

### Book Review

*Monster of God* by David Quammen. W. W. Norton: New York, 2003.

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Nearly everyone has an odd fantasy about “man-eating beasts.” Hence the famous “Wizard of Oz” line: “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my.” Add large reptiles to that list (i.e., crocodiles, Komodo dragons and alligators) and you pretty much complete the species list Quammen addresses in his book about man-eaters: “Monsters of God.” Quammen tries to explain our fantasy with “man-eating beasts” in a book that also addresses “beast-eating men”. Thus, the book is about large predators eating people, people killing predators for trade or sheer entertainment, the role of predators in the ecosystem and how this makes them particularly vulnerable to habitat destruction, comparative anatomy of carnivore teeth, cultural beliefs surrounding large predators, the respect and hatred predators receive from the human race, and large carnivore conservation. The book is filled with fascinating stand-alone sections on each of these topics, all of which make a wonderful read. However, Quammen weaves in and out of these topics with little effort to tie these threads together. Many times I found myself asking: why is he telling me this now? Unfortunately, he rarely answered my question. Quammen may have been leaving such integration up to the reader to contemplate. However, I couldn’t help but wonder how his lay-audience would accomplish this. As an extreme example, the second to last section of the book provides a highly detailed description of the film “Aliens” starring Sigourney Weaver. Again, a fun read, but given the space he devoted to this, I found myself asking “what was his point”?

Quammen emphasizes how the placement of predators at the top of the food pyramid makes them especially vulnerable to habitat destruction. They need large concentrations of prey, and hence relatively large home ranges to survive and keep their predation sustainable. Thus, habitat destruction and/or over-hunting of prey by humans can quickly take its toll on large predators, occasionally causing predators to turn toward more vulnerable prey such as domestic livestock, pets, and even humans. He also effectively describes the keystone role that predators play in shaping the environment and hence the potential for loss of predators to disrupt an entire ecosystem.

Quammen attempts to address the sticky issue of sustainable use of predators (in the form of trophy hunting and medicinal use of body parts) as a conservation strategy for large carnivores. However, I did not feel that his arguments reflected the true complexity of this issue. Ecosystems are the result of millions of years of evolution. Thus, the challenge is to explain how people will overcome their greed, enabling them to utilize wildlife without disrupting the complex balance of nature. In fact, one of the oddities of “sustainable” use is that it may be the very behavior that perpetuates man-killing. Ironically, the most frequent human killers in Africa are vegetarians. They include hippos, buffalo, and elephants. Often, these species kill humans in direct response to efforts at poaching. Should we expect a carnivore that evolved to eat flesh to act any differently?

Despite its frenetic read, there are many gems to be mined in this book. I just wish Quammen had made this easier by removing more of the topsoil for his readers.