

The writer Terry Tempest Williams, who now makes her home near Jackson Hole with hubby Brooks, uses “Coyote Clan” as her website’s *nom de plume*. Twenty years ago, as I participated in a writers’ retreat in the mountains of New Mexico, Terry led us in early-morning explorations of surrounding flora and fauna. One time she stepped into a creek and dislodged a stone to show us the slumbering mayfly larvae attached to it. After a while she returned the stone to its original place in the water, “so as not to stress out the little creature,” she said. The gesture has stayed with me as a reminder to be attentive to the web of life that surrounds us and sustains us. Humans are part of that web, not above it as we sometimes erroneously conclude. On that occasion I purchased a book Terry had entitled “Coyote Canyon” that included marvelous photos of her native Utah and its canyons, which she supplanted with Native American legends featuring the agile and intelligent predator cum scavenger.

Other lessons in wildlife have come through my son. When Walter served with Wyoming Game and Fish as wildlife veterinarian, he also worked on PhD studies that focused on brucellosis in elk. One summer I was fortunate to accompany him into the Tetons where he monitored the scavenging of simulated aborted elk-fetuses. He mounted motion-sensor cameras for night-time observation but at times we also tracked the scavengers visually. Walter has an ability to spot wildlife movement that escapes me. He’ll point out juvenile foxes playing at the mouth of their den where I see only rustling grasses. Fortunately he always has binoculars within reach, so that I can artificially discern what my son spots with the naked eye. That time in the Tetons we watched a coyote bitch drag off a piece of carrion, presumably to take to her young.

While raising my own young I remained mostly oblivious to the nonhuman life that surrounded us. Yes, we went camping in California’s Yosemite Park, marveling at the crags of El Capitan and the cascading waters of Bridal Veil, but the insects and small mammals of the vicinity escaped us. It was only after I had absolved myself of the necessity of providing for family that I could afford the leisure of observing and reflecting on the web of life. Sometimes I wonder if this isn’t true of humanity in general: we are so preoccupied with “providing,” we can’t or won’t take the time for anything else. In this we are not so different from a wolf or coyote whose focus when not at rest is always on the next meal.

Trouble is, humans have the ability to alter their environment much more drastically than our fellow creatures. We have used this talent to a detrimental extent. We think nothing of limiting, controlling, even exterminating wildlife populations while doubling our own every few decades. Only lately, at the eleventh hour as it were, have we become aware that our planet’s resources are finite and cannot be exploited indefinitely. The jury is still out on whether we’ll limit human rapaciousness in time to avoid our own extinction.

By the 1930s, an official program of extermination had cleared out the entire wolf population in Yellowstone, even though sufficient prey animals exist in the Park. Recent efforts at restoration have had encouraging results. Most people are in favor of allowing wolves to live in the wilderness, writes L. David Mech in *The Way of the Wolves*; trouble is, young dispersers will try to colonize adjacent areas, and these wolves will soon prey on livestock and pets. Hence, to survive, wolves must confine themselves—or be confined—to unarable, steep, remote and inaccessible areas. Mech, who is devoted to wolves and has studied them for decades, nonetheless states that “It really can never be otherwise,” for, when human and wolf interests collide, control programs are necessary. He cites an approach that has been successful in Minnesota: a state program reimburses ranchers for wolf-caused losses while a federal program eliminates wolves that have begun to prey on livestock and pets.

Besides Yellowstone, other Wyoming natural habitat continues to bear human mismanagement. Often we blame wildlife for problems we've caused ourselves. Too many cows' or horses' hooves compact the earth to the point it will not replenish the grasses on which these ungulates depend, though often the barrenness is attributed to prairie-dogs. The critters have been eradicated via poisons or shootings, often through concentrated government programs. Not long ago—in 1870, in fact—Wyoming contained 16 million acres of prairie-dog towns; by 1998, humans had usurped that acreage by 99 percent, leaving a scant 125,000 acres for these “sentinels.” If anything saves the prairie dog, someone remarked once, it will be the black-footed ferret. The rediscovery in 1981 of the tiny hunters and their subsequent recovery through captive breeding and later release was a hit-and-miss but ultimately successful effort. The handsome creatures no grace many a Wyoming wildlife poster. The ferrets, in turn, depend on prairie dogs for their sustenance.

Like wolves and coyotes, prairie dogs play a vital part in the ecosystems of the high plains. In *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, Terry Tempest Williams pays tribute to these “sentinels of the plains,” so human-like in their behavior and inter-species communication, we may think of them as our diminutive cousins.