30 years after Chernobyl disaster, camera study captures a wildlife wonderland

By Karin Brulliard  April 26, 2016

Exactly three decades ago, an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine sent a radioactive cloud across Europe. Within weeks, nearly 100,000 people who lived in a large zone surrounding the disaster site had been evacuated, never to return to the poisoned land.

Today, the relics of their past — hollowed-out hotels, empty swimming pools, crumbling farming villages and oxidized ferris wheels — stand in ghostly abandonment across a contaminated region larger than Rhode Island.

But time has not stood still. Nature has reclaimed the area, and new photographic data show the 1,600 square-mile Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is now “basically an incredibly large sanctuary” for animals large and small, according to University of Georgia biologist Jim Beasley.

Anecdotal reports of wildlife doing well in the ruins of Chernobyl have been controversial. Some scientists argue that the disaster has taken a deleterious toll on fauna, causing genetic damage and population declines. A study published last fall, however, backed up the idea of the fallout zone-turned-enchanted forest with data from helicopter observations and animal tracks. They pointed to flourishing animal populations.

Now Beasley and fellow researchers at the University of Georgia’s Savannah River Ecology Laboratory have bolstered that finding with the first published study based on images from remote cameras. Over a five-week period in 2014, 94 cameras they placed across the heavily forested Belarus half of the exclusion zone snapped photos of 14 species of mammals.

Among the most-sighted were gray wolves, red foxes, wild boars and raccoon dogs. As meat-eaters, they are all important barometers because they are exposed to radiation not just through the environment, but also because their prey contains it. Radiation levels vary across the zone, but all four of those species were widely distributed, spotted in areas of high and low contamination.

Also caught on camera: Moose and deer — which humans hunt outside the zone — as well as hares, dogs, and one European bison.
Where once there were bustling towns and busy roads, “the vegetation began to regrow and created habitat, and animals like wolves that don’t do exceptionally well in the presence of humans could be offered more protection,” said Beasley, whose study was supported in part by a grant from the National Geographic Society. “All these animals that could be hunted for food now are protected.”

The big picture of these pictures? According to Beasley, it’s that radiation does not seem to have kept wildlife from self-sustaining and spreading out across the Belarus exclusion zone. He said he expects another camera trap study being carried out in the Ukraine half of the zone will find the same thing.

Working in the highly restricted zone, which involves using a dosimeter and suiting up in masks and respirators, is an “emotionally polarizing experience,” Beasley said. Wildlife or evidence of it is “everywhere,” he said, making it feel like a “national park without people.”

“However, you are overcome by an eerie sadness as you drive past the dozens of abandoned villages and imagine the people’s lives that have been forever changed by this terrible tragedy,” he said.

Some scientists who have studied the disaster zone’s animals say their apparently flourishing presence is an indictment of human activity pre-disaster.

“It shows I think that how much damage we do,” Jim Smith, an environmental science professor at the University of Portsmouth and author of the 2015 study published in Current Biology, told The Washington Post last year. “Not that radiation isn’t bad, but what people do when they’re there is so much worse.”

Beasley emphasized that the findings of the remote camera study, which were published last week in the journal Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment, do not mean that the Chernobyl animals are doing well on an individual level, nor do they provide information about the species’ populations.

“I would never advocate that radiation is good for animals,” Beasley said.

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