HOW MEAT HARMS WILDLIFE

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A THREAT TO PLANTS AND ANIMALS

How we produce food affects wildlife and our environment. The collateral damage of deforestation, drought, pollution and greenhouse gases that come from toxic agricultural practices are devastating for endangered and threatened wild plants and animals. The meat and dairy industries are responsible for far more of these harms than any other agricultural sector. In addition to causing damage from feed-crop production and grazing, meat producers directly target many wild animals.

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DIRECT KILLING AND SPECIES ENDANGERMENT

From grasshoppers and prairie dogs to bison and wolves, native species are routinely killed in large numbers to protect meat-production profits. Grass-eating species like elk, deer and pronghorns have been killed en masse to reserve more feed for cattle. Important habitat-creating animals such as beavers and prairie dogs have been decimated because they disrupt the homogenous landscapes livestock managers want.

All too often the interests of the livestock industry get precedence over wild animals in their natural habitats. Wildlife Services, a program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, shoots, traps and poisons millions of wild animals every year — including wolves, foxes and bears in national forests — to make more room for cows and other farmed animals. This federal killing program uses taxpayer dollars to kill native wildlife, even on public lands, with minimal oversight or public transparency. It also often lets meat producers kill wildlife directly.

As a result, critical and beloved species risk extinction. "Predator control" programs like Wildlife Services, designed to protect the meat industry, have driven keystone predators like California grizzly bears and Mexican gray wolves extinct in their ecosystems. Flying in the face of modern conservation science, the meat industry remains the leading opponent to otherwise popular efforts to recover species like the Mexican gray wolf in Arizona and New Mexico.

Mexican Gray Wolves
Mexican gray wolves are one of the most endangered mammals in North America. Between 1915 and 1972, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service poisoned and trapped almost every single wild Mexican gray wolf. Seven surviving wolves were captured and bred to stave off extinction, leading to reintroduction in Arizona and New Mexico beginning in 1998. Since then the livestock industry has repeatedly urged the government to trap or kill the remaining wild Mexican wolves.

In January 2015, with only about 110 wolves left in the wild Southwest, the Mexican gray wolf was confirmed as an endangered subspecies of gray wolf under the Endangered Species Act. Despite this federal protection, the Fish and Wildlife Service has continued to kill Mexican gray wolves and to give livestock owners permits to kill them — even wolves not accused of preying on livestock.

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CLIMATE CHANGE

Animal agriculture is responsible for at least 16.5% of human-induced global greenhouse gas emissions. In the United States, cattle emit about 5.5 million metric tons of methane — a greenhouse gas 86 times more potent than carbon dioxide (over a 20 year period) — accounting for 36% of the country's human-induced methane emissions. Adding to the emissions from farmed animals' feeding, digestion and transportation, the amount of land used for feed crops and grazing multiplies the carbon hoofprint of meat consumption. Scientists predict that more than one-third of the Earth's animal and plant species will be extinct by 2050 if current greenhouse gas emissions trajectories continue. That would be a catastrophic loss with irreversible consequences for biodiversity, ecosystems and human societies around the world.

Meat production is a major contributor to the rising temperatures that are further altering or eliminating habitat, reducing food sources, and causing both drought and rising sea levels — a major threat to U.S species. A groundbreaking Center report found that, of the nation's 1,383 federally protected species, 233 threatened and endangered animals and plants in 23 coastal states are at risk from sea-level rise. This means that rising seas threaten 17% of protected U.S. species.

And of course the problem isn't confined to the United States. Due to sea-level rise, six out of the world's seven sea turtle species are on the endangered species list, including the loggerhead sea turtle, and more than a million other species globally risk extinction due to climate change.

Loggerhead Sea Turtle
The loggerhead sea turtle is truly a world traveler: Every year females migrate 7,500 miles from nesting beaches in Japan to feeding grounds in Mexico. Baby loggerheads make their own perilous journey: As soon as they hatch from their eggs and emerge from the sand, they must crawl across the beach to reach the ocean without getting caught by raccoons, birds, crabs or other predators.

But loggerhead populations across the world are in decline. These beautiful turtles are threatened on multiple fronts, from development on their nesting grounds to commercial fishing to rising sea levels caused by climate change. If humans don't reduce greenhouse gas pollution soon, sea levels will rise another 3 or 4 feet on average — 6.5 feet or higher in some places — within this century.

Due to high temperatures, a population of loggerhead sea turtles in Florida is already nearly 90% female, and scientists predict that if temperatures rise by just 1 more degree Celsius, the population may soon have no males at all. Climate change and ocean acidification also threaten sea turtles' feeding habitats.

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HABITAT LOSS

Humans use approximately 50% of total habitable **land** for **agriculture**– 77% of which is used to produce meat and dairy. In the United States, 80% of agricultural land is used for farmed animals and feed crops. That's almost half the land mass of the lower 48 states dedicated to feeding the nation's taste for beef, chicken and pork. More than half of the grain grown in the country goes toward feeding farmed animals, and nearly half the water used goes toward meat production.

Wildlife face devastating habitat loss, a major factor in many endangered species' decline. Studies have shown that animal agriculture is the leading threat to global biodiversity. Meanwhile grazing cattle and sheep destroy vegetation, trample land, damage soils, contaminate waterways with fecal waste, and disrupt natural ecosystem processes. The loss of wild habitat has terrible consequences for ecosystems that are obvious when we examine the precipitous decline of a once-common species like the American bison.

American Bison
Bison once roamed North America by the millions but were driven to the brink of extinction by wholesale slaughter and habitat destruction in the 19th century. The North American habitat for wild bison is now less than 1% of their historic range. Almost all of bison's former range has been taken over by the meat industry or urban development.

Today bison are still threatened by habitat destruction, genetic contamination by cattle, disease, domestication, and federal herd-management programs. Most herds are so small their populations aren't even considered "minimally viable" by scientists, meaning they're unlikely to survive challenges like disease or natural disaster. Despite this fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuses to protect bison under the Endangered Species Act.

And even with very little habitat remaining, bison's ability to migrate is further restricted by the meat industry: Bison who stray outside the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park are often killed by the National Park Service to "protect" commercial ranchers' livestock. Wildlife like bison desperately need better solutions to the conflicting commercial interests of animal agriculture on and at the boundaries of public lands.

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WATER USE AND POLLUTION

Animal agriculture consumes massive quantities of water. It takes about 2,464 gallons of water to produce a single pound of California beef. In total, 50% of all consumable water used in the United States goes toward meat and dairy production.

Much of the water not consumed by animal agriculture is polluted by it. Factory farms are industrial facilities where meat-production operations, farmed animals, feed, manure, urine and dead animals are concentrated in unsanitary, polluting conditions. Factory farms consistently fail to confine the staggering amount of waste they produce, and few laws require them to treat or clean up their mess.

Animal agriculture produces 500 million tons of manure per year that poses a severe threat to natural water sources. Factory farms pollute more than 35,000 miles of rivers in 22 states; contaminate groundwater in 17 states; and impair wetlands, lakes and estuaries. Meat production is responsible for 80% of antibiotic use (and the growth of antibiotic resistance). Meat and dairy also contribute 37% of pesticide use, much of which ends up in waterways and other wildlife habitats through improper handling of manure and agricultural runoff, and creating dead zones and eutrophication.
All of this has devastating consequences for the environment and endangered species like the hellbender salamander.

Hellbender
Hellbenders are the largest amphibians in North America, can grow up to 2 feet long, and secrete toxic slime from their skin to ward off predators. These strictly aquatic salamanders need clean, well-oxygenated water to survive. Many of the streams they once lived in are now too polluted from agriculture and urbanization to support them. Hunting, disease, fish stocking and loss of genetic diversity also pose major threats to this fascinating amphibian.

Animal agriculture plays a major role in the water pollution and climate change that threaten hellbenders. Across their range, their population is declining at an alarming rate — in direct relation to overconsumption of meat and dairy and the resulting pollution, habitat loss and disease.

If Americans continue their current level of meat consumption, the future won't be pretty— so one might say the not-so-pretty hellbender perfectly represents the problem. Unfortunately that future will have none of the hellbender's unique charisma or importance.

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GRAZING

Grazing by the meat and dairy industry is promoted, protected and subsidized on 270 million acres of public lands in 11 western states, degrading the landscape and further threatening more than 175 federally protected U.S. species. In fact grazing practices are among the greatest direct threats to imperiled species, affecting 14% of threatened or endangered animals and 33% of threatened or endangered plants.

Extensive studies have documented the devastating environmental impacts of overgrazing cattle, including erosion and soil loss, water pollution, the degradation of wetland and stream habitats, and the spread of invasive plants. The ecological costs of grazing cattle and sheep exceed that of any other western land use — yet grazing is highly subsidized by the government, under pressure from the meat industry.

Grazing cattle destroy native vegetation, damage soils and stream banks, and contaminate waterways with fecal waste. Overgrazing has reduced once-lush streams and riparian forests to flat, dry wastelands, and has turned once-rich topsoil to dust — which causes soil erosion, stream sedimentation, and the wholesale elimination of many aquatic habitats. Overgrazing of fire-carrying grasses has starved some western forests of fire, leaving them overly dense and prone to unnaturally severe fires. Cattle and sheep fencing creates problems for wildlife like increased predation; injuries from collision; and restricted access to food, water and shelter.

Livestock grazing wreaks ecological havoc on riparian areas, rivers, deserts, grasslands and forests alike. But it has taken an especially hard toll on the habitat of the sage grouse.

Greater and Bi-State Sage Grouse
Every year sage grouse travel to ancestral mating grounds, where males make special sounds using wing motions and inflatable air sacs on their chests in an elaborate dance to attract females.

Because of livestock grazing, development, off-road vehicles, barbed-wire fences and other threats, the sage grouse is disappearing from the West. Since sage grouse are particular about their mating and nesting sites, their habitat is often no longer suitable after livestock grazing alters its plant composition. Meanwhile fencing hinders the birds' ability to migrate.

Without Endangered Species Act protection, sage grouse populations have declined by as much as 70% — yet the federal government has failed to move forward on protection. A 2015 "Bi-State Action Plan" was supposed to "preclude the need to list the species [as endangered] while still allowing for sustainable economic development" in California and Nevada, but it doesn't adequately protect the birds from livestock grazing and habitat loss. Read more about grazing here.

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PESTICIDES

About half of all harvested U.S. cropland is used to produce animal feed. Most feed crops are corn, soy and other monocultures drenched in 167 million pounds of pesticides every year. Meat production is responsible for 37% of all pesticide use in the United States.

Pesticides threaten the survival and recovery of hundreds of federally protected species, including polar bears, salmon, sea turtles, kit foxes, and many sensitive birds, amphibian and insect species. Producing pesticides relies on fossil fuels, contributing to climate change and air pollution, and creates byproducts that are toxic to humans and wildlife. Particularly at risk are native pollinators like bees and butterflies.

You can thank these pollinators for one out of every three bites of food you eat. If you like apples, almonds, blueberries, cherries, avocados, cucumbers, onions, grapefruits, oranges or pumpkins (just to name a few), thank a pollinator . Most agricultural crops — more than 100 of them — can't grow without these pollinators, which would mean *a lot* less food available for the rapidly growing global population. Each year $15 billion worth of crops are pollinated by bees in the United States alone.

Monarch Butterfly
Every year monarch butterflies make a legendary, multigenerational migration of more than 2,000 miles, from Mexico to Canada. This American icon appears in literature and poetry, is raised by elementary school children, and is beloved by gardeners across the country.

Monarchs were once a familiar sight. But over the past 20 years, their populations have declined by more than 80%. In California, the western monarch butterfly population had declined to less than 2,000 butterflies.

One major threat pushing monarchs toward extinction is the near-eradication of milkweed — the monarch caterpillar's only food source — from midwestern croplands, where most monarchs were once born. Milkweed has fallen victim to skyrocketing use of the herbicide glyphosate, the main ingredient in Roundup, on genetically engineered Roundup Ready® corn and soybeans planted on more than 150 million acres. Since more than half of U.S. grain goes toward feeding livestock, meat production drives the high demand for Roundup Ready® corn.

Studies show that monarchs typically lay nearly four times more eggs per plant on milkweed growing in cropland than in other areas, making this glyphosate use even more harmful to the butterflies' survival.

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OVERFISHING AND BYCATCH

So far the statistics on this site have been about animal agriculture on land, but the fishing and aquaculture industries — along with the unsustainable fishing, ocean acidification, climate change and pollution they help drive — are pushing many marine species toward extinction. And with ocean waters covering nearly three-quarters of the Earth's surface, the seafood industry's poorly regulation allows for massive exploitation by commercial fisheries. These fisheries are removing life from the sea at astonishing rates, including millions of tons of discarded "bycatch" every year.

Bycatch is sea life that's captured by fisheries and not sent to market for consumption. It's an inevitable consequence of fisheries that use methods like trailing mile-long nets through the ocean, indiscriminately sweeping up all kinds of ocean life, or dropping down 60-mile-long baited fishing lines that attract and entangle marine animals *and* birds. Every year U.S. fisheries unintentionally catch almost 2,000 federally protected marine mammals, almost 12,000 sea turtles —including federally protected loggerheads and leatherbacks — and more than 7,600 seabirds.

Furthermore, fisheries degrade water quality, disrupt the food chain by removing large numbers of specific species, and destroy crucial habitat. This assault against oceans is constant, and it's taking a huge toll on the wellbeing of marine life, from whales and turtles to the fish species fished for, like the popular bluefin tuna.

Bluefin Tuna
Bluefin tuna are the Ferraris of the ocean: They can travel at speeds up to 43 miles per hour and even retract their fins into special slits to reduce drag. These huge fish are often 6 to 10 feet long, weighing 500 to 1,500 pounds. Unfortunately, because of a human taste for bluefin tuna sushi, these fish fetch prices that rival even the most luxurious sports cars. In 2013 a single bluefin tuna sold for $1.7 million in a Japanese fish market.

While bluefin tuna's plunge toward extinction is a global issue, the United States is primarily responsible for the decline of the critically endangered western Atlantic bluefin tuna, which spawns in the Gulf of Mexico and is fished mostly by U.S. fishermen. Due to politically arranged fishing quotas that allow for overfishing far above scientifically recommended levels, bluefin tuna may soon completely disappear from the ocean. A 2013 scientific report concluded that their population had declined by an estimated 96.4% from unfished levels.

Even before that, the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster of 2010 flooded the tuna's essential breeding habitat with millions of gallons of oil, and the spill's effects will persist and threaten many species for years to come. Despite the critical condition of bluefin tuna populations, in 2011 the National Marine Fisheries Service announced it wouldn't grant this fish protection under the Endangered Species Act protection.

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