

What to Do with a Magic Green Lamp

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If an environmental genie appeared and offered us a wish, we might pull out our copy of *The Sixth Extinction* by Elizabeth Kolbert and ask the oceans to be deacidified, the Amazon Rainforest to be saved, or the obvious, to stop climate change. But if I'm being honest, I'd ask the genie to make mosquitoes extinct (at least the ones that feed on us). Sure, the coral may die and Benadryl sticks will sell a lot less, but at least we won't have to deal with the bloodthirsty suckers.

There are only a few species of mosquitoes that feed on humans out of hundreds and, according to many ecologists, the environment would function fine without them. Observing their existence truly illustrates their appendix-like place in the ecosystem. I can attest; on an unusually hot and muggy summer day, right after one of Mother Nature's storms, Houston (where I previously contributed to the mosquito diet) becomes a breeding and feeding ground for vampires. Except unlike 'real' vampires, silver, garlic, and crosses don't ward them away, and, for that matter, neither does anything except bathing yourself in DEET. Without the fear of G-d or garlic and plenty of small pools of water ripe for egg-laying, female mosquitoes go out on a hunt. These tiny vampires go out in hordes searching for the smell of iron, the smell of blood. When they find it, nothing can stop them. Like the bald eagles in *John James Audubon's "Ornithological Biography"* on White-Headed Eagles, mosquitoes have an air of arrogance, which is normally only found in apex predators (Audubon 120). Unlike their eagle counterparts, their size doesn't scare potential predators away;

instead, they are so small that almost nothing eats them, so they have nothing to fear. They fearlessly divebomb towards our arms, our legs, to any open piece of skin with a buzz reminiscent of a kamikaze pilot, and if there isn't any available, they'll try to drill through our clothes like an oil rig in search of their red gold. Even when chased away from the well, barely escaping death by giant hands, they insistently goback time after time until they are dead or have had their fill. After getting their fill, the females lay their eggs in those small puddles and give rise to the next generation of blood-sucking vampires.

What is very evident is the lack of utility that mosquitoes provide to other animals. Sure, in their larval stage some dragonflies eat them, but other than that, they are the 40-year-old unemployed son living in the basement of the animal kingdom. Except they are far worse. When going from well to well, they cross-contaminate water, spreading horrific diseases such as West Nile virus, malaria, and Zika. To prevent the diseases from spreading, in the past and to a lesser degree to this day, we have declared war against mosquitos and sprayed chemicals into the air in unimaginable quantities. Unfortunately, not only is it noxious to us, but it is deadly to many other creatures that are productive, necessary elements of the food web. A group of scientists calculated the amount of DEET it would take to kill all mosquitoes and determined enough to end all life, which would be the sixth and last extinction. There are currently fewer atomic approaches to controlling mosquito populations, such as a program based in Brazil where they are genetically altering male mosquitoes to only fertilize females with other males who carry the same genetic mutation. Unfortunately, scientists have only lessened populations and

quite obviously haven't killed all mosquitoes as it takes time to have a significant effect.

So with my wish to the genie, I need to be careful and ask for a Thanos-ian snap, so I don't inadvertently cause the last age. Doing so would not only save us from the irritant of an itch but would save thousands of lives by adding West Nile virus and others to the list headed by smallpox. It would also stop us from having to spray chemicals into the air and DEET onto our skin. Excessive use of DEET has been correlated to cancer. Thus, ending mosquitoes would decrease the amount of diseases in multiple ways.

We aren't the only things harmed by chemicals. Many bugs are already going extinct due to deforestation, Elizabeth Kolbert in her book *The Sixth Extinction*, places the extinction rate of bugs due to deforestation to be "roughly fourteen species a day" (Kolbert 186). While that number is already unimaginable, it doesn't even account for other bugs dying from insecticides and DEET. Bugs are a pillar of the world's ecosystem. For example, a single species of ant supports at least 300 other species in the rainforest (Kolbert 184). Thus, their extinction would lead to an "insectagedon" that would lead us down a path far worse than even Kolbert could imagine. While DEET isn't the only chemical that kills insects, without mosquitoes, it wouldn't be as widely used and would allow bugs populations to recuperate. Foresight isn't twenty-twenty though; Wyatt Williams explicates this in his news article "When the National Bird is a Burden," in which he explains how bald eagle conservationists didn't expect the new eagles to treat chicken farms like an all-you-can-eat buffet and to drop their leftovers

from the sky. But it is still safe to say that any unlikely risks such as raining chicken are heavily outweighed by the certain benefits.

While my ideology may sound idyllic and selfless, it is anything but. It is quite morbid to exterminate a species that is only trying to survive and can only do it through us. It is no different than killing all mole rats for being ugly. Except for one thing: our reason for wanting to kill all mosquitoes is one of self-preservation, which is as inherent and necessary to life as carbon. We want to kill mosquitoes because they kill us, which is an acceptable act because if we don't preserve and protect our species, we won't have anything left to protect.

We, in a general sense, don't act to preserve things that aren't us and always act to preserve ourselves. It is why, in truth, most people don't care about the extinction of the Hawaiian crow (Kolbert 263) because we can easily live without them, and it's why farmers are butchering wild horses that destroy their land, quite literally killing a symbol of American freedom. If followed properly, self-preservation can be good. It can protect the Hawaiian crows and wild horses, and it can keep nature in equilibrium. (While "good" isn't necessarily the proper word here, as it is akin to saying Jupiter is "good," it just is, the fact that self-preservation can comparatively make the world a better place necessitates it. Self-preservation is not a real moral philosophy.) We disturbed the equilibrium when we veered off the road of self-preservation to one of self-gratification that lead us to wanting mahogany chairs without regard for the rainforest and lead multiple generations to hunt the auk into extinction (Kolbert 65). We have obliterated the natural balance of life, and it will not only harm the animals lost, but also threaten our very existence. Self-preservation can

no longer be misconstrued as directly preserving just us: we need to preserve our legs, we need to preserve our world. If we go back to acting like every other living thing and act out of true self-preservation, we might just live long enough to get a second wish.

Works Cited

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