Predators Benefit Public Health and Local Economies

If ever there was a time in American history when we had reason to fear being eaten by bigger animals, it is past. The greatest dangers these days are self-imposed: fast cars, fast food, pollution… All the wild carnivores in North America combined do not kill as many people as do domestic dogs. Cars kill thousands of times as many people as do animals.

While the likelihood of being eaten by a big wild toothy animal is vanishingly remote, the likelihood of being sickened by Lyme disease or another emerging public health threat associated with fragmented ecosystems is significant. Coyotes and other predators hold in check numbers of the smaller animals that carry such pathogens as the bacterium that causes Lyme disease.

The animal that kills the most people in the United States now is deer—our elimination of native predators having allowed prey numbers to soar past natural levels, resulting in countless, sometimes fatal, collisions between cars and wildlife. Bobcats, cougars, and wolves belong in the Adirondacks and Northern Appalachians regulating deer herds.

For New York's Adirondack Park to be indisputably the wildest, healthiest landscape in the East, we need to welcome home cougars and wolves. We should also study the viability of restoring lynx to the Park. Lynx depend heavily on snowshoe hare for prey and do best in cold snowy environments; so they may prove susceptible to warming climate. Still, snowshoe hare thus far seem to be surviving warming weather just fine, so perhaps lynx could too. A successful restoration of lynx could give our communities the confidence to welcome home cougars next.

Cougar Rewilding Foundation, Wildlands Network, and The Rewilding Institute are among the groups calling for the return of cougars to the Adirondacks and Northern Appalachians. We are fortunate to have in the Adirondacks enough wild country and prey (deer especially, but also beaver, snowshoe hare, porcupines, and other smaller animals) to support cougar recovery.

Wolves are the consummate top predator in North America, serving as rangers or guardians of wild ecosystems by keeping herbivores from severely over-browsing or overgrazing plant communities. Equally important, wolves keep the ungulates moving. With the return of wolves, browsers become wary and mobile again, no longer lazily browsing lush areas (often decimating the wildflowers we humans like to see), but rather moving frequently—allowing plants to recover. This is why, even though hunting can reduce deer numbers, it is not sufficient to change deer herd behavior and maintain ecological health.

Finally, aside from the public health & ecological benefits, predators like wolves, cougars, and lynx would enhance local and regional economies in at least two ways.

First, these top predators will allow hardwood forests to regenerate, helping wood products industries. In some parts of the East, over-browsing by deer has virtually halted hardwood regrowth. So far, the Adirondacks have had cold and snowy enough winters to prevent massive deer overshoot, but with warming climate, we could face the same eating down of the forest that parts of the Southern and Central Appalachians are already facing. (For a preview of what our forests could look like with continued warming and too few top predators, walk Shawangunk or Hudson Valley woods in southeast New York, where you will find many thorny plants but few wildflowers or hardwood seedlings.)

Second, the return of our charismatic megafauna would attract numerous wildlife-watchers, bolstering the tourism industry. Hundreds of thousands of tourists a year visit Yellowstone National Park and Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in hopes of seeing, or at least hearing, a pack of

wolves, bringing in $35 million annually. Adirondack Park could become the Boundary Waters of the Northeast, if we welcome back the big animals we exterminated last century, to the enrichment of guides, hotel and restaurant owners, and other local businesspeople.

In short, there's reason for everyone in the Adirondack Park to welcome home our top predators. We have little to fear from them, yet more to gain than we could have ever imagined— until now, when we it's easy to see what we've lost in their absence.

This article is an adapted excerpt from the *Split Rock Wildway: Scouting the Adirondack Park's Most Diverse Wildlife Corridor* by John Davis, published by Essex Editions.

John Davis lives with his family in Split Rock Wildway. He works with Eddy Foundation, which has opened to the public about 3,000 acres in the eastern Adirondacks; a board member of Champlain Area Trails and The Rewilding Institute; a co-founder of Wildlands Network; and author of *Big, Wild, and Connected: Scouting an Eastern Wildway from Florida to Quebec*—about his 7,600-mile traverse of the proposed Eastern Wildway in 2011. His 5,000-mile traverse of the Rocky Mountains from Sonora, Mexico, to British Columbia, Canada, is featured in the film *Born to Rewild*.

All photos in this article were taken by Larry Master, www.masterimages.org.