

Top Predator Losses Disrupt Ecosystems

The loss of top carnivores could alter the dynamics of disease and wildfires and have unintended consequences for ecosystems. Christopher Intagliata reports

What human activity has the biggest impact on the planet? I took an informal poll of New Yorkers: "Driving, day to day commuting." "Eating too much meat." "Using too many resources, I think." "Factory farming." "Driving."

Here's something I didn't hear: killing off the world's top carnivores, like tigers, wolves and bears. Scientists say it's an overlooked problem with effects that ripple through ecosystems in unexpected ways. When otters disappear, for example, urchins take over, decimating kelp forests.

Researchers reviewed the conservation status of 31 of the world's largest carnivorous mammals. They found that some two-thirds are threatened, living on a fraction of their former range. And nearly all are decreasing in number, apart from a few exceptions, like grizzlies and black bears. Their analysis appears in the journal *Science*. [William J. Ripple et al., [Status and Ecological Effects of the World's Largest Carnivores](#)]

The loss of top carnivores could alter the dynamics of disease and wildfires, they say, and have unintended consequences for ecosystems. So either we learn to coexist with these predators or their disappearance may come back to bite us.

—Christopher Intagliata