

WTE of October 16, 2015; "The slaughter continues"
CST of October 17, 2015: "Inflicting violence on marine life"

Since our appearance on earth, humans have become super-predators, decimating not only our own kind but exterminating much of non-human life. Hunting techniques thousands of years ago eliminated mastodons, saber-toothed cats, and other big game. In Wyoming, the name "Chugwater" attests to the native practice of running bison over a cliff for harvesting. With the arrival of Europeans, the slaughter increased exponentially. Rotting corpses dotted the prairies: these hunters were interested in bison hides only.

Sad to say, from our destructive past we have learned nothing. Today's practices are just as wasteful. In the oceans, the destruction of marine life is wholesale and industry-sized.

Sometimes the creatures we decimate are superior in intelligence and social awareness. Chimps, elephants, whales, dolphins: all recognize themselves in a mirror, a sign of self-awareness that is quite a feat. Not long ago we thought humans were the only living beings with this capacity, but research has shown this imagined self-importance to be wrong.

How do we know this? Scientists paint, e.g., a yellow stripe across an animal's face and then confront the creature with a mirror. If the subject swipes at the stripe, we know it recognizes itself as an entity with its own persona. Some animals, lacking such awareness, think the image in the mirror is another being of its kind. Dolphins, on the other hand, love to ham it up in front of a mirror. CT and MRI scans performed on their brains show them to be highly cognizant creatures, with brains every bit as extraordinary as our own. VEnS, the superstar neurons, four times as big as ordinary brain cells, are found in dolphin brains—and ours. They play a role in our ability to trust, to get along with one another, to know when we've made a mistake. Developing a culture requires good communication skills, which dolphins possess. The body of scientific knowledge shows that dolphins are conscious in the same way we are. Other sentient beings exist also, though we've been slow to understand and acknowledge them.

Like humans, dolphins are creature with enormous brains. Like humans, they use their brain power to keep track of complex social relations. They call each other by name. They form organized communities. They communicate in their own complex language. They hunt by sonar.

Every year, a butchery of whales and dolphins is carried out in the Taiji Cove of Japan. "The hunters captured a hundred pilot whales and killed every last one of them, including mothers and calves," writes Susan Casey in "Voices in the Ocean," where she accords space to Lori Marino, who is as horrified as she. During her PhD, Marino turned down a full scholarship at Princeton because she could not bear to vivisect cats. From Taiji, a friend emailed how troubled he was to observe the slaughter in such an alarming numbers. "Things are bloody awful here." When the Taiji Fishermen's Union ran out of freezer space, that did not stop its members from continuing the kills. In the Solomon Islands, a similar practice prevails.

The rationale is that marine predators "compete" with humans for resources like tuna. "Dolphins are pests that must be eliminated," Casey quotes a fisherman. Those that are not killed outright are sold into captivity, where they waste away in marine parks like Sea World. When a pod of ninety-two bottlenose dolphins were corralled, the marine park selection lasted for days. Those that could not be sold—too old, too young, too scarred-up, too feisty—"were butchered as usual," writes Casey.

"When I started to get into the dark side of the zoo and aquarium industry," the author quotes Professor Marino, "particularly the marine mammals captivity industry, starting with Taiji, it . . . makes the drug or mafia underworld look like a picnic." Marino and Emory University were sued by Ocean World over her criticism of the captivity trade.

Dolphin-loathing festers in places where fishing quotas have been lowered due to collapse of stock. What's decimating marine life is, of course, human fishing practices of long-lines and bottom-trawling, which discards as "waste" up to 40 percent of what's dredged up and caught in the nets. Other troubles we inflict on marine life are the blasts of sonar the Navy employs, also used by oil companies to locate oceanic petroleum. High-frequency sonar can destroy the ear drums of whales and dolphins, who have been found beached, bleeding from nostrils and ears.

The DP spill in April 2010 that gushed 150 million gallons of crude, along with the toxic dispersant Corexit that was sprayed with abandon, destroyed "one of the most fertile ocean nurseries on earth," writes the author. A 2013 study found its dolphins "grievously ill or dying."

Such activity decimates the food web upon which human and non-human life depends for long-term survival.