

REVIEWS

Beyond Conservation: A Wildland Strategy

Taylor, P. 2005. London and Sterling, Virginia: Earthscan Publications Limited, 278 pages, ISBN: 1-84407-198-7, \$40.95 (paperback); 1-84407-197-9, \$159.95 (hc).

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Beyond Conservation is a fitting name for this book about wildland protection and restoration in Britain. Readers are urged to shed their "species-centric" bonds and aspire beyond conservation approaches that merely maintain the status quo. To succeed in a grander vision, the book argues, we must look beyond the biological and political aspects of conservation and seek guidance in the spiritual dimension.

The book's approach to conservation is based on the "rewilding" concept. Rewilding strategies begin with the identification of protected core areas that serve as sanctuaries of nature. These are buffered by surrounding zones in which economic activities are constrained so as to complement the conservation objectives of the core area. The author identifies specific landscapes in Britain as candidate core areas and presents practical ideas for managing buffer zones. So far so good; these portions of the book are grounded on bedrock principles of conservation biology.

But then the vision begins to take flight. Rewilding assumes that given adequate protection and selected intervention, an area's plant life will gradually restore the "natural processes of wild nature." Fully restoring a "balanced ecosystem" requires that the indigenous herbivore guild be returned to the area. The ideal herbivores, the author suggests, would be the mega-fauna that shaped the ecology of these landscapes during the Pleistocene (e.g., woodland elephant, forest rhino, and hippo). Since those animals are long extinct, their functional equivalents should be substituted in rewilding projects. For example, Exmoor ponies and Heck cattle would be suitable choices to fill the functional roles of the extinct tarpan and auroch, respectively, because breeding programs have "come close to recreating the primitive characteristics" in these breeds. With herbivores re-established, reintroduction of the carnivore guild (e.g., lynx, wildcat, polecat, marten, wolf, and bear) would be the pinnacle step in the rewilding process. In the author's view, human fear and irrationality are the main obstacles to carnivore reintroduction. Therefore, restoring complete ecosystems is more a social challenge than a biological one.

While the conservation-activist in me found these ideas intriguing, the skeptical scientist won the day. The absence of underlying mechanisms for the rewilding process, the assumed ecological equivalency between selected breeds

and extirpated species, the notion that people's attitudes are the main obstacle to re-establishing large predators in Britain – these ideas are bold and imaginative but not well grounded in science and fact. My examination of the reference section revealed scant use of the research journals in conservation biology and ecology. Many unsupported claims are stated as fact. Consider, for example, the statement (on page 142) that “there are no reliable records of serious harm to humans in Western Europe or America, yet the myth of wolf attack still survives.” A simple Internet search on the key words “wolf attack” would have provided factual documentation on this topic (e.g., McNay 2002). Rather than check out the facts, the author chose to perpetuate a myth!

In conclusion, *Beyond Conservation* goes beyond the principles and evidence provided by scientific endeavor, into the realm of bold but wishful thinking. Readers looking for “out of the box” thinking on conservation will find some interesting ideas. A scientific treatise, however, it is not.

References

- McNay, M.E. 2002. *A case history of wolf-human encounters in Alaska and Canada*. Alaska Department of Fish and Game Wildlife Technical Bulletin 13. Juneau, Alaska.
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