The story of Walter Palmer, a Minnesotan dentist who hunted and killed Cecil the lion, rocked the internet—and indeed the world—this summer. PETA president Ingrid Newkirk has even called for Cecil’s killer—[who went back to work](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/09/08/walter-palmer-dentist-who-hunted-and-killed-cecil-the-lion-returns-to-work/) this week despite a crowd of lingering protesters—[to be hanged](http://www.peta.org/media/news-releases/peta-statement-zimbabwes-beloved-lion-cecil-gunned-down-by-american-dentisthunter/)…

As long-term vegetarians who abstain from meat for ethical reasons, we are both supporters of animal activists who seek to improve the lives of animals. So you might expect us to agree with activists like Ingrid Newkirk that the killing of Cecil is a terrible thing. But we don’t. In fact, we think it may be the case that animal rights activists should support the killing of predatory animals like Cecil…

The animal welfare conversation has generally centered on human-caused animal suffering and human-caused animal deaths. But we’re not the only ones who hunt and kill. It is true (and terrible) that an estimated [20 billion chickens](http://faostat3.fao.org/browse/q/qa/e) were born into captivity in 2013 alone, many of whom live in terrible conditions in factory farms. But there are estimated [60 billion land birds and over 100 billion land mammals](http://www.animalcharityevaluators.org/research/foundational-research/wild-animal-suffering/) living in the wild. Who is working to alleviate their suffering? As the [philosopher Jeff McMahan writes](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/the-meat-eaters/?_r=5): “Wherever there is animal life, predators are stalking, chasing, capturing, killing, and devouring their prey. Agonized suffering and violent death are ubiquitous and continuous.”

If we believe that we should protect animals from unnecessary suffering and death, then it seems that we should be focusing much more on reducing the non-human causes of animal suffering and death that occur almost continuously in the wild. Which brings us back to Cecil. Just as we may be able to alleviate the suffering caused to wild animals by disease or natural disasters, we might also be able to do something about predation and the often-brutal competition that permeates the natural food chain.

Predatory animals cause many animal deaths in the wild. Lions hunt their own prey and scavenge kills that have died naturally or that have been killed by other predators like hyenas. Although male lions will leave the bulk of the hunting to females, they create greater demand for prey kills from both female lions and the predators from whom they scavenge. A male lion [requires about 15 pounds of meat per day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lion%23Hunting_and_diet) and the kill rate for lions is estimated at anywhere [between 10 and 47 kills per year](https://books.google.com/books?id=hFbJWMh9-OAC&lpg=PP1&pg=PA292%23v=onepage&q&f=false). These kills can be [difficult](http://www.animalplanet.com/tv-shows/animal-planet-presents/videos/killer-clips-lion-kills-baby-zebra/) [to](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxejViC1Uvk)[watch](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOzt5iJGg8g), but they are an inevitable outcome of allowing predators to continue to live.

By killing predators, we can save the lives of the many prey animals like wildebeests, zebras, and buffalos in the local area that would otherwise be killed in order to keep the animals at the top of the food chain alive. And there’s no reason for considering the lives of predators like lions to be more important than the lives of their prey…

A final objection to the view outlined here is that we should not prevent animals from engaging in hunting behavior because such behavior is “natural.” And we can’t blame animals for behaving in accordance with their nature. (Of course, hunting behavior in humans is also natural, but people have not offered this as a defense of Cecil’s killer.) But a behavior may be natural—and may even be required for survival—without thereby being good. If a species emerged that had to viciously torture humans in order to survive, we would not conclude that their torture of humans is morally OK. It’s also important to emphasize that we are not making any moral judgments about predator behavior. Predators don’t have the kind of cognitive awareness that is probably required for moral responsibility. But we don’t need to think that actions have been undertaken by morally responsible agents in order to think that we are required to intervene and prevent them from happening. An infant with a handgun is not morally responsible if she accidentally shoots someone, but we are morally required to take the handgun from the infant as soon as we see that she has it. Similarly, we may think that predators are not morally responsible for their actions, but that we are morally required to prevent them from harming local prey populations.

Given the facts, therefore, it seems hard to see why animal welfare advocates would be in such uproar over the killing of Cecil. Walter Palmer killed one animal, but in doing so he saved dozens of others.