

A tale of two souths

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Abstract

A tale of two souths. Use of large caliber repeating rifles makes large birds and mammals vulnerable to over-harvest or simply mass destruction. This lesson was unscored when unregulated use of firearms caused the local extinction of nearly every species of large mammal and bird in the southeastern United States by the beginning of the twentieth century. During the same period in southern India, restricted access to firearms and a culture of respect for wildlife allowed large mammals and birds to co-exist with a large human population. The survival of megafauna rests on the will of a society to stop uncontrolled killing.

Key words: Conservation, Megafauna, Firearms, Southeastern United States, Southern India, Mass destruction

Resumen

Una historia de dos países del sur. La utilización de rifles de repetición de gran calibre hace que las grandes aves y mamíferos sean vulnerables a la sobreexplotación o la simple destrucción en masa. Esta es la conclusión a la que se llegó después de que la utilización indiscriminada de armas de fuego en el sureste de Estados Unidos provocara la extinción local de prácticamente todas las especies de grandes mamíferos y aves a principios del siglo XX. Durante el mismo período, en el sur de la India, el acceso restringido a las armas de fuego y el respeto por la vida silvestre permitieron que los grandes mamíferos y aves coexistieran con una densa población humana. La supervivencia de la megafauna depende de la voluntad de las sociedades de detener la matanza incontrolada.

Palabras clave: Conservación, Megafauna, Armas de fuego, Sudeste de Estados Unidos, Sur de India, Destrucción masiva

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As I am bounced around in the back of an open jeep, bumping and chugging along dirt tracks through Nagarole National Park in southern India, I am awed by the wildlife spectacle that surrounds me. The landscape and number of large animals are what I would expect in the bushveld of Africa rather than in India. Herds of spotted deer roam every clearing. The jeep lurches to a stop as a male gaur, large as a small

elephant, crashes through the bushes by the road. Forty minutes later and another lurching stop and there is an actual elephant for comparison—a bull male roaming a powerline cut. Between the gaur and the elephant are elk-like sambar, langur monkeys, and the fresh prints of an impressively enormous tiger. For me, thoughts of India have always been of crowds of people. I knew there were a few tigers

remaining, but the wealth and variety of wildlife I was experiencing in southern India took me by surprise.

Because I am from the southern portion of another continent (I live in Alabama in the southeastern United States), I couldn't help but compare and contrast India to my home in Alabama. From my first days in southern India, I was struck by two obvious—and somewhat paradoxical—differences: India was vastly more crowded than the southeastern U. S., but it had far more large species of animals. Why did the more crowded country hold more wildlife?

The American southeast was not always lacking in large animals. In 1773 when William Bartram began his famous four-year trek across what were then the southern colonies, he explored a region with a magnificent and varied fauna. Over the preceding centuries, the indigenous human populations had been drastically reduced by disease, and across an unpopulated landscape roamed a megafauna that included black bear, red wolves, mountain lion, woodland bison, Eastern elk, and white-tailed deer. Wetlands played host to huge flocks of whooping cranes and trumpeter swans in winter, and, during migration, the skies were filled with millions of passenger pigeons. Observers of that era routinely commented how rich this land was in wildlife.

During the same period, British colonists pushed into a landscape in southern India that was much more densely populated than anywhere in North America. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century, most parts of southern India were more densely populated than England. Unlike North America, southern India was not a remote wilderness and yet it held an animal fauna that was every bit as diverse and fantastic as that of the American southeast. The forests teemed with tigers, wild dogs, Asian elephants, leopards, sloth bear, gaur, sambar, and spotted deer.

What transpired over the next century is a lesson in humanity's capacity for consumption. The natural resources of the southeastern U. S. were extracted, and the wildlife was slaughtered at a pace unprecedented in the history of the planet. All of the largest mammals—bison, bear, lions, wolves, and elk—were driven to extinction within the region. White-tailed deer hung on only in small numbers in a few areas. Wild turkey, whooping cranes, and trumpeter swans were extirpated from all but a few small areas and these species very nearly went extinct. Passenger pigeons were reduced from the most numerous birds in the world to a memory. When the century of carnage ended, the fields and forests stood emptied of large animals.

A similar story did not play out in southern India. The British brought new forms of agriculture and they cleared large areas of forest for tea plantations, but the fauna was not exterminated. All the largest species of animals—elephants, tigers, bear, gaur, and deer—persisted in stable populations. The largest and most conspicuous birds—hornbills, pelicans, storks—all survived in good numbers. Wildlife co-existed with a large human population in India before the nineteenth century, and this wildlife resource was relatively little changed into the twentieth century.

Why was the history of human interaction with wildlife so different in southern India and the southeastern U. S.? Differences in culture and religion certainly must be considered in any attempt to explain the different treatment of wildlife. Most of the human population in southern India is Hindu, a religion that teaches tolerance of and respect for animals. Hindus are vegetarians, eliminating pressure to kill animals for food, and animals like elephants, tigers, and monkeys are woven into the Hindu culture of southern India. It is not surprising that a people who tolerate cattle roaming the streets of the largest cities, also are not inclined to exterminate populations of wild animals.

Most people who exterminated the wildlife in the southeastern U. S. were Christians. Christianity is a religion that can promote respect for the natural world, but all too often it teaches that the natural world exists for human exploitation. The people of European descent in North America came from dozens of distinct cultures and in the melting pot of the New World, there was no tradition to provide a model for respect of the natural world. Among this mix of people in this new land, a new culture emerged: the way of the gun.

There was no more important factor in the decimation of American wildlife than widespread, nearly universal, access to firearms. Before the mass production of the repeating rifle in the nineteenth century, humans had few means by which to rapidly kill large animals. The repeating rifle, however, is a weapon of wildlife mass destruction, giving anyone the power to kill even the most massive animals in large numbers. In America, nearly every adult male living in the rural south carried a rifle, and these tens of thousands of shooters took out nearly every large animal. In India, owning a gun was uncommon and shooting was largely left to the British and the nobility. These few wielders of guns in India did an amazing amount of damage to Indian wildlife, but without an entire population armed, animals withstood the onslaught. Not a single species of vertebrate was extirpated from southern India due to shooting.

I think there are at least two lessons to be learned from the differences in how wildlife fared in India versus America in the nineteenth century. First, we should never underestimate the speed and thoroughness with which people can eradicate populations of wildlife. With modern weaponry, it doesn't take long for entire populations of large animals to be exterminated. Second, now that there is a cheap and accessible technology that allows a few humans to decimate entire populations of large animals, the only hope for the survival of large animals is a collective effort to keep them alive. If we don't, as a society, set aside wild lands for animals and stop people from coming into those areas and killing the animals, then there will be no large animals.

Somewhere in the early decades of the twentieth century, we entered a new age with a new wildlife dynamic in southern North America and southern India. In America, people began to regret the devastation that was wrought from unregulated shooting. A new conservation ethic emerged, pushed as forcefully

by hunters—who wanted sustainable populations of animals to harvest—as by any groups. Not only was the unregulated shooting of large animals halted completely, but large amounts of money were invested to recover populations of remaining wildlife species. As a result, in the twenty-first century, whooping cranes and trumpeter swans again wing across the skies. Populations of white-tailed deer have recovered, and these small deer are now so abundant that they are a nuisance. Black bear populations are increasing, and coyotes have filled the niche of red wolves. The forests of the south once again harbor a few large wild animals.

Sadly, in many areas of southern India, the fortunes of large animals are moving in the opposite direction. The huge human population seems to finally be taking its toll. Forests are being cut; poaching is on the rise; species that survived the hunting pressures of the nineteenth century are now dwindling in numbers due to habitat loss. The future of the magnificent megafauna of southern India rests on the will of the people. If protecting the wildlife of the region does not become a priority it could be lost in a generation.

It would be sad indeed if the Indian wildlife that withstood the age of the gun in the nineteenth century faded away by attrition in the twenty-first century.
