Night Life

Invisible Cleaners

Since time immemorial human societies have relied on cleaners who “take care” of our trash, yet their services are rarely acknowledged. Somewhat similar is the fate of vertebrate scavengers who, despite their vital role as ‘cleaners’, remain grossly underappreciated. By removing carcasses from the environment, scavengers are facilitators of hygiene. Yet, culturally they have an image of being unclean (even evil) and are despised and often persecuted. This, in combination with the shrinking wild habitats, makes them vulnerable and at risk. Unfortunately, even in conservation circles scavengers receive disproportionately less importance as compared to predators. Similarly, in ecological research and teaching they receive negligible prominence. Interestingly, not just our present dependence, but our ecological history is tied to vertebrate scavengers. Early *Homo* species relied on confrontational scavenging of carcasses to access meat for their diet, thereby being in direct competition with scavengers. As we took to hunting and eventually animal farming, these competitors became our service providers. Evidence supports that the rate of infectious disease spread to humans and livestock would be much higher in the absence of scavengers. While the world deals with another pandemic, scavengers such as the nocturnal striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*, shown in picture with a carcass), must ‘keep calm and carrion’.

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