing a condor are violations that can result in jail time and fines up to \$250,000.

Get The Lead Out

Condors are also suffering from chronic lead poisoning. According to a story in the Times Standard (10/27/23), "One of the condors reintroduced to the wild as part of a Yurok Tribe program required medical care after it ate part of a poached elk that had been shot with lead ammunition."

"Lead poisoning from ingestion of lead ammunition is the single largest threat to free-flying condors. Portions of the gut piles frequently contain high quantities of lead if lead bullets are used. A very small piece of lead is enough to make a scavenging animal ill and can even kill a condor or an eagle."

“In 2019, California banned lead bullets in hunting, but they are still used. Poachers who harvest game to feed their families should consider that lead is also toxic to humans. It is especially detrimental to developing children and through pregnant and nursing mothers to their babies and unborn fetuses.”

Eagles Come Back

I saw a bald eagle fly over my house last week and I wondered how rare that is. How many bald eagles are there in California? According to an article published by Wildlife Informer (2/7/21), “Bald eagles are looked at as America’s greatest conservation success story.”

“At the founding of our country, there were around 100,000 in the lower 48 states, but habitat loss, hunting, and DDT toxicity decimated the bald eagle population down to 800 birds by the 1950’s and 60’s. Through concentrated conservation efforts and a ban on DDT, the eagles have made a comeback.”

“The last large-scale studies on American Bald Eagle populations were done in 2007. At that time there were an estimated 30,000 birds in Alaska, and an additional 9,700 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states. There are over 1000 bald eagles in California with the largest concentration of wintering eagles in the Klamath Basin.”

Time to Clean Up

It is concerning that the common thread through all three stories is the impact of man-made toxins on the decline of the health of these species. Banning DDT was a major factor in the recovery of the American Bald Eagle. Reducing mercury emissions and lead contamination should be equally effective actions that our society can take to maintain a healthier environment.

Humans are the ultimate apex predator. We eat the same mercury laden fish that the seals eat and this detrimental chemical is also concentrated in our bodies.

Reducing the use of lead bullets will be good for the condors, but also will reduce human exposure from eating game with lead fragments.

We are not separate from the environment. We are a part of it, and it is a part of us. It’s past time that we clean up our act and stop polluting our environment. This will be good for seals, condors, eagles, and us.

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