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The Disappearance of Pizza Rat

Humans have seen rats as pests since the dawn of history. We domesticated cats for the express purpose of getting rid of them. However, despite the seemingly unending war to rid ourselves of these foul creatures by using increasingly barbaric devices such as traps that resemble guillotines and good old fashioned poison, we have been unsuccessful at eliminating our foes. But what if rats went extinct? Assuming that their adaptability, broad diet, and fast breeding patterns that make it so hard for humans to rid themselves of their furry friends haven't changed, for rats to go extinct, something pretty dramatic would have to happen. Something like the mass extinction of species that we are currently witnessing.

The so-called sixth extinction, as coined by Kolbert in her book of the same name, has been brought about by human activity. Our meddling has resulted in ocean acidification, rapid climate change, and the increasing occurrence of invasive species. Rats are arguably one of the best invasive species on the planet, secondary to humans. They have hitchhiked to distant lands on ships since humans first learned to sail. Wherever humans ventured in hopes of colonizing a new land, and people, rats colonized right along with them, wreaking havoc on ecosystems. Before human exploration, Darwin theorized any animal hoping to expand from its native home "either slithered or swam or loped or crawled or cast its seed upon the wind" (Kolbert, 194). Kolbert describes the human action of spreading species across continents as

resulting in a new Pangaea, a clashing of continents and their flora and fauna in a way that is not natural.

Rats have been the animal victor of this unintentional consequence of human exploration. They can adapt to practically every continent, excluding Antarctica, and terrorize the native life. They often bring disease and have voracious appetites that will demolish anything they can get their tiny little rat paws on. Although they will genuinely eat anything, they have formed a parasitic relationship with humans and often steal our food. New York City is a wonderful case study to examine this relationship. New York rats are notorious for their size and audacity. They have no problem stealing food from people's cupboards, digging through dumpsters for someone's 3-day old hoagie, or dragging whatever food they find through the subways until they can find somewhere to gorge themselves safely. Rats unite both city and country folk. Country folks often see them making themselves comfortable in their attics, pantries, or garages. While city dwellers may see one carrying a gigantic slice of pizza through the streets like the notorious pizza rat. Kingston, an urbanite unfamiliar with raw nature, writes about the wonder that metropolitan residents like herself experience when they see nature and the creatures it holds. She describes an experience where she and her friend are observing creatures they found in the ocean, they stare in awe and "when [they] checked the clock, four hours had gone by. [They'd] both thought it had only been about twenty minutes" (Kingston, 789). I doubt anyone except researchers and those who keep rats as pets have ever stared at a rat in rapt attention and awe for hours on end. Most people who catch a glimpse of a rat shriek in horror; to most, they are not nature's creatures but instead a common menace that has cursed humanity for centuries. But what if one-day rats are no longer so common? What if, instead, they were a source of fascination due to their rarity.

Frankly, in all honesty, humans will likely not be there to see the moment a rat sighting becomes an uncommon occurrence. Rats are very hardy animals, and in views of a post-apocalyptic world, our minds often go to a hellscape populated solely with rats and cockroaches. In the last chapter of her book, Kolbert even jokes about this very thought when she discusses a world post-human if we become victims of the sixth extinction ourselves or abandon the planet due to the destruction we have wrought, stating, "The Sixth Extinction will continue to determine the course of life long after everything people have written and painted and built has been ground into dust and giant rats have ---or have not--- inherited the earth" (Kolbert, 268).

While the extinction of humans may mean that rats live a less comfortable and more primitive life, they will likely do just fine. Although the easily accessible food and comfy warm places to build nests may go away, rats' adaptability means they will have no problem returning to their natural habitat. Their lives will likely be similar to the water shrew once observed by the naturalist John Knapp, foraging for insects and other food and continuing to propagate except for when caught by a bigger animal. If rats can survive with and without humans, what does a world in which they have gone extinct look like?

It is a world that is silent. It is a world devoid of life. The day when rats, one of the world's most tenacious species, are no longer around will be a day when the world is unrecognizable to humans. There may be no more land because sea levels have risen so dramatically. The world may be so hot that it is comparable to an oven, baking everything on its surface. The air may be so polluted that any living creature may struggle to choke out a breath. The world may have been ruined by radiation as one last cruel act of humanity killing every living creature on Earth. The world will be populated with only microscopic creatures if it still

supports life at all. A world without the rat, one of the greatest pests of all time, is a world no one would want to live in.

While it is almost certain that rats will win the battle of survival against humans and live long after our species is gone, if rats cease to exist, it will be a sad moment for humanity. It will mean that our civilization's remnants will be gone along with any recognizable traces of the Earth we once inhabited. So let us put down our poison and our rat traps and celebrate the rat's continuing success because as long as they exist, we know there is the hope of continuing durability of life on Earth. As long as rats continue to haunt the streets of New York City, even if most of life on Earth has vanished, there is the promise of a new day where all kinds of wondrous creatures will once again fill the Earth. So instead of screaming in terror next time you see one of these furry creatures, why not salute the humble rat and wish him well, for without them Earth would be in a sorry state indeed. Long live Pizza Rat!