**Headline:** Global Pet Craze Is Becoming a Major Contributor to the Extinction Crisis

**Teaser:** Pets and the industry that supports them are fueling the loss of wildlife populations around the world.

By Peter Christie

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**[Article Body:]**

In 2019, an independent international science group—the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—announced that about [1 million species around the world are threatened with extinction](https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment). The number, based on a consensus by hundreds of experts and other researchers from 50 countries, made headlines around the world when it was included in the group’s global assessment of biodiversity.

One in every five backboned species we know of is at risk of being erased from the earth, and each year, say scientists, about [52 different mammals, birds, and amphibians](https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1194442) move one species-at-risk category closer to oblivion. Many biologists believe countless other species are vanishing even before science—so far familiar with about [1.7 million of the planet’s many millions](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/693564) of living species—knows they exist.

Take insects, for example. Estimates suggest [four out of every five insect species remain to be discovered](https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-ento-020117-043348), but researchers fear that insect declines could put more than [40 percent](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0006320718313636) of these at risk of disappearing within decades, according to a 2019 study. In 2017, a German study made news around the world—the favored headline was “[insect Armageddon](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/world/europe/krefeld-germany-insect-armageddon.html)”—when it found that the abundance of flying insects in German nature reserves had fallen to just a quarter of what it was 27 years ago, as measured by weight.

**Extinction Cascade: Ecological Tipping Point**

It’s no small matter. Some warn of what they call an “[extinction cascade](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/02/180219155019.htm),” whereby the loss of one species, such as a butterfly or a bee, leads to the secondary extinction of a plant it pollinates, which, in turn, means the end of a specialist plant-eating animal, and so on. As more and more of the living pieces in an ecosystem go missing, the system itself risks breaking down.

Try removing parts of your car one by one while still expecting it to get you somewhere. To Gerardo Ceballos, an ecologist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, our general and seemingly growing disregard for the sanctity of life’s variety is like that. If we fail to stop more creatures from vanishing, the natural ecological functions of the world—the ones that keep our air and water clean and our food supply healthy—will most certainly falter. Some scientists warn that our mounting environmental insults may soon take us to a [worldwide ecological “tipping point.”](https://www.nature.com/articles/nature09678) Wildlife may be feeling the worst of it now, says Ceballos during an interview, but the reckoning for our own species is probably not far off.

Ceballos, who helped introduce the world to the possibility that we’re seeing a sixth mass extinction, says that “many scientists in many different fields feel there may be a collapse in civilization if this trend continues in the next 20 to 30 years.” His matter-of-factness is chilling.

**Population Explosion: Humanity Dwarfs the Wild World**

Sometime in the mid-to-late 1800s—when Charles Dickens was chronicling the crowded squalor of London, and Charles Darwin was championing his queer notion of “descent with modification”—the size of humanity’s great mass eclipsed that of all the wild land mammals on earth.

The human population, according to [one remarkable estimate](https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262528276/harvesting-the-biosphere/), had grown until there were more of us *by weight* than the combined mass of all our wild mammal brethren. In the race to become the world’s greatest life force, we had finally streaked past nature. Soon, we will leave it behind in our dust.

By 1900, we [weighed](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00450.x) one-third more than wild mammals, and by the end of the following century—after the total weight of mammalian wildlife plummeted by half and the mass of people quadrupled—we became 10 times more abundant (by weight). Now, 8 billion of us dwell on this busy planet, and by 2050, the number is expected to [rise](https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/population) close to 10 billion. We have arrived at a point at which [we absolutely dwarf the wild world](https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262528276/harvesting-the-biosphere/). Like the proverbial bull in a china shop, we can scarcely move without breaking something.

**Human Impact on Earth’s Biodiversity**

Unfortunately, we’re a fidgety species. More than [three-quarters](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-07183-6) of the earth’s land surface (not including Antarctica) and almost 90 percent of oceans have been [directly affected by what we’ve done so far](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-07183-6). Between 1993 and 2009 alone, the total wilderness flattened to build new farms, towns, and mines around the world equaled an area larger than India. With the loss of these wild lands, we are also losing wildlife; many consider our changes to the global landscape—for agriculture and development—amount to the single greatest threat to life’s diversity in millions of years. But there are others.

Our surging population now means excessive hunting, fishing, and harvesting (that is, taking more wildlife than can replenish itself) threaten [more than 70 percent](https://www.nature.com/articles/536143a) of the species facing extinction around the world.

Climate change isn’t helping. A fifth of the world’s land surface is expected to see large-scale shifts in climate by the end of the 21st century, thanks to the greenhouse gas consequences of our fondness for oil. Plants and animals that can’t stand the heat will be [forced to move or perish](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0186934). Meanwhile, our penchant for polluting and spreading invasive species and diseases only seems to be gathering steam.

**Biophilia and Pet Ownership**

People, after all, will be people. And people—the growing billions of us—will keep pets.

There’s the rub. In his inimitably hopeful way, biologist Edward O. Wilson [imagined](https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674074422) a growing awareness of our innate biophilia would make our species—even in our clumsy, outsized dominance of the world—more caring about the nonhuman life around us. Our hardwired wonder for other beings was supposed to add delicacy to the way we manage our shared planet. Instead, our biophilia may have found another outlet: pets.

While one estimate suggests the total number of wild backboned creatures on earth has been cut by roughly [70 percent in the last 50 years](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1922686117), the population of pets (at least dogs and cats in the United States) has more than doubled during the same period.

There’s [no sign the trend is slowing](https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/demscapop/7/). [Thirty million puppies and kittens are born in the United States each year](https://international-animalhealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Pet-Overpopulation....pdf)—a ratio of seven pets born for every human birth. More pet birds, lizards, and other exotic beasts are bred or brought from the jungle. We may finally be acknowledging our genetic need for and attachment to animals—as Wilson wished—but not in the wild; we’ve brought them into our homes instead. Our soaring numbers of pets have become, as author and University of Bristol professor John Bradshaw [suggests](https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/277326/the-animals-among-us-by-bradshaw-john/9780141980164), our wildlife on demand.

**As Urbanization Grows, Pets Replace the Role of Nature**

Our relationship with the natural world, meanwhile, is growing more estranged. More than half of the world’s population already dwells in cities, and by 2050, more than [two out of every three of us will be leading urban lives](https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html). The proportion of people who will ever set foot in the wilderness is growing smaller. Those who’ve met a moose on a trail or watched a heron over an evening marsh are becoming a smaller and smaller percentage of us. For the growing majority—among our swelling numbers in cities around the world—dogs, cats, and other pets are our chief experience and familiarity with animals.

It’s the pets we meet—and the pets we keep—that have our attention now. We’re drawn to them in the way we’ve always been drawn to other living creatures. And, as Wilson predicted, the urge remains seemingly ancient, deep-seated, and stirring. The only difference is that the animals we’re focused on aren’t wild; they live with us. Increasingly, we seem to prefer having animals in *our* lives to visiting them in theirs.

**Pets’ Impact on Wildlife**

That’s not all. Pets and the pet industry are not only replacing the role of nature in our human experience but they’re also devastating wildlife directly.

In myriad ways, pets pose a clear threat to the wonderful, wild splendor of the rest of life on earth: Cats and dogs stalk wildlife as human-subsidized killers; jungles are robbed of animals to satisfy the pet trade; diseases deadly to wild creatures are spread by globe-trotting pets; pets released in non-native habitats (such as pythons in the Everglades) eat every wild animal in sight or squeeze them out as indomitable competitors; and the pet food business, with its insatiable demand, drains our oceans of vital forage fish.

The impacts are considerable. Over the past five centuries, [pets have been among the leading culprits](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1602480113) in clobbering literally hundreds of species of threatened and extinct birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians around the globe.

Domestic cats alone have [helped obliterate](https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1602480113) more than 60 species in that period—including the Stephens Island wren of New Zealand and the Hawaiian crow—creatures lost forever from the rich variety of our living planet. Dogs have been linked to the extinction of up to 11 species. Other pets, and the pet industry that supports them, have been linked to other dwindling wildlife populations around the world.

**Irony: The Wild World Needs Pet People**

Our biophilia has become fraught. Our love of pets is contributing to what is arguably the [greatest environmental crisis faced by global ecosystems](https://www.nature.com/articles/nature11118). The irony is that pet people are the same animal people the wild world needs to help get it back on its feet. [Pet owners care more about animals](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233597983_Attitudes_and_activities_related_to_urban_wildlife_Pet_owners_and_non-owners); they’re more likely to watch birds or to become enthralled by nature documentaries. The only problem is our affection for the animals we hold close at home is obscuring our view of those out of reach in nature. We’re fond of our pets.

They’re part of our families. But the wild creatures of the world are vital, too. They’re the [machinery of natural systems](https://www.nature.com/articles/nature23886) and hold the keys to our survival. They’re part of our evolutionary history and essential to how we think. They’re wild and, unlike pets, remain aloof from our pedestrian lives and human routine: Untamed, their mystery survives, complex, inscrutable, and tangled in nature’s vast, delicate web.