



**Green Sense 08/03/2014**

## **Wild Tales**

“Wild Ones”, three stories about endangered species, is also a book about people and wild things. Jon Mooallem wrote this thought provoking book about how people are trying to save endangered species from the changes that human kind has, intentionally or not, brought about on the Earth.

The tale cannot be told without including some history of extinctions brought on by human actions, from the mastodon, to the sea mink that lived along the coasts of Maine and New Brunswick, to the passenger pigeon that once existed in the billions. And now, when we know enough to see that we are driving a species to extinction, we sometimes intervene (and try to save the species) and sometimes we don't do anything, or don't do enough.

For Mooallem, it's about his child and the world she's growing up in. That's the big picture, wondering if we can make a difference in the world we are fashioning for our children and children's children. In “Wild Ones”, Mooallem first zeroes in on the plight of the polar bear. The polar bear is sort of a poster child for climate change effects. And for the children, there are stuffed polar bears and footie pajamas with polar bears on them. Mooallem wonders if there will still be stuffed animals and footie pajamas of polar bears even if the polar bear itself is driven to extinction by the loss of its habitat – sea ice.

Polar bears are charismatic characters, they are smart, and strong and tough, all qualities we admire. But they have evolved to hunt seals on arctic ice, and that's pretty much where the problem comes in. If climate change results in the disappearance of arctic ice for too much of the year, the polar bears do not get enough to eat. This is being watched in Churchill, Manitoba (Canada) one of the more southern extents of the polar bear, and where the winter ice forms later and melts earlier with each passing year.

This seems like a far away problem, but it's caused by our actions. That's why the several environmental groups hoping to save the polar bear and other endangered Arctic flora and fauna turned to the Endangered Species Act, which

outlines a program for the conservation of imperiled plant and animal species.

Mooallem notes, “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 if it qualified for protection, that could confront the government and all of us with the climate science we have “so far managed to duck.”

And, in 2008, the Bush administration responded to the petition by placing the polar bear on the endangered species list, classifying it as ‘threatened’ which doesn’t give the same level of protection as ‘endangered’. The finding included an assertion that “regulating greenhouse gases was outside the bounds of the Endangered Species Act.” But Mooallem continues, “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.”

Polar bears are indeed threatened by climate change, but so are many other species. That’s why it’s important to act locally, to do what we can and live thoughtfully, recognizing the vast resources we have and should preserve. Mooallem doesn’t give solutions in his book, the book is not about climate change, but about the larger picture of human change to the natural landscape and what can survive. It’s an entertaining book, and a good read, with many characters to be admired.

His first subject happens to be endangered due to climate change, and this helps us to understand what is at stake if we fail to act. Start this summer, for example: try to avoid turning on the AC every time it gets a bit hot, and try some fans instead. As always, walk when you can and avoid driving everywhere. Eat local foods, and less meat. Follow more tips: look up our old columns on the town website, and watch for new columns.

A column by Reading Climate Committee member Gina Snyder