

FORUM  
animal visions:  
rethinking the history  
of the human future

ABSTRACT

Wild animal abundance and scarcity have been key to religious and secular visions of the American future for centuries, and changes in their meanings reflect radical shifts in understandings of nature and progress. In the colonial era, the extirpation of wildlife was a sign of the fulfillment of prophecy and the conquest of Indians. But by the late nineteenth century, fears of wildlife decline were so great as to render the Ghost Dance, an American Indian prophecy of game abundance, oddly resonant for a broad swath of Americans. More recently, secular scientific predictions of wildlife extinction inspired such writers as Paul Shepard, Rachel Carson, Peter Matthiessen, and Cormac McCarthy to contemplate (and sometimes to prophesy) global extinctions.

Wild animals have been central to religious and secular predictions about the fate of humanity perhaps since there were humans at all. In these portents, the beast (or its absence) begs questions of morality, sending signs about human communities and the earth they are making. Such traditions might seem ideally suited to hunters and gatherers. But oddly, material reliance on game bears only a vague relation to its cultural importance: even as Americans became people of the machine whose world turned on oil, they sought historical meanings in the untamed creatures of the earth. Thus in Peter Matthiessen's *Wildlife in America*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and

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uncounted magazine and television accounts, a paucity of salmon, deer, and meadowlarks tells how far our world has fallen.<sup>1</sup>

Surprisingly, in earlier times, some read the signs quite differently. English colonists and early Americans, inspired by God's injunction to Adam to reclaim the garden from the wilderness, interpreted diminishing beasts as signs of the coming millennium. In part, this was because less game usually meant fewer Indians. Indians often complained about settler rapacity with litanies of local extinction, and we know this because settlers recounted those laments with some glee. Thus when militia commander Leif Lion Gardiner transcribed a Narragansett chieftain's paean to lost animals into his account of the Pequot War, he was recording a testament to English power. "We shall all be gone shortly, for you know our fathers had plenty of deer and skins, our plains were full of deer, as also our woods, and of turkies, and our coves full of fish and fowl. But these English having gotten our land, they with scythes cut down the grass, and with axes fell the trees; their cows and horses eat the grass, and their hogs spoil our clam banks, and we shall all be starved."<sup>2</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, however, a profound cultural shift was afoot. In regions where wildlife—and Indians—were more or less gone, vanished animals became a sign of civilization run amok. James Fenimore Cooper's wizened frontiersman, Leatherstocking, in 1823 prophesied God's retribution for the mass killing of passenger pigeons. "I wouldn't touch one of the harmless things that cover the ground here, looking with their eyes on me, as if they only wanted tongues to say their thoughts." Warning the town hunters to mend the "wasty ways that you all are practysing," he predicts "the Lord won't see the waste of His creators for nothing, and right will be done to the pigeons as well as others, by and by."<sup>3</sup>

Within two decades, warnings of wildlife decline had become the stock-in-trade of a nascent conservation movement. In 1841 George Catlin called for preservation of North America's buffalo, "so rapidly wasting from the world, that its species must soon be extinguished."<sup>4</sup> By the 1870s, such predictions circulated among an emergent national audience of sportsmen, and Congress even attempted to regulate bison hunting (although President Grant refused to sign the bill).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it was inevitable that amid a cultural reorientation of this magnitude wild animals would become not only tokens of reform for a mass public but also the bearers of messages between cultures.

When Americans first heard of the Ghost Dance, the millennial movement that swept the tribes of the interior West in 1890, the teachings sounded at once familiar and strange. The movement originated with Wovoka, a Paiute shaman in Nevada, who prophesied that through right conduct and the practice of a sacred dance, the multitudes of Indian dead would rise in a world renewed, where people inhabited "a pleasant land . . . full of game" and engaged in "their oldtime sports and occupations."<sup>6</sup> On distant Plains reservations, his disciples soon shared their own visions of a world teeming with buffalo.

Authorities and the public thought little of this revelation. White Americans have historically claimed an exclusive right to narrate civilization and its historic epochs, its emergences and vanishings. The resonance of Wovoka's visions with the Old Testament book of Ezekiel ("I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel") made it all the more ridiculous to most non-Indians.<sup>7</sup> The United States was a modern nation of locomotive and dynamo, not the Holy Land of ecstatic dancing and prophets in the wilderness.

And yet, even among the most dismissive, there was some discomfort. Rumors of Indians who believed in an imminent return of the bison resonated among a public already anxious about environmental changes that were widespread and real. In the run-up to 1890, the decline of wild game inspired the formation of new organizations, from local game protection societies to national associations like the Audubon Society and the Boone and Crockett Club (whose name suggests the cultural acrobatics performed by Theodore Roosevelt and other founding members, who refitted the déclassé pursuit of hunting—so provocatively explored by Jon Coleman in this forum—as a badge of manly honor). All these groups sought to restore a rapidly vanishing game abundance. In 1889 William Hornaday published one of many conservationist polemics excoriating the wastefulness of unregulated hunting, *The Extirpation of the Bison*. That same year, largely in an effort to start a breeding program for captive buffalo (in part, at Hornaday's urging), Congress founded the National Zoo in Washington, D.C.<sup>8</sup>

So even among Americans who generally derided the Ghost Dance, there were some who paused briefly, long enough to notice the prediction that the "Red Christ" would "bring back the buffalo." References to this aspect of the prophecy seem to have appeared in hundreds of newspaper reports of the prophecy that year. To a surprising degree, the prediction seemed to echo the lament for a vanished nature that defined the zeitgeist.

The Ghost Dance is but one of the many messages about wild creatures and earthly renewal that punctuated the industrial and postindustrial eras, and one wonders how our understanding of it would change if we saw it as a call to reform, in some sense an echo of, or even part of, the religious revivals that accompanied populism and contemporary movements.

And what can we say about its obvious connection to the wildlife-centric prophecies of our own time? Of course, there are vast differences between Wovoka's vision and non-Indian spirituality, and a gulf separates both these from modern science. But secular wildlife prophecies, like Peter Matthiessen's *Wildlife in America* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, often augured human futures by the numbers of particular wild animals. When Carson conjured pesticides as fallout and prophesied a world in which no birds sang, she was warning that people would soon follow birds into oblivion. In a sense, she almost echoed Leatherstocking: "Right will be done the pigeons as well as others."

Wise reformers are cautious in their resort to language of doom. The idea that animal extinction foreshadows human annihilation can encourage us to imagine that the end of a species is the end of us, and ergo of our responsibilities. If the end of humanity is that near, perhaps it is inevitable. Why then go through all the work of reforming ourselves?

In fact, such prophecies might have a deeper flaw: for the most part, people and wildlife have not shared a common fate. People have spread thickly over the globe; aside from rats, cockroaches, and a handful of other creatures that thrive on people, most animals have not. Dawn Biehler's contribution to this forum suggests promising avenues of historical inquiry in the most successful vermin species. But to follow the curve of declining wildlife has often led writers and scholars in the opposite direction, to wonder what kind of world would be inhabited solely by people.

The late Paul Shepard meditated on exactly this predicament. Shepard was a founding scholar in the field of animal studies, and in *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*, he argued that engagement with wild animals was key to human development of all the virtues and techniques that make up our humanity. Language, medicine, science, spirituality, and the richest stuff of our dreams all flow from our engagement with bears, wolves, tigers, crows, snakes, worms, even insects.

Shepard's arguments tended toward the philosophical, but science continually reaffirms that relations with wild creatures were fundamental to the making of humanity. According to Lynne Isbell, predation by snakes on our primate ancestors helps account for our three-dimensional color vision, our social gesture of pointing, our widespread intuitive fear of snakes, and perhaps contributes to the myth of the serpent in the garden. Other wild animal legacies include the processes of domestication that may have been driven partly by the choice of animals themselves and turned wild animals into tools and companions without which human history is inconceivable. The continuum of animals from wild to domestic has in turn bequeathed to us some of our worst maladies, from smallpox to AIDS. At times it is hard to mark the dividing line between humanity and wild creatures. Where would we be without them?<sup>9</sup>

In a curious way this question burns at the heart of a very different work, Cormac McCarthy's grimly prophetic *The Road*. One could scarcely imagine a more blighted planet than the one left to "the man" and "the boy." Staggering through a wilderness where survival clings only to people, the man is unable to explain the lost bonds between people and the beasts of memory. The boy, who was born too late to know animals, is mystified by expressions like "as the crow flies." The man is haunted by memories of geese honking in the gray sky, of hawks, egrets, and herons, of fish in the swirling rivers that are now empty. Together they quest for refuge from the scabbling gangs of cannibals with whom they share the smoldering earth. So in a world abandoned by beasts do people lose their humanity.<sup>10</sup>

In connecting the fate of culture and the future of wildlife, McCarthy joins a long tradition in environmental thought. Something like the postapocalyptic land of *The Road* perhaps haunted the dreams of Rachel Carson, who in decrying how “the most modern and terrible weapons” had been turned against the earth condemned war itself.<sup>11</sup> Peter Matthiessen wrote stories of animals destroyed by heedlessness and restored by a science more benign than the one that produced the nuclear cloud under which he yet labors. And for that matter, the Ghost Dance could only restore the original community to an abundant earth if the dancers were humane to one another. “Be good and love one another,” Wovoka told his disciples, and “have no quarreling.” Do not tell lies. Do not steal. And “put away all the old practices that savored of war.”<sup>12</sup> Wovoka’s vision was of a world renewed through bonds of human affection, or peace, on which nearly every wild thing today depends.

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## NOTES

1. Peter Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America* (New York: Viking, 1959); Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). I would like to thank the other members of this forum and Spring Warren for their many helpful suggestions in writing this essay.
2. Charles Orr, *History of the Pequot War* (Cleveland: Helman-Taylor, 1897), 142.
3. I owe my argument here to Alan S. Taylor, “Wasty Ways: Stories of American Settlement,” *Environmental History* 3, no. 3 (1998): 291–310. Quote from James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (New York: G. P. Putnam Sons, 1953), 270, 272.
4. George Catlin, *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians: With Letters and Notes Written during Eight Years of Travel and Adventure among the Wildest and Most Remarkable Tribes Now Existing* (H. Bohn, 1866) 1:261.
5. Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 152.
6. Mooney, “Ghost Dance Religion,” 771.
7. Book of Ezekiel, Chapter 37.
8. Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 164, n. 2; Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America*, 151; William Temple Hornaday, *The Extirpation of the Bison* (1889); Michael Robinson, “William Temple Hornaday: Visionary of the National Zoo,” *Smithsonian News Service*, February 1989, reprinted at <http://nationalzoo.si.edu/AboutUs/History/hornaday.cfm> (accessed January 4, 2010).
9. Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Covelo: Island Press, 1996); Lynne A. Isbell, *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent: Why We See So Well* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Edmund Russell, “Evolutionary History: Prospectus for a New Field,” *Environmental History* 8, no. 2 (April 2003): 204–28.
10. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Knopf, 2006).
11. Carson, *Silent Spring*, 297.
12. Mooney, “Ghost Dance Religion,” 772.