In Dead Zone of Chernobyl, Animal Kingdom Thrives

By MIKE HALE  OCT. 18, 2011

In the months since the Japanese tsunami, we’ve heard a lot about Chernobyl as a worst-case example: here’s how bad Fukushima could have been. Now PBS’s “Nature” offers another vision: Chernobyl as a best-case demonstration that life abides despite the human race’s efforts to eradicate it. As long as the life in question isn’t ours, that is.

“Radioactive Wolves,” the 30th-season premiere of this documentary series on Wednesday, goes inside the 1,100-square-mile “exclusion zone” straddling Ukraine and Belarus that has been virtually uninhabited since the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. Film crews accompany naturalists and biologists who make short, tightly controlled research trips, investigating what has happened to animals and landscape since the rapid removal of several hundred thousand people.

The paradox of Chernobyl is that it became a haven for unsuspecting wildlife by virtue of its being poisoned. Tests of animal bones, where radioactivity gathers, reveal levels so high that the carcasses shouldn’t be touched with bare hands.

But the prognosis, coyly withheld until the end of the hour, is positive. (Skip to the next paragraph if you’d rather enjoy the suspense.) While the rate of slight birth abnormalities is twice as high as normal among the zone’s growing animal population (but still in the single digits), overall health appears to be fine. It wouldn’t be an acceptable situation for humans, but the dormice and eagles and gray wolves don’t appear to be bothered.
The research is all well and good, and a soulful Belarussian wolf expert named Vadim Sidorovich is a great character; in one spine-tingling scene, he cups his hands and lets loose a haunting yowl that draws several packs of puzzled wolves within camera range. But the real pleasure of the episode is more purely voyeuristic.

For those, like me, who enjoy a good computer-generated facsimile of what the earth might look like without people, “Radioactive Wolves” goes one better. When the camera isn’t focused on critters, it’s showing us haunting, confounding images of the abandoned habitations, like a postapocalyptic Hollywood blockbuster, but all the better for being real. The concrete high-rises of the city of Pripyat sit like islands in a green sea of towering trees; plants force their way up through the floors of empty schoolrooms.

Within this strangely pastoral setting the animals go about their business, sometimes finding uses for what we’ve left behind. The wolves rise up on their hind legs to peer through the windows of houses, looking for routes to the rooftops, which they use as observation posts for hunting. Eagles build nests in fire towers.

And beavers, forced out decades ago when the landscape was engineered for collective agriculture, have already undone much of man’s work and restored one of central Europe’s great marshlands. Just think what they could do if they had the whole planet.

**NATURE**

**Radioactive Wolves**

*On PBS stations on Wednesday night (check local listings).*


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