

The Death of Marius

Putting a zookeeper's decision in perspective



(Photo by Art G./digitalART2)

By Josie Glausiusz

Last month, keepers at the Copenhagen Zoo shot a two-year-old giraffe named Marius, cut up his carcass, and fed the meat to the lions in front of a crowd of onlookers. The zoo's scientific director, Bengt Holst, argued that the giraffe's genes were "well-represented" in a European breeding program, and that the [measure](#) was necessary to ensure a healthy captive population of the animals. Some 27,000 people had petitioned to save the giraffe, and others targeted Holst with death threats. Two days after the kill, Joyce Carol Oates tweeted, "Still can't comprehend why the Danish zoo killed the beautiful young healthy giraffe. Yes, they had 'reasons'—so did Nazi doctors."

The writer's bandying about of the word *Nazi* is troubling, but so is the fact that she and others seem more alarmed about the fate of one captive animal than the loss of large beasts in the wild. According to a [report](#) published in January in the journal *Science*, many revered carnivores face "enormous threats" that have led to colossal population declines in the past two centuries. The reasons for these declines include habitat loss, poaching, and loss of prey.

The study, led by William J. Ripple of Oregon State University in Corvallis, shows that more than three-quarters of the 31 species of large carnivore are decreasing in the wild, and details the specific threats to seven of them: lions and leopards, the Australian dingo, Eurasian Lynx, sea otters, gray wolves, and pumas. Lions—which, as Holst points out, eat giraffes in the wild—have "declined dramatically" in past decades due to habitat loss and "indiscriminate killing" to protect

humans and their livestock. When lions and leopards decline in abundance, their prey—olive baboons—increase. Baboons themselves pose a major threat to livestock animals, and baboon raids on crops often force families to keep their children home from school to protect their fields.

Likewise, the dingo's range has been restricted substantially by the construction of a 3,400-mile fence aimed at keeping these free-ranging dogs out of Australia's major sheep-grazing zone. When dingo populations fall, exotic predators such as red fox proliferate, with a corresponding loss of small marsupials. And the extirpation of pumas and other large carnivores from the Eastern United States has led to an explosion in the population of white-tailed deer, which eat wildflowers and crops and carry Lyme disease.

Ripple and his colleagues propose the creation of a "Global Large Carnivore Initiative" to protect wild carnivores. This agency, Ripple told me via email, "is still at the idea stage, but some day could be part of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature." In the meantime, he believes that we need to encourage people to care about large carnivores by educating them about their importance.

Which brings me back to my original conundrum: why all the fuss about one giraffe? "This is because there is a face on the Danish zoo giraffe," Ripple says, "while the loss of large carnivores in general is a vague concept and much less personal."