

## MONSTER OF GOD (man-eaters)

“ Monster of God: The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind” (2003) by David Quammen, is a travel book by a man so fascinated by creatures most of us find terrifying, that he travels the world to report first hand on what may well be their last stands.

Humans have long found roles for alpha predators, like the lion in the Bible, both feared and worshipped, and Leviathan, part crocodile, part dragon, created to keep the Lord’s people humble.

Is killing off big predators crucial to the colonial endeavor? Quammen asks. In the earliest stories heroes destroy monsters of the wild, and only the city remains -- think Gilgamesh, Beowulf, etc.

The monsters and dragons themselves may ultimately derive (in Europe) from dinosaur skeletons and brown bears. Subduing these projected nightmares shows civilization on the march. And as civilizations rose, alpha predators fell.

The Chauvet cave paintings in southern France prove that humans have lived with, and treasured, lions for at least 35,000 years. Lions once roamed all of Europe, southwest Asia, Greece, Egypt, Palestine and of course Italy, where in Rome captive lions fought in bloody spectacles.

In the Gir forest, Gujarat, in northwest India, among Maldhari herders whose only weapon is the hoe, lions still hunt, mostly without problems. When Quammen interviewed the Maldharis, he found them tolerant, accepting lions as natural, part of the landscape – though they acknowledged that the poorest and weakest among them bore the brunt of lion predation.

Quammen asks, is there an instinct to separate ourselves from and destroy man-eaters? Can we continue to have them at all if we're unwilling to suffer among them?

Saltwater crocodiles, once abundant and widespread, were almost eradicated by hunting for skins and meat. Kenyans assume crocodiles' human victims must be evil, else they wouldn't have been taken – the man-eater as avenging angel.

In Orissa (northeast India) those who live among crocodiles hate and fear them. In northern Australia, where crocodiles' populations have recovered thanks to nature preserves and controlled hunting, they're sacred as totems to some Aboriginals, and anathema to others, whose totem may be, say, the shark.

The best way to preserve crocodiles over the long haul, Quammen is told, is to give them sustainable commercial value, though he seems unconvinced.

His visit to the European brown bears' remaining habitat, in the Transylvanian alps of Romania, reveals a similar conservation theory, though with a strange history.

Romania's notorious dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, loved more than anything to shoot big game – especially brown bears. So he ordered wildlife managers to set him up constantly with bears, drawn to feeding stations below hunters' platforms, where they could be safely transformed into trophies.

Ceausescu is long gone, but the managers continue to manage with hunters' fees, feeding bears where they can most easily be harvested.

Elsewhere alpha predators can still teach us humility (humans as meat); here they're reduced to commodities, like cans of fancy tuna only the rich can afford.

Were early humans more often prey than predator? Certainly the history of the tiger suggests so. In India as late as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century 800 people a year were tiger victims; by 1982 the number was still 45 a year. In the Russian Far East the Siberian (or Amur) tiger, "greatest of the last great predators" lives still, precariously, among meat hunters and loggers.

Nowadays it's poached for skin and body parts, and its human-related prey is mostly dogs.

Thanks to human population growth and consumption, our relationship with the tiger and all other large predators will probably end soon. Quammen wants to give us some last glimpses, to fix them in our consciousness.

Because soon only in movies will the man-eaters stalk through the shadows of our minds.