



Book review: *Wildlife in the Anthropocene – Conservation after Nature*

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Published: 9 February 2017

Lorimer, J.: Wildlife in the Anthropocene – Conservation after Nature, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 284 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8166-8107-5, EUR 26.00, 2015.

Understood as “a set of embodied and skilful processes of learning to be affected by the environment”, conservation is at the heart of this book. By thinking with other geographers of his generation – e.g. Hinchliffe, Whatmore, Braun – and inspired by philosophers such as Haraway, Despret and, before, Deleuze and Guattari, Lorimer offers a rich journey into contemporary conservation. He draws on literature, conservation films and personal research into several field cases (corncrake conservation in the Hebrides, rewilding at the Oostvaardersplassen reserve, conservation of the Asian elephant) to highlight the diversity of contemporary conservation practices, reflect on their changes and offer avenues for conservation in the Anthropocene.

While seeing the Anthropocene as a catastrophe and acknowledging its conceptual flaws, Lorimer thinks that it has the potential to shock people into rethinking conservation, creating an opportunity to renew it. Conservation is still needed, probably even more than ever, but it should now fully integrate the complexity, contingency and unruliness of ecological processes, as well as the entanglement of humans and non-humans. This renewed conservation should attend to the richness and openness of multispecies encounters and envisage life as a continuous “process of becoming” (Haraway, 2008) in a multinatural world.

Lorimer scrutinises concrete conservation practices, which are usually neglected in official scientific accounts. He highlights the embodied skills they imply, and demonstrates that conservation is as much about loving and caring as about knowing, counting and monitoring. It is a passionate practice, driven by affective logics, i.e. “a particular embodied disposition that establishes a habituated set of practices and

feelings, often occurring in advance of reflexive thought, through which a person orients himself or herself within and makes sense of an encounter with human and non-human others” (p. 122). One main goal of the book is to tease out the affective logics at work in conservation practices and show their diversity.

In addition to the general conclusion and introduction, the book contains three parts divided into eight chapters.

The first part presents the book’s conceptual foundations. Chapter 1 proposes to view conservation in the Anthropocene in terms of wildlife rather than nature. Lorimer reproaches nature with being unique, external to humans, restricted to species and spaces deemed remarkable and static, with a will to congeal ecologies rather than to foster their fluidity. On the contrary, the author, following Whatmore, defines wildlife as being everywhere, multiple, entangled with humans and performed rather than given. By suggesting processes and attention to difference, i.e. the potential to become otherwise, wildlife is what conservation in the Anthropocene is really about. Wildlife conservation appears as a multinatural, relational and provisional achievement, a performance or a “choreography”.

Chapter 2 is notably interested in what makes some animal species “charismatic”. Lorimer distinguishes ecological, aesthetic and corporeal charisma. Ecologically charismatic animals are those that are relatively rare and that humans find easy to detect. Aesthetically and corporeally charismatic animals are those that trigger strong feelings when encountered respectively in visual media and in the field.

Chapter 3 examines the knowledge practices and steps cutting up wildlife and operating a shift from panoptic biodiversity, theoretically encompassing life as a whole, to a limited set of prioritised species, amounting to a little less than 400 species in the UK.

The second part contrasts two prevalent ways of thinking and practising conservation and of understanding, managing and finally performing wildlife conservation, each with its own affective logics. Through an illustration of the successful yet contested story of corncrake conservation in the Hebrides, the first chapter (chapter 4) corresponds to “classical” nature conservation. The corncrake is one of the prioritised species in the UK. Lorimer identifies the affective logics and concrete practices at work in its conservation. He shows how the fieldwork of trained and disciplined surveyors, who have learned to be affected by the bird in its landscape, contribute to framing it as a population whose dynamics can be monitored and calculated.

The second case (chapter 5) illustrates emergent conservation practices. It concerns a Dutch nature reserve, the Oostvaardersplassen (OVP), where large herbivores were introduced in order to “rewild” the ecosystem and restore what some believe to be prehistorical ecological conditions. Lorimer analyses conservation in the OVP as a “wild experiment”, characterised by an openness to surprises and a readiness to integrate them into conservation and by acknowledging the importance of uncertainty and contingency.

Both cases have been contested. The corncrake conservation has been criticised for disempowering the crofters, favouring an arbitrary baseline corresponding to an already degraded ecology, and for its inability to respond to climate change and more generally to the Anthropocene challenges, and to learn from experiences. Management in the OVP has been contested because of concern over the welfare of the herbivores and controversy over their legal status. Yet, the consequences of these two approaches for agricultural development and land management are clearly different. The corncrake conservation depends upon crofting, an extensive and economically marginal form of agriculture in the Hebrides; it requires land sharing. On the contrary, rewilding as practiced in the OVP implies abandoning large portions of agricultural land while intensifying agriculture elsewhere; it is premised on land sparing. Lorimer’s deep interest in the OVP’s “rewilding” does not prevent him from being cautious and concerned about the purposes and potential consequences of such experiments.

The third part examines the affective logics at work in wildlife films, the role of markets in wildlife conservation and the geographies of wildlife.

Chapter 6 stresses the role of conservation films in a world where actual encounters with wildlife are relatively rare. Films have become an important way of presenting wildlife and becoming affected by it. Drawing on the elephant case, Lorimer identifies four interacting affective logics that keep the non-human difference visible and give sense to this difference: sentimentality, sympathy, awe and curiosity.

Again drawing on the elephant case as a flagship species, chapter 7 deals with the marketing of multispecies encounters. Commodification is increasingly considered a potential resource for conservation; encounters with wildlife are

staged and sold as precious experiences. Following a decrease in public support and contributing to the neoliberalisation of conservation, wildlife is performed as a lively capital. Somewhat surprisingly, scientists also now harness this trend, with the rise of “voluntourism” giving life to new versions of the wild as well as to new versions of science and tourism. Without entirely rejecting such merchandised encounters, Lorimer raises the issue of social justice and democracy in cases where conservation is imposed on local populations who see elephants as dangerous invaders.

Chapter 8 is about spaces for wildlife and focuses on cities that Lorimer considers to be archetypal novel ecosystems. For instance, brown fields appear to be perfect spaces for exploring conservation in the Anthropocene. Lorimer contends that such places can help avoid the territorial trap into which early conservation has fallen and explore ways of fostering fluid ecologies for wildlife, connectivity, adaptation and difference.

Lorimer exposes his aspirations and concerns over future conservation in the conclusion. Cosmopolitics for wildlife, defined as “a politics of dynamic processes, diverse agencies, and conditional, contingent and unstable outcomes (p. 183)”, is what he hopes will emerge from the contested Anthropocene. A new era characterised by the awareness of our inevitable entanglement with non-humans and our responsibility would be known as the “cosmoscene”. Lorimer insists that this means giving up nature to shift to a hybrid, multi-natural, immanent world.

Whether the term “nature” will or should be given up is debatable. Furthermore, the contrast between nature conservation and wildlife conservation is perhaps not as sharp as the book suggests. But Lorimer’s book has the great merit to display conservation in action. It shows very clearly that wildlife occurs in a variety of ways through a range of conservation practices driven by specific affective logics. It also offers a nuanced and balanced analysis of ongoing changes in and political stakes of contemporary conservation. While clearly advocating a shift from nature conservation to wildlife conservation, Lorimer warns against its risks at several points. He rightly notes that the multiple and fluid ecologies of wildlife make better targets for market mechanisms than the more stabilised ecology of nature. Thus, he insists on the need to remain watchful and attend to the consequences and risks of emergent forms of wildlife conservation. With its tendency towards fluidity, contingency and constant adaptation, conservation in the Anthropocene might open up new possibilities and opportunities but it also has its pitfalls, and Lorimer is well aware of this.

References

Haraway, D.: *When species meet*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN-13: 978-0-8166-5046-0, 423 pp., 2008.