

# Introductory Comments

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It is perhaps inevitable that we become concerned about things in proportion to their rate of disappearance: interest in wildlife has never been greater than today, when wildlife is scarcest. This holds particularly true for large carnivores, the beasts of our evolutionary past that now need saving from us, their former prey. But far from our dominant position easing our anxieties vis-à-vis the monsters of the wild, we continue to be both fascinated and terrified, wanting to bring wild things back without really knowing how to live with them.

The very idea of a fundamental separation between nature and culture, the wild and the civilized, is vehemently contested in an increasingly human world. This, however, does not mean that our cultural imaginaries are keeping up with the critique: the category of the beast, of the wild thing that threatens the fabric of civilized life, is as present as ever, in many different forms. For example, new conservation measures can themselves be perceived as beastly when they rely on the re-creation of extinct animals (Lorimer & Driessen, 2013, 2016). The category of invasiveness in ecology uncomfortably transpires into social discourse, relegating to monstrous forms both human and non-human others (Anderson, 2017; Comaroff, 2017). A human ecology of wildness, in other words, has to parse the complicated and often contradictory relations between our ecological role and the social imaginaries that only partially overlap with it.

There is a contradiction inherent in recognizing both human impact on the planet and the need for further human intervention to maintain a livable (for us) ecosystem. The worth, therefore, in examining what wildness *is* lies in the light that can be thrown on our own human actions and desires, especially in this technologically advanced, highly globalized modern world; a world wherein calls to “reconnect to nature” are loud and salient (Ives et al., 2018). Appreciating “wildness” encapsulates a variety of intersecting issues: from philosophical notions of agency and sovereignty (Matthews, 2012; Monbiot, 2013; Plumwood, 2006), to logical, technical, and instrumental categorizations of wild or domestic, natural or artificial, managed

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or unmanaged (Braverman, 2015). In the following collection of papers, we draw together three facets of this problem, each interrogating one aspect of the idea of wildness and its relation to a livable future.

The first question that arises is whether it makes sense to speak of wildness at all in a world that will, in all likelihood, become increasingly managed and engineered. John Visvader's articulation of nature and wildness as *process* rather than essence is a very helpful answer to this question. The ancient Greek and Chinese conceptions of "wild" presented in his paper offer an alternative to the dualistic divide often drawn between humans and nature. He shows that our idea of wild is on a scale; that is to say, it does not always mean "not-created-by-humans." Instead, the ways in which we use the concept of wild betrays its affinity to the idea of autonomous process: something is wild in relation to its distance from human control, which is always judged contextually. Visvader's plea for a future that makes space for autonomous processes echoes calls from across ecology (Snyder, 1994), pop science (Monbiot, 2013), anthropology (Kohn, 2013), and environmental ethics (Schmidtz & Willott, 2002).

If retaining wildness means retaining self-willed, natural cycles of life and death—that is, of predation—then how do human societies and individuals deal with the potential consequences of encouraging the size and distribution of predator populations? One way to think about this question is by first trying to understand the magnitude of the problem of predation on humans. As Jennifer Kelly et al. summarize in "Large Carnivore Attacks on Humans," the risk of death via carnivore attack is minimal compared to, for example, the risk from lightning. Though this is the case, it is not on its own enough to soothe our fear of predators; something that Jonathan Thurston's article shows likely to be rooted in deep evolutionary processes.

In "The Face of the Beast," we are guided through the ways predators are represented and portrayed in fiction and horror genres. Beastly predators in literature tend to be reduced to abstractions of teeth, eyes, and claws, yet this is enough to send shivers down our spine. Why? As Thurston argues, our evolutionary fear of being eaten is still present, despite our immediate environment not resembling that of our distant ancestors. Through the ways we choose to represent these "beasts" back to ourselves, we reinforce their difference from and danger to us, all the while ignoring their complexity as living, wild beings. The more we relate to predators as literary monsters, the less are we able to understand them on their own terms.

Taken together, these three contributions suggest that the idea of a future where space is made for autonomous processes must also reckon with the psychological responses humans have to a wild understood, often unconsciously, as dangerous. It is not enough to engage in ecological rewilding; we must also engage in new forms of conviviality with wild animals (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019). The role of

human ecology in this process is to keep the focus on *the relation* between ecological processes and social ones, so as to avoid the pitfalls of narrowmindedness: an entirely human world, or else an inhuman one.

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