

The Horror of Being Eaten

Dale Miquelle

In early July, 2002, another tiger attack was reported in Khabarovsk, in the region of Sukpai, to add to this spring's attack in Southwest Primorye, and so already this year, there are two incidents of tigers attacking people in the Russian Far East. Thank God no one was killed. The Khabarovsk incident, at the time of this writing, is so recent that we know nothing about the incident, but, like the attack on Sokolov in February, it will no doubt receive extensive coverage by the local press. There will be the initial reports, very sensational, but with little concrete information. Then there will be additional newspaper articles, and perhaps TV coverage, as the information trickles in. Then the press reports of the official investigation, ongoing now with the Conflict Tiger Team and representatives of the WCS "Siberian Tiger Project" will be released. Then will come the statements from local hunters, and perhaps biologists and bureaucrats as well, that there are too many tigers, and they have become too dangerous. The call will arise yet again: "Something needs to be done."

This is the standard response, fairly predictably (not only in Russia, but everywhere in the world) when large carnivores attack, and sometimes kill, people. For good reason, we are horrified at the prospect of being eaten. Since our ancestors of long ago first climbed down from the trees, we have been unusually susceptible to predation. Unlike other potential prey, who can run swiftly, have large teeth, antlers, or some other form of defense, we humans, naked and alone without a tree to climb, have only our innate intelligence to use, and often enough, it is simply insufficient to deal with the explosive rush of an oncoming tiger, bear, crocodile, or lion.

Perhaps our ancestors accepted – as fate – the prospect of being eaten, but modern man certainly does not. In addition to the sense of horror, and the fascination that keeps us all repeatedly reading the accounts of tiger attacks in the local newspapers, there is often a sense of indignation – a sense that no animal has the right to attack, much less kill and eat, a human. Hence the cries for a response arise, with a sense that something must be done. We have, in essence, removed ourselves from the natural food chain, and consider ourselves separate – not like the other animals that inhabit this earth. Except for those of us who consider ourselves hunters, we consider ourselves neither predators nor prey. And hunters, who still like to think of themselves as members of that natural food pyramid, only envision themselves at the pinnacle – no hunter I have ever met would consider themselves at a lower level - in essence, potential prey for a larger, better predator.

We modern humans, living in cities, driving in cars, and locking the doors at night, have divorced ourselves from the natural world. We consider ourselves above the animal kingdom, evolved to a higher sphere where the concept of "eat or be eaten" is no longer relevant, except as a metaphor for business and commerce. How else to explain the sense of indignation, and the need to exact revenge when tigers, bears, or lions, do what they have done for centuries – hunt, kill, and eat other animals that are less skilled than they. Why is it that the daily muggings, beatings, and killing in our cities do not receive the same press coverage as an attack by a tiger? Why is it that the "mafia" killings that seem almost a part of daily life here in Russia are shrugged at by most people as "part of a dirty business" but we are horrified, fascinated, and indignant at the prospect of a tiger or bear killing one of us humans? In essence, why is it "O.K." for a human being to kill another human being, but not for another species to kill one of us? I can only suggest that it is because we consider ourselves "godlike" - better, beyond, and above the rest of the animals we share our planet with. As we know from Greek mythology, only other "gods" of similar status retain the right or capacity to attack and fight a godlike creature.

Ultimately, divorced from the natural world, we feel no responsibility to protect it, and attach no value to it – hence, the ease with which we log, mine, shoot, and harvest. The bible, as interpreted by many, makes it clear that the world was created by God for man, and we western civilizations have done our best to exploit that world, however and whenever we want, regardless of the consequences to ecosystem integrity, biodiversity conservation, or species conservation. Enacting the word of God, as some might think.

However, there are still some places, like the Russian Far East, where there still exist tracts of wild lands, where tigers and bears still roam, where the laws of nature still rule, and where the potential of an animal attacking a person still exists. Unfortunately, such incidents are largely independent of tiger or bear densities – they are ill-timed events, a consequent of a human being in the wrong place at the wrong time, putting himself into a vulnerable situation. Often there is an explanation – the tiger was starving to death or wounded, a hunter inadvertently approached too closely to cubs or surprised an animal at close range – and sometimes it is just bad luck. The claim that there are too many tigers, and hence there was an attack, is simply a fallacy - as long as there is one tiger out there, living his/her life in the natural world, there is a possibility that, if you enter that world, you may be eaten. To eliminate this risk is simple – kill all the tigers, and kill all the bears. Then you can enter the Ussuri taiga free from the fear of being killed by a large predator. But then, of course, it will no longer be the Ussuri taiga, but something much less.

There are those of us who feel strongly that we humans need wild places, with tigers, bears, crocodiles, and lions, to remind us of our relationship to the natural world, to humble ourselves before greater powers, to understand our links to the rest of living beings on this planet, if for no other reason than to understand how much will be lost if all of that is destroyed, to understand the consequences for our own well being if natural ecosystems are lost. If we humans are to survive, ultimately, we must move away from the continuous, unsustainable exploitation of natural systems. We need to put ourselves back into the natural system, and stop thinking we have evolved beyond, and no longer need, these systems. The sooner we re-learn our relationship to the natural world, the better our chances of survival. Thus, the presence of tigers and bears are a type of test for us. We need those large predators to remind us of our relationship, as well as our responsibility for wise stewardship, to all things wild.

Nobody – especially me – wants to be attacked or eaten by a tiger, and there are certainly many who disagree with the need for so many tigers in Primorye and Khabarovsk. We have a responsibility to minimize the risk for every individual who has a need or desire to enter the forest. People need to be educated about how to conduct themselves, how to reduce risk of depredation to livestock, and what to do when encountering wild animals in the forest. We need to ensure there is always a trained cadre of specialists ready to deal with conflict situations, to resolve them quickly, professionally, with the protection of human health and welfare foremost in mind. But as long as there is at least one tiger out there, the risk will remain. Will the people of Primorye and Khabarovsk accept that risk as part of the cost of retaining the essence of the Ussuri Taiga? That is the public debate that is ongoing in the pages of Zov Taiga and elsewhere. How it will be answered is yet to be decided. I only know that personally, I accept that risk. With pepper spray and “flashflare” in hand, I will defend myself, to the best of my ability, in the event that a tiger or bear wants to make a meal of me, but I accept, and embrace that risk – in fact, I need that risk - as a reminder of who I am, and what I am. Without that risk, I am afraid that we humans will have lost something very dear and valuable to our fundamental being, and our relationship to all things wild.