The Debate: Should Extinct Species Stay Extinct?

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Have you ever wondered what it would be like to walk the earth with a wooly mammoth or a saber tooth tiger? You may just get that chance. While some people are all for this unique and exciting possibility, others are opposed to this prospect. Would this opportunity truly be a benefit to wildlife or in actuality, a detriment to nature? The debate is up for discussion as scientists, wildlife conservationists and others vie for their arguments to be heard.

The possibility is becoming a reality that scientists today could revive an extinct species through surviving DNA. According to Discovery News and Live Science, “in 2003, biologists created a clone of the Pyrenean ibex using a frozen tissue sample acquired from the goat species before its extinction in 2000. The clone died seven minutes after birth, but it made scientists realize that “de-extinction” was possible.” As cloning techniques expand, there is a greater possibility that we can recreate a currently extinct species with just a tiny amount of DNA from the remains of the animals left behind. Only those species with DNA that is too old to be recovered, like dinosaurs, are the ones that would still be considered totally extinct, both bodily and genetically. All other animals have the plausibility of being brought back to life. So, why would we want to bring back extinct species? The argument stands that the same reasons for species conservation could be used to promote the rationale for reviving extinct species. It would preserve biodiversity, restore diminished ecosystems, advance the science needed to prevent further extinctions, and undo some of the harm humans have caused nature.

Some conservationists and scientists think that the species brought back from extinction would be seen as pillars of hope; this would preserve biodiversity by reviving and reversing the negative effects on wildlife due to the disappearance of many species. The current generations would be given the opportunity to experience some of the remarkable creatures that have lived on our earth. Currently, many of the world’s most marvelous creatures can only be found in books. By reviving these missing species, science could redefine attitudes toward the natural world. We could once again view the wooly mammoth, Ivory-billed woodpeckers, Eskimo curlews, and dodo birds. Science hopes that this would prompt widespread visitation to zoos and conservation parks to view these amazing creatures. Since zoos provide a great deal of funding toward conservation efforts, they will likely be the center point of species revitalization. These efforts could provide greater funding for environmental conservation. Species revival could also help to restore weakened ecosystems.
Some extinct species were considered keystones to their particular region, and restoring them could add a great deal of ecological wealth to many waning ecosystems. For example, woolly mammoths were the most dominant herbivore in the far north. They promoted the carbon-fixing grasslands and helped curb greenhouse-gas releasing tundra. With their absence from the earth, the rich grasslands were replaced with poor tundra and boreal forests, which are quite species deprived in comparison. Their revival could help to replace and sustain a better ecosystem in the far north. Along with improving ecosystems, species revival could help prevent other species from going extinct.

Not only would this revival bring back species already extinct, but it could help prevent the extinction of further species by allowing science to increase the population numbers of threatened species by studying and fixing the things that made the other species vulnerable in the first place. For example, the Tasmanian devils have a large population plagued by a transmissible cancer on their faces. If we can perfect the revival process and gene manipulation, we could theoretically silence the gene that causes this and make them immune to the virus; therefore, the genetic deficiency could be quickly bred out of existence as more and more animals are reproducing with this enhanced or corrected gene. This would help ensure that our current wildlife would continue to flourish and avoid any further extinction. Along with preventing further extinction, we would also be correcting some of the mistakes we have made as humans by destroying the environment these creatures depended on.

Many animals were hunted into extinction and others died off because of the loss of their habitats due to deforestation or human population and building growth. By replacing some of these species, some feel we would be giving these animals a bit of redemption for all of the species lost over the past several thousand years. Can we really provide redemption and create hope? Or, is this a waste of time and resources that could be better spent preserving and protecting the species we still have left? There are strong arguments against species reintroduction, including the opinions that it will take needed focus away from the immediate need to preserve our current environment and living species, and that it would not work due to the lack of existence of the natural habitats these animals once had.

One argument against the resurrection of extinct species is that it sets up the expectation that biotechnology can replace any damage we are doing to our planet’s biodiversity. This effect will reduce the urgency to protect our current habitats and species through aggressive conservation efforts. The fear is that if people think we can just reengineer any creature that becomes extinct, we will allow the corporate world to destroy the existing habitats for monetary gains. For example, if logging companies argue that the spotted owl can be genetically reintroduced if they are logged out of their habitats, who is to say the conservation efforts to save these precious habitats won’t lessen? If this happens, we will forever lose the natural diversity in the habitat it was intended to be in. The only hope these animals will have is living in captivity, which is neither fair nor ethical just for human material gains.
Another argument against reviving extinct species is that it is illogical due to the lack of natural habitats that these animals need in order to survive. Just because a species can be brought back to life, does not mean they can be successfully reintroduced to the wild. The lack of habitat is one of the major reasons many of these animals went extinct in the first place. Land uses have changed the landscape so dramatically that in most cases of these animal’s habitats, it would be impossible to reintroduce them anywhere but a zoo or wildlife park. Also, many of the plants needed for feeding these animals would also need to be revived, as many of those have also become extinct. This poses the question of where to put them, and whether they would quickly become extinct again due to the lack of homes and roaming grounds needed to flourish.

Although there is a certain amount of wonder and amazement at the possibility of seeing and experiencing so many of the amazing creatures that have been lost to our world, is it worth losing more of the ones we are still trying to protect? Conservationists are working hard to protect ecosystems and to find sustainable ways for humans and animals to share our world. The resurrection of extinct species has a possible future, but should we abandon our efforts to conserve the nature that desperately needs our help? These efforts only distract us from defending our world’s current and future biodiversity to ensure that we do not lose any more of our precious creatures. There are so many endangered species and ecosystems that need our attention. The emphasis on de-extinction methods are more costly than those required to conserve the endangered species and habitats that we still have alive. So, shouldn’t the focus be on saving the animals and ecosystems we still have to protect. We don’t want to lose more precious elements of our world; we want them to be there for our future generations to enjoy in actuality instead of in just a book?

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