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Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation After Nature by Jamie Lorimer

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Whose Entanglements? The Problems of Transnational Wildlife Conservation Theory

***Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation After Nature* by JAMIE LORIMER**

University of Minnesota Press, 2015 \$32.50

Reviewed by **PAMELA BANTING**

I had read versions of a couple of chapters of this book as articles in journals and so eagerly awaited its publication. With chapters on such diverse topics and creatures as corncrake (a bird) conservation in the UK, elephants in Sri Lanka, the famous (or infamous) rewilding experiment of Oostvaardersplassen in the Netherlands, the commodification of interspecies encounters, representations of wildlife on screen, and novel ecosystems, I anticipated that *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation After Nature* might be both richly insightful and a possible course text. Lorimer also draws upon the work of many of the most prominent theorists who think about and with animals—Donna Haraway, Steve Hinchliffe, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, Cary Wolfe, Anna Tsing, and others.

However, once I had it in my hands it took me a long time to finish this book. Lorimer's theses and statements of purpose emerge not only at the beginning of each chapter but repeatedly in each small subsection. Just as the reader launches into an interesting stretch of material, of which there are quite a few actually, the dutiful author intrudes yet again to recap what he has just done and to inform you as to what he is about to do next. In one chapter, this framing device occurred and recurred over the space of a mere two and a half pages.

Even theory requires a certain measure of suspense, and this practice deprives the reader of that narrative torque, not to mention the freedom to think one's own thoughts about the book. After two or three chapters, this structure of constant promising had the perverse effect of making me feel as if his many promises were *not* being kept, even though they were, more or less. Moreover, Lorimer's tendency to tell more than show is redoubled by his habit of submerging interesting material in footnotes rather than taking the opportunity for his own thinking to engage directly on the page with that of the theorists he mentions to create new knowledge. Maybe the book is freighted this way because it is targeted toward the textbook market: it does provide quite a number of short, handy definitions that would make it useful in teaching, and nearly one third of the book (90 of its 284 pages) is comprised of the endnotes, bibliography and index, which might make it a good resource for someone studying or researching in this field, especially in the UK. At the same time, strangely, there is no mention in *Wildlife in the Anthropocene* of the work of UK-based journalist George Monbiot, who has published numerous columns in *The Guardian* as well as a book, *Feral*, about rewilding in the UK and Europe, including a chapter on Oostvaardersplassen, the Dutch rewilding experiment.

Reading this book made me wonder how effective our poststructuralist, post-Natural theoretical vocabulary can be for wildlife conservation. That is, without implying that conservation work is simply a matter of practical, hands-on execution of government policy in which theory has little or no role to play, I could not help but ask whether the attractive theoretical terms,

metaphors and concepts that abound in the book—change, transformation, process, diversity and the most frequently deployed term in the book, “entanglements,” a term I too adore for its imagery, theoretical play and mouth-feel—are or will be any more effective than their modernist equivalents with respect to preserving and restoring habitats and curtailing extirpations and extinctions. After all, the very notion of ecology—the term was coined back in 1866—already contains within it notions of change, transformation, processes, diversity, interdependence, and entanglements.

As I read I also wondered whether because the wildlands and wildlife of the UK and Canada are so different a critique of this book from here is even tenable. Even if conservation today is largely post-Natural, is conservation theory focused on corncrakes and stag beetles in the UK the same or substantially similar as conservation principles and practice devoted to preserving the existence of grizzlies, wolverines and caribou in Canada? While I do not want to suggest that Lorimer ought to have written a book he did not intend nor lament that his book does not have “universal” application, one does find oneself occasionally speaking back to the assumptions of empire as one reads. For instance, in his introduction Lorimer verges on dismissing all Indigenous knowledge by equating it with prehistory when he writes that “The Anthropocene legitimizes various modes of retreat: renaturalization based on a return to some premodern or even prehistorical state revealed through a valorization of traditional/indigenous knowledge” (2). Here his critique is directed at the Dark Mountain Project and Alan Weisman’s thought experiment *The World Without Us*, but when in criticizing them he

implies that Indigenous knowledge is a prehistoric relic, he both errs outright and recapitulates the “vanishing Indian” stereotype. Moreover, he fails to see the irony of valorizing a diverse, dynamic, processual ecological theory rooted in “entanglements” while simultaneously writing off Indigenous ecological knowledge in which, for example, other species are often figured in terms of kinship relations, a complex and rich form of multispecies entanglement if ever there was one. In one gesture, he eliminates the very possibility of learning from Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous people. Even while taking into account that the book is primarily about the UK and Europe and therefore it is entirely fair to allow that one can best learn about conservation in those regions from British, Dutch and French thinkers, what licenses Lorimer to dismiss the conservation value of learning from, for example, the ecological knowledge of the Ojibway, Blackfoot or Haida? Is that dismissal not heavily ironic in light of the environmental depredations of colonialism? I would posit instead that in a way not so very dissimilar from the ways in which the moderns borrowed from African and other Indigenous cultures to “Make it new,” our evolving poststructuralist ecocritical vocabulary—critical anthropomorphism, multispecies encounters, actors, agency, entanglements, and assemblages—is an attempt to find latent traces and approximate equivalents within non-Indigenous Euro-North American traditions for the insights of Indigenous ecological thought.

For me, the genuinely positive virtues of this book re-emerge when I go back and re-read my underlining, freed of the obligation to navigate its recursive and didactic prose.

PAMELA BANTING is an Associate Professor at the University of Calgary and lives in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains where sometimes she is lucky enough to see

moose, trumpeter swans, bears, and, once, a wolverine. She has published articles on the writing of a number of naturalists and national park wardens.