Make Meadows, Not Lawns

The Heart of the Ecosystem:

Taking Responsibility for the Extinction of Bees

When we think of extinction we tend to think of a few iconic species, such as the woolly mammoth or the dodo. Although none of us today has ever laid eyes on one—at least not a living specimen—we still mourn their loss. Yet, there are many creatures whose extinction we do not mourn, or just never really noticed. There was little outcry, for instance, when the Levuana Moth went extinct. And very few people are campaigning to save endangered dragonflies. However, most people certainly seem to know that bees are in danger of extinction; it has been splashed across headlines around the world, reiterated in hundreds of articles, and been the topic of many a social media campaign. In Ball and Hayne's words, "we have been losing sleep over bees." What is it about them that has prompted this visceral response?

Maurice Maeterlinck famously wrote of honeybees that since the beginning of humankind, this "strange little creature, that lived in a society under complicated laws and executed prodigious labours in the darkness, attracted the notice of men." Indeed, bees have long had a somewhat magical influence upon humans, dancing upon their imaginations and inspiring creations in literature, music, and architecture—even route-planning algorithms. Furthermore, bees sustain human life as we know it. Read almost any narrative or text on bees and you will inevitably be told of the vital role that bee pollination plays in agriculture. It is no wonder that their plight has become a topic of so much interest and concern. Nowadays, to talk of bees is also to talk of extinction or crisis. It should be all the more troubling to us that human endeavour is predominantly responsible for this crisis. The loss of habitats, the use of chemicals on crops, the spread of diseases, and climate change are just a few examples of the threats to bees that humans must be held accountable for. If bees and other species are to flourish in this damaged world, we seriously and urgently need to evaluate our behaviors. Luckily, it's not all bad news.

The decline of bee populations has triggered an unprecedented amount of positive and forceful activism. Whilst bees still face extensive threats, and we still have a long way to go in addressing their decline, their potential extinction has been recognized and challenged in a way that the endangerment of many other insects and animals has not. In fact, the plight of the honeybee has gained such traction that it has placed a spotlight on declining insect numbers in general. However, there is a lack of information, or indeed instruction, about how people might tangibly engage with the decline of bee populations. It would not be naïve to assume that we cannot have a direct impact upon bee populations unless we take significant action, such as becoming a beekeeper (which, as a side note, does not even necessarily help the decline of bees). I believe that perhaps the most significant and impactful way that people can help address this decline is really quite a simple one: by planting more flowers. But I do not mean just having a few more plants dotted about. I mean by turning our lawns into meadows, by filling our roundabouts with wildflowers, by replacing our walls with shrubs and hedges, and by filling our parks with trees and flower beds. Although our parks and lawns might look green and healthy, if they are not filled with the plants and flowers needed to

sustain the Earth's biodiversity they are, fundamentally, barren. Put simply, we need to bring wildflowers into our homes, gardens, and living environments. To borrow a phrase from the renowned entomologist Dennis vanEngelsdorp, we must begin to "make meadows, not lawns."

Motivating people to essentially rewild their home environments will not only be beneficial for bees. Enriching everyday places will help many of the other, arguably less obviously appealing, insects to thrive once again. Numerous species are threatened with extinction and, like bees, one of the key reasons for their increased loss is the destruction of habitats. Even the smallest of wildflower patches could become host to a rich variety of insect life, such as butterflies, beetles, dragonflies, and grasshoppers. The St. Louis butterfly project Milkweed for Monarchs, which launched on Earth Day in 2014, has been particularly successful in this regard. It has also helped connect people with urban nature. At its start, this rewilding initiative aimed to establish 50 community gardens, most of which were located at fire stations and in parks throughout the city. By 2015, a further 50 gardens were created in urban schools. Today, a large proportion of monarch gardens exist in people's home gardens, providing an oasis for insects and butterflies.

It is not only insects that would benefit, however. Humans would benefit as well. Although I am cautious about relying on anthropocentric reasons for addressing insect extinction, it is undeniable that if we can show people the obvious benefits to themselves, it is more likely to motivate widespread action. The Milkweed project, for instance, inspired the community to exceed the original goal of planting 250 gardens. There is abundant research that shows how humans, which are themselves natural entities, benefit emotionally and psychologically from being surrounded with natural spaces and habitats. E. O. Wilson defined this relationship as "biophilia", the innate and valuable bond between humans and other natural life forms. In recent years, as the human world has become increasingly modernized, there is concern that we have lost this vital connection with the natural world. Whilst I do not necessarily agree with this contention, largely because it relies too heavily on the misleading premise that humans could ever be separate from nature, I do believe that we will certainly benefit from that connection if we begin to invite plants and flowers back into our lives.

Although this blog is dedicated to addressing the loss of insect populations, it is important to recognize the wider positive impacts that addressing insect extinction would have. For instance, planting flowers will not only increase biodiversity or enrich human experiences; it can also help address issues such as air pollution, and even flooding.

Not everyone has a lawn, or even outdoor space. Not everyone is an architect or a town planner. But everyone has a voice... and most of us have an empty windowsill. Planting flowers does not need to be inaccessible or exclusive. The benefits of rewilding our everyday spaces in this way are endless. Flexing our green thumb would help address the decline of insects, such as bees, whilst also significantly enhancing human and more-than-human lives. I do not offer this as a "silver bullet" solution, but rather as one of the many ways in which we can begin to address the mass extinction of insects. In doing so, we can work towards achieving the fundamental cultural shift needed to move forward in an age defined by environmental instability.

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