

I hate bugs and wish they would go away forever

Jeffrey Smith (ages 5 and 25)

I've always had a love-hate relationship with insects, in that while I love them, they hate me. One fall day, early in first grade, my teacher took our whole class outside for reading time. I, and a group of equally rambunctious five-year-olds, decided that the large leaf pile on the edge of the woodlot would make the perfect reading nook. Sadly, we were second in reaching this conclusion, and were promptly greeted by a swarm of wasps (*Vespula maculifrons* I believe). The battle that ensued was wholly lopsided and left the school nurse's office looking and sounding more like a M*A*S*H triage scene than a quiet, suburban elementary school.

When my mother arrived at school to collect me, I proclaimed, in a state of wasp-kinin induced delirium, that, "I hate bugs and wish they would go away forever." Now that I am pursuing a PhD studying insects, my mother has become quite fond of this story, using it liberally and with great effect to embarrass me. While I have come to appreciate insects, I would like to take a moment and go back and ask, what would the world have looked like if the bugs, in fact, went away forever.

Scene 1: Insects play key roles in food webs

Setting: Jeffrey's bedroom, the morning after 'the incident'

Characters: Jeffrey, Mom

Jeffrey: My whole body hurts.

Mom: You poor thing, let me put some cream on the stings, it will make you feel better.

Jeffrey: This means I don't have to go to school today right!?!

Mom: I guess...

Jeffrey: Mom?

Mom: Yes, sweetie?

Jeffrey: Where are all the birds? They usually wake up when I do, but I don't see any, I don't even hear any of them.

Mom: Well you wished they would all go away forever, don't you remember?

Jeffrey: No I didn't, I just wanted the bugs to go away, I like the birds.

Mom: Well when all the bugs disappeared the birds had nothing to eat, so they all flew away.

Jeffrey: Why didn't they just eat other food; I always see them by our bird feeder? Couldn't they just eat seeds and plants?

Mom: For a little bit yes, but eventually birds need to eat insects because they have lots of protein, especially the baby birds. It's like how you have to drink milk to grow up to be big and strong, baby birds have to eat caterpillars. At some point 98% of all birds have to eat insects!

Jeffrey: Oh, I see...

Mom: Go back to bed, you need your rest

Jeffrey: Okay... *[falls back asleep]*

Scene 2: Insects provide vital ecosystem services on which humans rely

Setting: The dining room, lunch time

Characters: Jeffrey, Dad - AKA "Best Dad in the world" – has mug to prove it.

Jeffrey: *[Walking downstairs]* Dad, I'm hungry!

Dad: Okay let's get you some lunch, you haven't eaten anything all day.

Jeffrey: I want peanut butter and jelly!

Dad: I know... *[rolls his eyes and starts making a PB&J sandwich for the 400th straight day]*. Is orange jelly okay?

Jeffrey: Why can't I have strawberry? I always have strawberry!

Dad: I'm sorry Jeff, but when you wished away all the bugs you wished away all the strawberries.

Jeffrey: What do you mean? That doesn't make any sense!

Dad: Well you see, strawberries need bees and other insects to pollinate them, without insects they can't make any strawberries.

Jeffrey: But what about oranges?

Dad: Not all plants need insects to pollinate them; oranges don't need bees like strawberries do.

Jeffrey: Well, I guess if all I have to give up is strawberry jelly I can still live without bugs.

Dad: But it's not just strawberries, it's also apples, mangos, kiwis, avocados, and many, many more foods, not to mention the coffee that you see mommy and I drinking every morning.

Jeffrey: Oh I see... *[scene fades]*

Scene 3: Insects should be conserved on intrinsic merit

Setting: The backyard, after dinner

Characters: Jeffrey, Katie – archetypal little sister

Katie: Let's go catch fireflies! They're my favorite and we can put them in jar and make them light up!

Jeffrey: We can't.

Katie: What do you mean?

Jeffrey: Well I wished them all away.

Katie: Why would you do that?

Jeffrey: Because I thought that all bugs were bad, but I think I might have been wrong.

Katie: You're always wrong about everything.

Jeffrey: I'm sorry.

Katie: It doesn't feel like summer without the fireflies. Insects are so cool. Remember the butterflies and beetles we saw at the museum last weekend? They were so pretty, why would you want them to go away.

Jeffrey: I know... I wish I could bring them all back *[curtain]*