

BILLY POSSUMS

In 2007, a fourth-grader at Sobrante Park Elementary in Oakland, California, wrote a letter to the head of the United States Department of the Interior. “My name is Juan Piedra,” he began. “Every morning when I wake up I tell myself how much danger the polar bears are in right now, and how sad I am right now. Imagine if everything was upside down. Please help the polar bears. I am really heart broken. They are feeling badly.”

I found Juan’s letter in an archive of public comments submitted to the government after it announced that it was considering putting the polar bear on the endangered species list. Normally, these decision-making processes are quiet, complicated ordeals, hashed out by bureaucrats and lawyers; calling for comments from the public is a pro forma part of the procedure. But with the polar bear, half a million supportive letters, postcards, and petitions from Americans poured into the Department of the Interior—then the most ever in the Endangered Species Act’s history. Many were handwritten pleas from

children to “save the polar bear,” and some offered solutions to climate change, like using ethanol instead of fossil fuels. (A kid named Fritz wrote: “I feel bad about the polar bears. I like polar bears. Everyone can use corn juice for cars. From, Fritz.”) Lots of kids just drew pictures: polar bears wearing life preservers, or stuck on little ice islands, or—in one case—a polar bear drowning and being eaten simultaneously by a shark and a lobster.

The polar bear was, by this time, a pop culture preoccupation—“a shining white symbol of the green movement,” as one television news reporter put it. The mania was sparked in early 2005, when environmental groups, led by the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, had first petitioned the Department of the Interior to consider endangered status for the bear, setting the legal procedure in motion. Petitions to list species as endangered are filed all the time. In fact, the Center for Biological Diversity and another group, WildEarth Guardians, would soon be filing them at a combined rate of about three hundred per year—pressuring the federal government to protect all manner of imperiled sturgeon and bats that most environmental groups don’t bother to lobby for. But the Center for Biological Diversity hoped the polar bear might stir up special interest. It could be a landmark case: the first species protected explicitly because of the threat of climate change.

The morning after the center filed its petition, MSNBC splashed a picture of a polar bear across its home page. Then CNN did. A long polar bear blitz began. Over the next several years, public attention to climate change intensified, spurred on by events that often had nothing to do directly with polar bears. The summer of 2005 saw less ice cover in the Arctic than any other summer since satellite monitoring began three decades earlier. In 2006, Al Gore released *An Inconvenient Truth*. Then, in 2007, a high-profile panel of scientists convened by

the United Nations released its final, sobering report about the “unequivocal” certainty of climate change and its projected effects. (“This is real, this is real, this is real,” one of the lead authors said, explaining the findings to the press.) But because the problem of climate change was invisible, the media found that polar bears were an easy, adorable means to illustrate these stories—more eye-catching than a smokestack spewing carbon or a glacier crumbling. *Time* magazine ran a photo of a bear on its cover with the headline “Be Worried. Be Very Worried.” Annie Leibovitz photographed Knut, a celebrity polar bear cub at the Berlin Zoo, with Leonardo DiCaprio for the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

The species had become a spokes-species, and no matter what context polar bears appeared in, they symbolized the same thing. It had gotten to the point that, by the end of 2007, New Line Cinema, the makers of the fantasy film *The Golden Compass*, which featured a computer-generated, armored white bear as one of its characters, worked with the World Wildlife Fund to produce public service announcements about climate change using clips from the film. They also donated several hundred thousand dollars to the conservation group. It was as though New Line were paying a karmic licensing fee for the use of a white bear, even though *The Golden Compass* never actually mentioned polar bears and took place in another universe. “This is a very organic partnership for us,” a New Line marketing executive insisted.

This convulsion of polar-bear love may look like an empty craze. But all that visibility, and all those children’s letters, had real, political consequences. Even though the fervor for polar bears wasn’t engineered by the Center for Biological Diversity, they were counting on it as part of a plan they’d laid out in advance. They were using the bear as a trap in a much bigger and longer-running legalistic war of words.

IN THE EARLY 2000S, environmental attorneys were struggling to force the Bush administration to regulate greenhouse gases. The Bush administration, meanwhile, kept refusing even to acknowledge definitively that those emissions were causing climate change. In 2003, the legal tack that had seemed the most promising—that carbon should be controlled as another kind of pollution under the Clean Air Act—got stalled in the courts. Looking for new angles of attack, two attorneys at the Center for Biological Diversity, Kassie Siegel and Brendan Cummings, turned to the Endangered Species Act.

The Endangered Species Act lays out a program for the conservation of imperiled plant and animal species. It makes it possible to devote money and government workers to their recovery and to set aside and protect land they live on. It bans killing, harassing, or shipping those species across state lines or overseas, and forces government agencies to make sure that their activities—everything from building a new fence to testing bombs—don't endanger them further.

The government's decisions about which animals deserve to be on the endangered species list must be based solely on the "best available science"—whatever studies have been conducted that speak to the severity of the threat of their extinction. It wasn't clear how far listing the polar bear could go toward actually saving the species; some significant steps could be taken under the Endangered Species Act, but it seemed unlikely that any administration would upend America's entire carbon-based economy to fulfill its technical obligations to the polar bear under the law. But petitioning the Bush administration to rule on whether the polar bear *qualified* for protection would at least confront the government, and the public, with the climate science it had so far managed to duck—a first step to any eventual prog-

ress. It was a way to put the government on the spot; the polar bear and the entire Endangered Species Act were being played like pawns in a higher-stakes chess match. In fact, Siegel and Cummings had come up with the strategy several years earlier and had already auditioned other species for the role of climate change victim.

The science of climate change was well understood at the time, but there still weren't many published studies showing how specific species would be affected—and, for the environmentalists' strategy to work, the "best available science" the Bush administration was going to be cornered with needed to be ironclad. Siegel and Cummings were left scraping the bottom of the taxonomic barrel. They considered using the Glacier Bay wolf spider, a spider in Alaska. But there was uncertainty as to whether the wolf spider was a distinct species, and whether it therefore qualified for protection. Also, the Glacier Bay wolf spider sounded icky, a public relations nonstarter, unlikely to focus the American public, and not just the courts, on climate change as the case picked up steam.

In 2001, Siegel and Cummings petitioned the government on behalf of the one truly solid case they could find: the Kittlitz's murrelet, a little-known speckled Alaskan seabird that frequently nests near shrinking glacial ice sheets, and whose population—estimated in the low tens of thousands of birds—may have declined more than 85 percent since 1991. The outcome of the Kittlitz's murrelet petition was discouraging. The Bush administration didn't exactly deny the bird endangered status, but it didn't protect it, either. The Kittlitz's was deemed "warranted but precluded." It was shoved through a curious loophole in the law onto a backlog known as "the candidate list."

The candidate list has a complicated history. The modern Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973, by an overwhelming majority of senators and congressmen. It announced itself as a counterforce to the "consequences of economic growth and development untempered

by adequate concern." And, although this may sound radical—the United States government pledging to temper the country's growth—it was treated as feel-good, softball stuff at the time. A law to save animals was a relief from Watergate and Vietnam. Its passage was hardly noted—the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* each devoted exactly one sentence to it—and President Nixon signed it into law in the doldrums between Christmas and New Year's.

One historian writes that most in Congress believed the Endangered Species Act was "a largely symbolic effort" to protect only the kinds of species environmentalists call "charismatic megafauna"—grizzlies, whales, bald eagles, and other large, beautiful species that people tend to feel an easy connection with. But the act had been quietly beefed up by idealistic staffers, and was much further-reaching and more powerful than most congressmen took the time to understand. After its passage, there was instantly a lot of buyer's remorse. (In a famous example, a small fish called the snail darter quickly complicated a dam-building project in Tennessee.) Meanwhile, protection was being sought for obscure birds and skinny little snakes that none of these legislators had ever heard of. Within two years, some twenty-three thousand species had been proposed for endangered status. The Smithsonian pulled together a list of 3,187 plants it considered worthy of protection. The paperwork alone was staggering. The agencies responsible for ruling on those petitions, primarily the Fish and Wildlife Service, soon found ways of brushing them off their desks.

Congress reformed the law several times to make the listing process more functional and fair. It required the government to rule on petitions according to strict timelines, but also set up the candidate list so that, if a particular species needed protection in a hurry, Fish and Wildlife would have the flexibility to deal with that crisis. Designating a species "warranted but precluded" would put it in a temporary holding pen, pausing the clock on its petition deadline, while the

agency made progress on its more pressing work. But the workload involved in staving off extinction and managing all of America's endangered species only grows, and in our new era of conservation reliance, it appears to be open-ended. Especially since the 1990s, the government has used the warranted but precluded category as an indefinite dumping ground.

In 2005, the Center for Biological Diversity found that many candidate species had been waiting around on the list for an average of seventeen years, some of them holdovers from that original list of imperiled plants drawn up by the Smithsonian. Recently, the center and other groups sued the federal government to spring those species from their bureaucratic purgatory and give them full protection. The government settled and will now be slowly reassessing each one's case. But the settlement didn't close the warranted-but-precluded loophole. It's likely only a matter of time before the candidate list starts filling up again.

Around the time I visited Churchill, there were nearly three hundred species on the candidate list. I found a copy of the list and noticed that virtually all the species on it have one thing in common: I've never heard of them. There's the Neosho mucket mussel and the Slab-side pearlymussel, the band-rumped storm petrel, spotless crake, relict leopard frog, small-eye shiner, and least chub. The Roy Prairie pocket gopher is one of nine pocket gophers on the list. There are several bats, five kinds of salamanders, nine snails, and four shrimps. There's the Sonoyta mud turtle and Miami blue butterfly; the Clifton Cave beetle, the Coleman Cave beetle, the Fowler's Cave beetle, the Indian Grave Point Cave beetle, the Icebox Cave beetle, the Inquirer Cave beetle, the Louisville Cave beetle, the Nobletts Cave beetle, and the Tatum Cave beetle. Also, Stephan's Riffle beetle. And there are plants, like Hirst's panic grass and Short's bladderpod. A Hawaiian plant called the Alani spent fifteen years on the candidate list before it was

finally bumped up to endangered status in 1994. Unfortunately, the plant appeared to have gone extinct two years earlier.

At least twenty-four species seem to have gone extinct while waiting around on the candidate list, and I've never heard of them, either. They include a fish called the shortnose cisco and lots and lots of species of mussels, including one called the lined pocketbook. In 1982, something called the Valdina Farms salamander, which lived in a single cave in Texas, was deemed warranted but precluded. Five years later, a water agency diverted a river and flooded the cave, wiping it out.

This was the real value of the polar bear, then: its magnetism. It could inspire enough public gushing to make it politically impossible for the Bush administration to dump it quietly onto the candidate list and bury the issue of climate change yet again. The public-relations strategy was also a legal strategy. As the Center for Biological Diversity's Brendan Cummings put it at the time, "No politician wants to tell their kids, tell their constituency, 'Yes, I voted to kill the polar bear.'" The Endangered Species Act may say that we, as a nation, are devoted to preventing the extinction of any more species. But we also know that we can't realistically save everything. And no one cried for the lined pocketbook.

WHY ARE WE DRAWN to certain wild animals and not others? Can the cultural carrying capacity of a species—its charisma, essentially—be predicted or deconstructed?

That's the mystery that the Center for Biological Diversity was trying to game in its listing petitions, and that conservation groups have long puzzled over, working to move the public to a particular ecological cause through the story of just the right, sympathetic victim—the bald eagle, which brought attention to DDT in the 1970s; or the spot-

ted owl, which took on the logging industry in the nineties. Why exactly, according to one survey, are 73 percent of Americans willing to block construction of a power plant and pay more for their electricity in order to save mountain lions, but only 48 percent willing to do so to protect a plant called Furbish's lousewort—especially since, frankly, few of us are likely ever to see a mountain lion or a Furbish's lousewort whether the power plant is built or not.*

Part of the answer seems to be that we are attracted to animals that resemble us physically, a principle called "phylogenetic relatedness." Monkeys are more likable than otters; and otters—with their recognizable facial structures, little mustaches, and shrunken hands—are more likable than lizards. We may be especially sympathetic to phylogenetically related animals because we assume that a creature that

* Over the last twenty years, a new field of academic study has coalesced around similar questions, examining our attitudes toward animals and the sociological, psychological, and imaginative forces that influence them. The field is so new that its own researchers don't always agree on a name for it—often it's called Human-Animal Studies—and its findings are wide-ranging. My favorites include: The more television a person in upstate New York watches, the more fearful he or she is of being attacked by a black bear. Americans are more likely to assume that a given tiger is female than male. If the mammals depicted on beer bottle labels reflected the actual mammalian biodiversity of Earth, there would be far more rodents and bats on beer bottles, and far fewer mountain goats, bighorn sheep, and woolly mammoths. Only 13.7 percent of white women in Southern California won't enter the ocean out of fear of jellyfish. American television commercials tend to depict solitary wild animals, whereas Chinese ads show herds, flocks, and gaggles. The average time a person spends in front of an animal enclosure at an American zoo is 99.31 seconds.

In a study in which a fake snake, a fake turtle, and a Styrofoam cup were placed on the side of a road, motorists hit the snake and turtle more often than the cup, and the snake more often than the turtle; nearly 3 percent of motorists who hit the fake animals appeared to hit them on purpose. Another study, looking at people's reactions to being attacked by pumas, found that the "lowest likelihood of escaping injury occurred when individuals remained stationary." Women are more likely than men to get "a magical feeling" when seeing dolphins in the surf. Sixty-eight percent of "mothers with high feelings of entitlement and self-esteem" identified with a dancing cat in a commercial for Purina.

Americans consider lobsters more important than pigeons, but also more stupid. Turkeys are seen as slightly more dangerous than sea otters, and people believe dolphins to be smarter and more lovable than human beings. Pandas are twice as lovable as ladybugs.

looks vaguely like us will have similarly high capacities for thought, pain, and feeling. (In one study, researchers told interviewees that a small mob had just cornered and kicked an animal "like a football" until it was bloodied, unconscious, or dead. The more similar that animal was to humans, the stiffer the fine or the more jail time interviewees recommended for the abusers.)

We are also evolutionarily programmed to empathize with species that resemble human babies—with large, forward-facing eyes; floppy limbs; circular faces; and a roly-poly shape. This helps explain, for example, why polar bear cubs wind up on so many cutesy wall calendars, and why cartoon fish, like Pixar's Nemo, are never drawn realistically, with eyes on either side of their heads. The Yale social ecologist Stephen Kellert has summed it up this way: "People generally prefer large attractive animals with an erect bearing, animals that walk, run, or fly rather than crawl, slither, or live underground. A good candidate for the average human nightmare might be a creature that is small, ugly, predatory, likely to inflict injury or property damage, lacking in intelligence or feeling, and a denizen of dark, damp places, inclined to crawl and slither about." In other words, we like the polar bear, not the Glacier Bay wolf spider.

Still, physicality explains only so much, and what it does explain can feel obvious. There is a purely cultural dimension to the way we think about wild animals; their meanings can shift and float in and out of fashion over time. As the softening of the polar bear's image suggests, the stories we tell about animals depend on the times and places in which we tell them. This was proved more than a century ago, during an inadvertent nationwide popularity contest of bear versus opossum.

It began in November 1902, when President Theodore Roosevelt took a train to Mississippi, to escape the White House for four days of roughing it and black bear hunting outside the town of Smedes. On

the second morning of the hunt, the dogs caught the scent of a bear and chased it into the swampy thickets outside of camp. After a chase, Roosevelt turned back for lunch. But his hunting guide—a yarn-spinning ex-slave named Holt Collier, well-known in the Delta for having killed three thousand bears—eventually managed to corner the animal near a watering hole late that afternoon. The bear snatched one of the hounds by the neck and mashed its spine, killing it. After it injured a second dog, Collier leapt off his horse and cracked the bear on the head so hard that he bent back the butt of his rifle. Then he roped the animal to a tree and tooted away on his bugle, calling in the president for the honor of the kill.

The bear was a 235-pound female—semiconscious, injured, mangy-looking by some accounts, and, Collier judged, shrunken to about half its normal weight by Mississippi's drought. When Roosevelt saw the pitiful animal lashed to the tree, he refused to fire at it, or to have anyone else shoot it, either; he felt it went against his code as a sportsman. Instead, he asked a hunting companion to put the bear out of its misery with a knife. But that detail of the story would quickly get lost. A few days later, a political cartoonist in Washington, Clifford Berryman, memorialized the moment when Roosevelt declined to fire his weapon as an almost saintly scene. He called the cartoon "Drawing the Line in Mississippi." Roosevelt was shown with his rifle down and his hand outstretched to spare the bear, while the animal sat on its hind legs like a baying puppy, with frightened wide eyes and two ears pricked up on the top of its head. It looked as helpless as an infant, as if it needed to be reassured or swept into someone's arms. It wouldn't have registered as familiar at the time, but, looking at the cartoon now, you recognize the animal right away: it's a teddy bear.

Essentially, the bear from the cartoon was turned into a plush toy and named after the president. There are competing legends about

who made the first teddy bears: it was either Rose Michtom, the wife of a Brooklyn toy-shop owner, or a German seamstress named Margarete Steiff, whose family owned the felt manufacturing company Steiff, still the world's most prominent teddy bear producer. We do know that Steiff had been selling a line of stuffed animal toys, including a bear, for several years before Roosevelt's hunt. But Steiff's original bear was a much more realistic animal, less cuddly and infantile, with the humping, brutish back of a wild one. Also, the bear was chained through its nose to a peg.

Bears, after all, were considered monsters. For so long, the animal had been a shorthand for the unruliness and danger that Americans were encountering on the western frontier. Bears rarely turned up in toy catalogs and books, one historian notes, and "when they did they looked mean and were apparently designed to upset young children." Two years before Roosevelt's trip, *Ladies' Home Journal* published a kids' adventure story about a fourteen-year-old named Balser, described as "the happiest boy in Indiana" because he owned a rifle, "ten pounds of powder, and lead enough to kill every living creature within a radius of five miles." In the story, Balser winds up killing a bear, but gets bitten in the process. So, in the story's feel-good conclusion, the boy and his father track down the bear's mate and shoot her, too, in revenge.

For bears—real bears, out on the land, with pulses and appetites—turn-of-the-century America was a painful and inhospitable place. All kinds of large carnivores were being systematically exterminated, from east to west, to keep from complicating the lives of humans. Wolves, cougars, and coyotes especially were demonized as Americans' competitors: "brutal murderers" that killed and ate "harmless, beautiful animals"—namely, the livestock that people were raising to eat themselves. In 1906, an arm of the federal government, the Bureau of Biological Survey, began killing tens of thousands of wolves and coyotes

every year, with traps and poisoned meat. The government also offered bounties, roping ordinary citizens into the work. One bureau biologist would justify the war on wolves by insisting, "Large predatory mammals, destructive of livestock and game, no longer have a place in our advancing civilization."

This is to say, the teddy bear was born in the middle of a great spasm of extermination that would go on for decades. (Even the Audubon Society began eradicating predatory birds, like hawks and eagles, from their bird sanctuaries.) It was a natural escalation of the mind-set formed a century earlier, in Thomas Jefferson's time, when Americans told themselves that the gruesome Incognitum had been driven extinct to wipe the continent clean for their use. Now the country was finishing off all these smaller, less imposing Incognitums—buffing out the land's last scratches of wildness so that all we could see in its surface was our own reflection.

The teddy bear was only one sign that some people, deep down, had started to feel conflicted about all that killing. America still hated and feared the bear. But all of a sudden, America also wanted to give the bear a hug.

THIS AFFECTION was already starting to percolate when Roosevelt went to Mississippi. Two years earlier, in 1900, the bestselling author Ernest Thompson Seton published *The Biography of a Grizzly*, a book that tenderized the reputation of the bear in the same way the teddy bear would. The story begins with a mother grizzly and her cubs "living the quiet life that all bears prefer." But when a rancher opens fire, only one cub survives—a morose little guy named Wahb who must find his way in a shrinking wilderness riddled with steel traps and tainted by the "horrible odor" of man. Yes, Seton argued, grizzlies were once ferocious. But the barbarity of men with rifles and traps

had put them in their place. Now was the time to show the bear some mercy: "The giant has become inoffensive now," he later wrote. "He is shy, indeed, and seeks only to be let mind his own business."

By the time Seton wrote *The Biography of a Grizzly*, he was a controversial figure at the vanguard of a new literary genre called realistic wild animal stories. These stories claimed to be credible natural histories of wildlife. But they dramatized the lives of animals as though they were the anthropomorphic heroes of fiction. (Jack London's *White Fang* may be the realistic wild animal story that's best remembered today.) Seton insisted that his stories were steeped in a nuanced and accurate knowledge of animal behavior, gained from his years in the field. And yet he endowed his animals with a cleverness and morality that sometimes border on the ridiculous. He wrote, for example, of a mother fox that feeds her trapped offspring poisoned meat so that the pup won't have to suffer the indignity of being chained up. Then she nobly commits suicide herself.

Seton was not the most unrealistic realistic wild animal story author. Some almost completely sanitized nature of its violence or trauma. (The writer William Long described a scene of wolves ripping apart a deer as being "peaceable as a breakfast table.") Still, Seton was one of the most successful authors, and he became a target for the backlash against the genre by other naturalists. One critic derided realistic wild animal stories as the "yellow journalism of the woods." Theodore Roosevelt was one of the authors' most vicious enemies, dubbing them "nature fakers," which is the name by which they're remembered today. The fear was that these writers were misleading readers about the way nature worked. Children would be especially vulnerable to their lies.

The country was urbanizing. By 1910, a majority of Americans would live in cities. Instead of spending time in nature, children relied on secondhand descriptions of wildlife now, and naturalists worried

that, without much firsthand experience of animals, kids might accept even these sappy bedtime stories as fact. Teachers around the country were starting to use another of Seton's books, *Wild Animals I Have Known*, as a textbook. "All of this would be highly amusing," one zoo director wrote, "if it were not so pitifully serious to the children of the public schools."

But some of the nature fakers' motivations were more poignant than their critics understood. Seton especially was responding to America's war on predators. His most dignified, sympathetic protagonists were usually the same animals that were being exterminated in the West, like grizzlies and wolves. He was trying to create public empathy for these species—to save them. Like Robert Buchanan with his polar bears more than a hundred years later, Seton knew that regurgitating dry, scientific descriptions wasn't enough to generate a true emotional response. Seton's aim instead, he wrote, was to capture the "personality" of an individual animal "and his view of life." "Since, then, the animals are creatures with wants and feelings differing only in degree from our own, they surely have their rights."

The nature fakers may be mostly forgotten, but this sentimental compassion lives on in nearly every children's book about animals I've read to my daughter—books that, like everything adults give to little children, are echoes of our own beliefs. And it was evident, too, in so many of the letters about polar bears that schoolchildren wrote to the Department of the Interior in 2007. "I really think it is not fair to the polar bears," wrote the fourth-grader in Oakland, Juan Piedra. "Also, they could drown and die off and what if they were you?"

Nature can seem this pure and honorable only once we're no longer afraid of it. We seem to be forever oscillating between demonizing and eradicating certain animals, and then, having beaten those creatures back, empathizing with them as underdogs and wanting to show

them compassion. We exert our power, but are then unsettled by how powerful we are.

Large predators—those able to rip us apart—have understandably commanded a huge share of humans' psychic attention for as long as there have been humans. (Some of the earliest cave paintings are of bears and lions.) But as we've insulated ourselves from nature, and diffused the danger of those animals, we've started to give them new meanings. That basin of anxious, imaginative energy can get rechanneled into a deep aesthetic appreciation. In the bear especially, Yale's Stephen Kellert argues, we see a creature a lot like us: it can walk upright, snores when it sleeps, and is roughly our size and shape. But it's also omnivorous, agile, clever, self-possessed—all the admirable dimensions of ourselves that have been "diminished in modern culture." For many of us today, who spend our days slumped over spreadsheets or quarreling with our banks over hidden fees, bears look like the composed and competent survivors we wish we still were.

No single piece of research demonstrates this cycle of fear and reverence more clearly than a study, led by the geographer Jennifer Wolch, that examined how cougars were written about in the *Los Angeles Times* between 1985 and 1995. In the early 1970s, the cougar population in California had been ground down to as low as twenty-four hundred animals. But by 1990, a ban on hunting had allowed the species to come back; the cougar had become an icon of conservation in Southern California. It was described in the newspaper as "majestic" and "innocent," an embodiment of nature's grace, and a "symbol of our dwindling wilderness heritage." But soon cougars started encroaching into the populated areas around Los Angeles. There were two fatal attacks. More people still died in America because of bee stings and black widow spider bites, Wolch writes, but "as reports of cougar-human interaction rose and public fears were fanned by epi-

sodic attacks, the images of cougars as charismatic and proud wild animals at home in nature were replaced by terms conjuring danger, death, and criminal intent." It was as if a switch had flipped. Before 1990, the predominant image in the newspaper was of an "elusive and fascinating wild creature." After 1990, cougars were "efficient four-legged killers" and baby-snatchers, "roaming like phantoms" in the nearby hills.

The same shift has been happening with wolves lately, especially since Republican legislators maneuvered via a last-minute budget amendment to take away the gray wolf's federal protection in several states in 2011. (Conservationists defended the wolf as part of America's natural majesty; Montana's governor, meanwhile, told his constituents to forget the Endangered Species Act altogether and take matters into their own hands: "If there is a dang wolf in your corral attacking your pregnant cow, shoot that wolf. And if its pals are in the corral, shoot them, too," he told Reuters.) And a decade after Wolch's cougar study, similar research looked at newspaper editorials about a proposed black bear hunt in New Jersey and found almost exactly the same scenario: bears being cast both as "menacing threats" and as "God's creatures" who would gladly "live in peace" if people just left them alone.

When Roosevelt refused to shoot that black bear in Mississippi in 1902, the species' larger cousin, the grizzly, was being brutally eradicated around the country. And as it disappeared from the land, it found new prestige in our imaginations. Soon a novel by James Oliver Curwood, called *The Grizzly King: A Romance of the Wild*, would turn on a scene that is almost exactly the opposite of what happened on the president's bear hunt. A grizzly named Thor stalks the hunter who has previously shot and wounded him. The bear creeps in behind the hunter, trapping him between a rock wall and a cliff, with nowhere to run—and unarmed. Thor towers over the man angrily, but then

pauses, stunned by how “shrinking, harmless and terrified” the creature that had hurt him looked now. And so the animal slowly turns and disappears in the direction from which he’d come, leaving the hunter standing there—letting him live.

The bear was now the merciful one, with a code of honor he refused to break. The hunter was the senseless killer. As Seton once wrote, “No animal will give up its whole life seeking revenge; that kind of mind is found in man alone. The brute creation seeks for peace.” The bear was the bigger man.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG after Roosevelt's bear hunt in 1902 for the teddy bear to become a full-blown craze. By the end of the decade, Steiff was producing close to a million teddy bears a year. Sets of teddy-bear clothes were sold separately, and *Ladies' Home Journal* published patterns for making your own. Your teddy bear could wear pajamas or dress up like a sailor or a fireman. There were even special blankets and caps to keep the toys toasty in winter. That is, despite all its fur, the bear needed a winter coat. In the natural history of the teddy bear, this seems to be the point at which the teddy bear splintered into its own discrete species, when it completely broke away in our imaginations from its relative in the forest.

But the toy confused adults. Their children were trading in dainty baby dolls for beasts—it was troubling. “From all quarters of the globe,” wrote the *Washington Post*, “comes the demand for Teddy bears, with poor Miss Dolly gazing woefully out of her wide open eyes powerless to prevent the slipping away of her power.” The *New York Times* published a poem: “The Passing of the Doll.” The teddy bear seemed like a novelty—a fad—and everyone assumed it would be forgotten once Roosevelt left office. Mass-manufactured toys themselves were still fairly new, and so, as the inauguration of Roosevelt's succes-

sor, William Howard Taft, approached in 1909, the toy industry was hungry to ramp up production of America's next cuddly plaything—whatever it might be.

That January, President-elect Taft was the guest of honor at a banquet in Atlanta. The big news, for days in advance, was the menu. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce was going to serve Taft possum and taters, a Southern specialty that one writer of the time described as “the Christmas goose of the epicurean negro.” An opossum, roasted on a bed of sweet potatoes, was typically presented whole—head on, pale tail hanging off it like a meaty noodle—with a smaller potato crammed between the animal's fifty tiny teeth. The one brought to Taft's table weighed eighteen pounds.

After the meal, the orchestra started to play, and the guests suddenly broke into song while Taft, presumably caught off guard, was presented with a gift. It was a small stuffed opossum toy, beady-eyed and bald-eared. This brand-new creation was intended by a group of local boosters as the William Howard Taft presidency's answer to the teddy bear. They called it the Billy Possum.

A company, the Georgia Billy Possum Co., was already being formed in Atlanta for large-scale manufacturing of these stuffed animals. According to one account, deals for Billy Possums were being brokered with toy distributors across the country within twenty-four hours of the banquet. (It seems that the company initially experimented with stuffing actual opossum skins, but wound up with something too fleshy-looking and repulsive—like a pale, limp rat.) The *Los Angeles Times* covered the unveiling of the new toy at the Chamber of Commerce banquet and announced, “The Teddy Bear has been relegated to a seat in the rear, and for four years, possibly eight, the children of the United States will play with ‘Billy Possums.’”

A fit of opossum fever began. There were soon Billy Possum postcards, Billy Possum pins, and Billy Possum pitchers for cream at coffee

time. There was even a new ragtime tune: "Possum: The Latest Craze." Real opossums weren't that common in cities. So a toy shop in Brooklyn ran an in-store promotion with a live, captive opossum, so that children could familiarize themselves with the animal that was primed to "rival the Teddy Bear in popularity." ("Do not let it be said," the store's advertisement read, "that any man, woman or child in Brooklyn has not seen the cute little animal whose name is mentioned more perhaps in all parts of the world to-day than any other.") At Taft's inaugural parade, the Georgia delegation was given Billy Possums to wear clipped to their lapels. There were smaller Billy Possums—on-a-stick to wave like flags.

But, despite all this marketing, the life of the Billy Possum turned out to be demoralizingly brief. The toy was a flop, peaking and petering out within months of its introduction that January and almost entirely forgotten by the end of the year. That is, Billy Possum never even made it to Christmastime, a special sort of failure for a toy.

In retrospect, the failure of the Billy Possum can probably be explained two ways. The first is straightforward: opossums are ugly. But the Billy Possum's backstory was all wrong, too, particularly compared with the teddy bear's.

Through most of human's evolutionary history, what has made the bear magnificent in our eyes is the animal's independence from us—its parallel life as a menace and competitor. But by the time Roosevelt was hunting bears in Mississippi, with the country exterminating its predators from coast to coast, that stature was being crushed. That one black bear, tied to a tree outside Smedes, symbolized the predicament of all bears. The animals now lived or died according to our wants and whims. It said something ominous about the future of bears, but it also raised disquieting questions about who we'd become, if the survival of such a creature was now up to us. The legend of Roosevelt and the bear resonated as an allegory of the confusion that

America was only beginning to face. The bear was a helpless victim roped to a tree. The president of the United States decided to show it some mercy.

Taft, on the other hand, ate his opossum for supper. He ate a lot of it, in fact—so much that, after his first several helpings, a doctor seated nearby actually passed him a note, suggesting it might be a good idea if he slowed down. “Well I like possum,” Taft told reporters the next day. “I ate very heartily of it last night, and it did not disturb in the slightest my digestion or my sleep.”

Today a small selection of stuffed opossums has found its way back onto the market. Judging from the reviews I found on Amazon, the toys seem to be mostly bought as gag gifts for people who have had creepy run-ins with actual opossums. One woman explains that the Fiesta Toys ten-inch plush opossum is so realistic-looking that her daughter screamed when she first took it out of the box. “We all love it now,” the woman goes on, “but opossums are not lovable in real life.”

A CENTURY AFTER ROOSEVELT drew the line in Mississippi, the trap that the Center for Biological Diversity was setting for the Bush administration hinged on one question: Was the polar bear a teddy bear or a Billy Possum? How lovable was it? Now that it had been proposed for endangered species status, would the animal whip up enough public sympathy to steer clear of the candidate list and force the administration’s hand, or could it be quietly shunted aside like the Kirtlitz’s murrelet? In the end, the answer was more complicated than anyone imagined.

In 2008, the Bush administration did place the polar bear on the endangered species list. It classified the bear as “threatened,” a designation that gives the government more flexibility and doesn’t guaran-

tee the same level of protection for the species that a fully “endangered” one receives. This allowed the administration to write what’s called a 4d rule for the polar bear, an amendment that adjusts how the law will apply to a particular species. The polar bear’s 4d rule was exceptionally dramatic. It asserted that regulating greenhouse gases was outside the bounds of the Endangered Species Act; in this one case, the Fish and Wildlife Service was exempt from addressing the primary threat to an imperiled species. In a press conference, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne explained that he wasn’t about to let a law about animals be “abused to make global warming policies.” The government, finding no way to wiggle out of the corner that the Center for Biological Diversity had backed it into, had looked the environmentalists right in the eye, kicked a ragged hole in the wall, and crawled through it.

An almost incomprehensible carnival of lawsuits kicked off. The Center for Biological Diversity and its partners ginned up several. The first, brought against the government, tried to get rid of the 4d rule by demanding that the bear be listed as endangered and not just threatened (4d rules can be applied only to threatened species). They presented rather embarrassing internal government documents showing that the decision had been politically manipulated, not solely based on the best available science. This, in turn, forced the government—it was the Obama administration by now—to defend the bear’s threatened classification. Surprisingly, at no point in the history of the Endangered Species Act had anyone had to parse the legal difference between “endangered” and “threatened,” and so the government now produced a richly perplexing document that tried to do just that, drawing ephemeral distinctions between phrases like “on the brink of extinction” and “the step just prior to the brink of extinction” that allowed it to define “threatened” in a way that applied perfectly to the

polar bear's situation. Of course, this semantic hair-splitting then had to be rebutted by the Center for Biological Diversity, which offered its own semantic hair-splitting.

By the time I visited Churchill, the whole legal fight had, to my mind, devolved into an existential debate about the nature of time. (If the government defined "endangered" as likely to go extinct, then "threatened" must mean likely to be likely to go extinct. But what does *that* mean? And so on.) As the litigation vanished deeper into this procedural rabbit warren, the media lost interest. It got hard even to remember the Center for Biological Diversity's original goals: to get America thinking seriously about climate change; to get the Endangered Species Act and the entire national project of conservation that it enables to start addressing, or just acknowledging, climate change as the game-changing, environmental challenge of our time; to begin to imagine how it will undermine or downright shatter the work of conservationists who, having fought to keep imperiled species swaddled safely inside their native habitats, will now watch the habitats themselves change, or fall out from under the animals entirely, like the sea ice under the bears.

The polar bear, really, was just a prop to underscore the problem of climate change—a problem that, if left unaddressed, begs the question of whether addressing anything else is worthwhile. But now everyone had been yanked into a frothing, bottomless argument about the prop itself. Six years after she'd filed the original petition to list the bear, the Center for Biological Diversity's Kassie Siegel was in a federal court in Washington arguing the definitions of "endangered" and "threatened" again when, finally, the judge asked her: "What does all that mean in the real world?"

