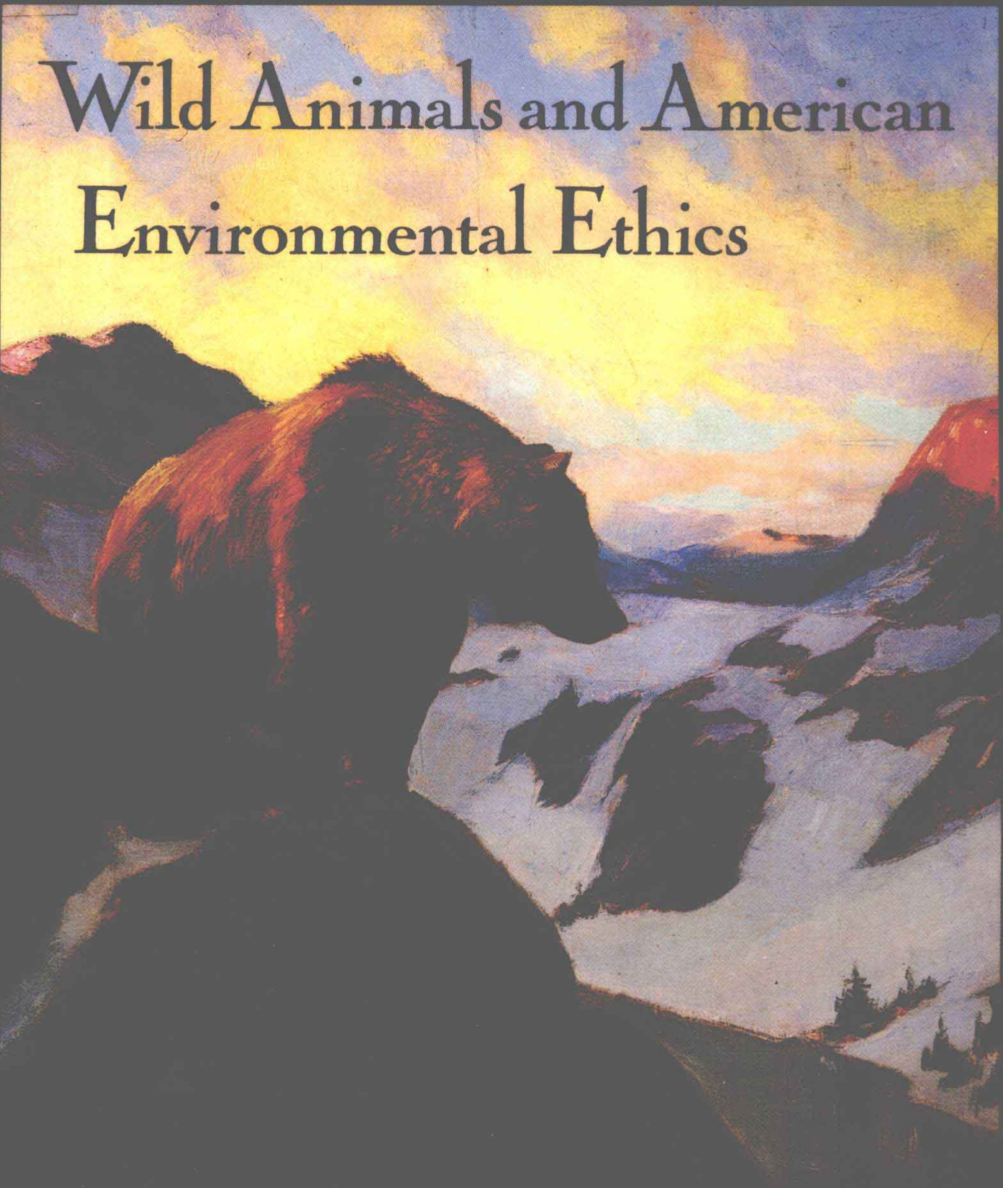
Wild Animals and American Environmental Ethics



Lisa Mighetto

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Wild Animals and American Environmental Ethics

To Frank

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I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so
placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

WALT WHITMAN, "SONG OF MYSELF"

PREFACE

For over a century, American conservationists have been working to protect animals. This book concerns their motivations. From the beginning of the conservation movement, Americans have had different incentives for saving wild creatures. Today, as in the nineteenth century, many conservationists argue that animals should be protected because humans find them useful. Others claim that animals have intrinsic worth apart from their usefulness to people. This book emphasizes the development of the latter view.

Because most of the ideas examined here are new to the Western world, they have only a small number of advocates. The notion that animals have rights, for instance, is not widely accepted, even by conservationists. Still, mere numbers of advocates cannot measure the significance or effectiveness of an idea. There were only fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence, yet they started a nation. Although the abolitionists of the 1830s and 1840s were also few in number, they became an especially visible, vocal force that contributed to the onset of the Civil War. Similarly, most of the animal lovers discussed in this book represented a minority—and sometimes eccentric—position. Even so, they were among the first Americans to reject the human centeredness that has pervaded Western thought. By encouraging people to view animals as something more than conveniences or objects for amusement, they helped forge a revolutionary way of looking at the natural world—one on which the modern environmental movement is based.

The sources used for this book, then, convey a strong message. Much of my evidence is drawn from the writings of animal lovers who hoped to convince Americans that wild creatures should be saved from abuse, slaughter, or extinction. Written for a general audience, these publications were often lively, humorous, and entertaining. They can also appear proselytizing, even strident in tone—and some readers might find them to be wrongheaded or offensive. In any case, my intention here is to place the ideas discussed in this book in historical context; the views examined do not always coincide with my own.

Moreover, my sources cannot always be accepted as scientifically accurate. The portrayals of animals examined in this book often appear romantic or unrealistic—but that is not the point. I am more interested in how Americans have *perceived* wild creatures than in the actual habits and behaviors of animals. Like the writer Edward Abbey, who once claimed that the only birds he could identify were the turkey vulture and the fried chicken, I am not a wildlife biologist. How animals have affected the American imagination is of greater concern here. My subject is the development of values and ethics, which are human constructs. This book, then, is more about people than it is about animals.

What follows is not a study of the depletion of wildlife populations. Nor is this book devoted to the construction of policies or organizations to save them. Instead, I am interested primarily in the *arguments* used to protect animals. The word "conservation" is used in its most general sense here, to indicate the desire to defend wild creatures—as individuals or as species. This is a history of how attitudes toward wildlife have changed over the last hundred years, and, more importantly, of how new values and ethics regarding the animal world have emerged.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Moving around the West by degrees, I incurred many debts. During my undergraduate years at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Roderick Nash encouraged my interest in environmental ethics. In the master's program at Arizona State University, L. Christian Smith offered further support. At the University of Washington, George K. Behlmer, John Findlay, William J. Rorabaugh, and Lewis O. Saum read initial drafts of the manuscript and provided valuable advice. Morgan Sherwood of the University of California, Davis, also read a chapter. I am especially indebted to Alfred Runte, who has extended many kindnesses to me during my years in Seattle. After guiding me through my Ph.D., he continued to urge me to write and publish. He and his wife Christine have included me in several train trips; they helped me see the environment of the West from a new perspective.

Recently, my colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Puget Sound have encouraged me. On the topic of wildlife, Thomas R. Dunlap of Texas A&M University has shared his ideas and research with me in a generous spirit. Tom has provided more than historical guidance; he is also a good hiking and birding companion.

For this project, I have consulted a variety of archives. These include the state historical libraries of Alaska, California, and Washington, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection at the Boston Public Library, the Library of Congress, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Library of the California Historical Society in San Francisco, the Bancroft Library and Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, Berkeley, the Huntington Library in San Marino, and the John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez. I have appreciated the efforts of their staffs.

For my research on John Muir, the Holt-Atherton Center for Western Studies at the University of the Pacific in Stockton was particularly valu-

able. Stephen Zimmer, Director of Museums at the Philmont Scout Ranch in Cimarron, New Mexico, provided information concerning Ernest Thompson Seton. On the subject of Jack London, Sara S. Hodson of the Huntington Library and Russ Kingman of Glen Ellen were helpful. Mary Vocelka, formerly of the Yosemite Research Library, provided *Yosemite Nature Notes* as well as aid in locating numerous photographs of animals. Similarly, Jim Peaco guided me through the wildlife illustrations in the Yellowstone National Park Photo Archives. Bob Ardren of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, helped me obtain circus posters. My brother, George Hawkins, also assisted me in locating photographs.

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Most importantly, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my husband, Frank L. Mighetto, whose enthusiasm for the outdoors and interest in environmental issues have inspired me throughout my adult life. He has taken me on wilderness excursions all over the world, continually reminding me how I became interested in environmental history in the first place. I will always be grateful.

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PROLOGUE

Appreciation of animals is nothing new. Celebrated thinkers ranging from Pythagoras to Leonardo da Vinci to Montaigne expressed not only an interest in wild creatures but also a concern for their welfare. In the United States, however, it was not until the last hundred years that an urban population, far removed from the processes of the natural world, could afford to romanticize and cherish wildlife. Moreover, the late nineteenth century was unlike previous eras both in the larger number of people who devoted considerable energy to this topic and in the content of their arguments, most of which drew from science. When Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the link between humans and animals became difficult to deny. During the decades that followed, numerous American writers explored how this revelation would change the nation's treatment of other creatures.

These writers were well aware of the uniqueness of their time. The popular journals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries abounded with articles concerning the need for an expansion of ethics to include the animal world. A contributor to *Harper's Weekly*, for example, explained that the "scientific research" of his era had prompted a "changed attitude of civilized man toward the non-human species." Another commentator agreed that knowledge of evolution "lowered our pride of exclusiveness," while an article in the *Arena* claimed that "what science reveals of our common relationship and origin" has required humans to revise their conduct toward "the entire animal creation."[1] On both sides of the Atlantic, the word "new" was often evoked: one Victorian detected the emergence of a "comparatively modern social manifestation," which he labeled "the New Humanitarianism." Similarly, advocates of "The New Ethics" adopted "The New Charter."[2] Although there was confusion regarding the meaning of these terms, subscribers to the new ethics agreed that humans should exercise restraint in their use of animals.

This sympathy would have seemed strange indeed to the first white settlers in the New World. For the most part, colonists had little regard for other creatures. From New England to Georgia, they especially abhorred wild animals. According to one description of colonial Virginia, the land had been "possessed and wrongfully usurped by wild beasts, and unreasonable creatures."[3] Puritans, too, found the "howling wilderness" to be "hideous and desolate"; the inhabitants of the New England woods were thought to be "hellish fiends."[4] Unfamiliar animals, particularly predators, were bound to frighten colonists who were struggling for their very survival. But the Puritan fear of wild beasts went far beyond mere concern for physical safety. To them, wilderness represented an amoral void that harbored the agents of the devil. Because they associated order with godliness, Puritans viewed the wilderness—which was chaotic and uncontrolled—as a place of evil. Wild creatures posed a spiritual threat.

Domestic animals did not fare much better in the seventeenth-century estimation. Early restrictions against their mistreatment were largely utilitarian in nature. In 1641, for instance, a law in Massachusetts prohibited "tyranny or cruelty towards any brute creatures which are usually kept for the use of man."[5] Certainly the wording here focuses on the interests of humans. In sum, the Puritans' ideas concerning inherent depravity and human insignificance did not dampen their conviction, upheld by Genesis 1:28, that animals exist only to serve and be used by people.

Nor did this attitude change during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. During this period, an emphasis on reason and order produced an appreciation of cultivated landscapes. Wild animals, on the other hand, were not valued by most Enlightenment thinkers, who continued to fear the chaos and haphazardness that the wilderness represented. Despite an increasing interest in cataloging the physical details of fauna exemplified by Mark Catesby and William Byrd, there was little concern for the animals themselves, let alone for their protection or preservation. While Enlightenment thinkers no longer viewed nature as being innately evil, they valued it most where humans could impose control.[6]

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Romanticism encouraged a different posture toward the animal world. This movement, characterized by an attraction to mystery and chaos, pervaded intellectual life in nineteenth-century America. Romantics looked favorably upon wilderness and its occupants; they emphasized the awe rather than the fear that uncontrolled environments inspired. Although many Romantics continued to accord humans the central position in nature, a few writers and artists—such as William Cullen Bryant and Thomas Cole—either downplayed people and their works or omitted them altogether.[7] But most Romantics had no desire to experience wilderness or wild animals firsthand. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, was interested in unspoiled nature because he believed it was a conduit through which humans could establish contact with a higher reality. As an exponent of Transcendentalism, an offshoot of the Romantic movement, Emerson was more concerned with the spiritual than the material world. Rarely did he write about the physical aspects of nature.

That task was left to Henry David Thoreau. From 1845 to 1847 this disciple of Emerson put Transcendental ideals into practice by living in the woods at Walden Pond. Here he recorded the wild animals he encountered. Like Emerson, Thoreau hoped that his painstaking examination of the details in the natural world would yield spiritual knowledge. "The fact," he wrote, "will one day flower out into a truth." Sharing Emerson's notion that nature is emblematic of the spiritual world, Thoreau did not venerate animals for their own sake; instead, he had found an aesthetic use for them. Still, his writing conveyed a deep sympathy for wild creatures which was unusual in the mid-nineteenth century. It was the "character" of the animal that interested Thoreau, "not its clothes and anatomy." Contact with wildlife, he wrote in *Walden*, "is to make my life more rich and eventful."[8] During his day, however, Thoreau was not widely read; it would take a generation for his enthusiasm for wild nature to filter down to the popular level.

By the end of the nineteenth century, rapid industrialization fueled the Romantic love for wilderness. As contact with the natural world became a rare experience, urban Americans began to value it. Because they feared that their society was becoming too developed, an increasing number of city dwellers turned to the outdoors, sparking the nation's first "Back to Nature" movement.[9] John Muir, a mountaineer and a popular nature writer, observed this trend in his book, *Our National Parks*:

"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that . . . wildness is a necessity," he claimed. "Awakening from the stupefying effects of the vice of over-industry and the deadly apathy of luxury, they are trying as best they can to mix and enrich their little ongoings with those of Nature, and to get rid of rust and disease."[10] Wilderness, then, was especially appealing to those who worried that Americans were becoming too soft in the cities. For many urban dwellers, contact with animals—the embodiment of the wilderness—became a way to regain their lost vitality.

In linking animals and humans, Darwinian science seemed to support the notion that life in cities was unnatural and debilitating. Seizing this theme, such writers as Jack London and Maximilian Foster reveled in the wildness and invigorating savagery of their animals. Meanwhile, Frederic Remington and Ernest Thompson Seton captured the frenetic energy of wildlife in their paintings, which frequently featured such seemingly fierce creatures as wolves.

More often, however, popular portrayals emphasized the lighter side of animal kinship to humans. Reversing the Jekyll and Hyde motif, writers and artists demonstrated that beasts are like people. In fact, late-nineteenth-century cynics noted that animals depicted in popular writing were becoming more amicable and virtuous than many humans; the peaceable kingdom, it seemed, had arrived. While such anthropomorphism was not in itself unique to the late nineteenth century, new characteristics of expression emerged during this period. First, literary and artistic works were presented increasingly from the animal's point of view. While the intention, like that of Aesop, might have been to inspire and instruct humans, the focus was on the animal. If they appeared at all, people occupied the sidelines. Second, writers and artists themselves ventured into the natural world, primarily to observe *living* creatures. Lastly, popular depictions often argued against the mistreatment of animals.

Works about wildlife were changing in volume as well as in form. Never before had the general public been so widely exposed to this genre; animal stories and essays were especially prevalent in popular journals. By 1880 inexpensive postage and the use of the rotary press had increased the number of national magazines, some of which came to boast circulations of a million.[11] These presented natural history to lay readers in terms they could understand.

This increasing regard for wildlife culminated in the desire for protection. Sportsmen were among the first to protest the wanton destruction of animals. So significant were their efforts that one historian has credited them with spearheading the conservation movement.[12] Yet the rationale of sportsmen was almost wholly utilitarian; alarmed by the rapidity with which game animals were disappearing, hunters, for the most part, were more concerned with the continuation of their sport than with the welfare of individual creatures or species.

Nineteenth-century humanitarians, on the other hand, deserve greater attention for their concern for wild animals than they have thus far received from historians. For all the recent debate concerning the "animal liberation" movement, very little has been written about early humanitarian interest in wildlife. Like the hunter-conservationists, this small but vocal group protested the wholesale slaughter of western animals; the humane point of view was in fact represented in such conservation organizations as the Audubon Society. However, humanitarians objected to killing animals not because it was wasteful to humans but because it inflicted pain. Drawing their inspiration from English thinkers, they established sentience as the basis for protection. As science closed the gap between humans and other animals, humanitarians had further ammunition for their cause. Some went so far as to question our right to interfere at all with the lives of other creatures.

But this burgeoning goodwill was not extended to predators. Hunters and humanitarians were united in their rejection of meat-eaters. Although a few farsighted individuals pointed out the value of carnivores, most conservationists favored elimination of animals who were inconvenient or who failed to comply with their standards of morality. Reactions to predators, then, can measure how much attitudes had actually changed; even humanitarians—whose position concerning animals represented a radical intellectual departure from traditional thought—stopped short on this issue. For all their rhetoric concerning enlightened treatment of animals, most nineteenth-century Americans continued to require that animals be useful and well behaved.

Certainly it would be inappropriate for this study to condemn people of the last century for their apparent inconsistencies or their failure to assume modern views. It was not until predators gained acceptance in the 1920s and 1930s, however, that an entirely new ethic regarding animals could emerge. As scientists revealed the necessity of predation, animal lovers began to use ecological precepts to question longstanding assumptions about human centeredness.

To some observers, this shift in perspective signals nothing less than a second Copernican Revolution. Just as sixteenth-century science removed the earth from the center of the universe, discoveries of the last hundred years have displaced humans from the center of the biosphere.[13] Yet old attitudes die hard. Anthropocentrism is crumbling, but it has not collapsed; recent studies have demonstrated that most Americans do not subscribe to a biocentric view of the world.[14] Although nearly all of the sources used for this book—stories and essays, newspaper editorials and letters, humanitarian promotional literature—were widely available to educated readers, the authors were not representative of the general public. Aside from the personal papers of several naturalists and humanitarians, the evidence here focuses on writing intended for a popular audience. But reading John Muir's essays—in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries—was different from embracing his ideas.

Even the most eloquent writers cannot eliminate the tenacious hold of attitudes from centuries past. Our society continues to mistreat animals, perhaps owing to a lingering fear of the impulses they arouse. Numerous creatures—predators in particular—are viewed more in symbolic than realistic terms.[15] The persistent hatred of the wolf, for instance, is reminiscent of the Puritan line of thinking, which held that wild creatures represent a danger to man's spiritual welfare. So complex are modern perceptions of animals that one exasperated zoo director recently characterized them as being "hopelessly and perversely inconsistent."[16] Yet it is important to remember that our ethics regarding other creatures are still developing. As one early twentieth-century observer reminded his readers: "the question of our behaviour towards animals is a comparatively recent one."[17]

Part of the problem is that the moral systems of the variety of animal-protection groups are not understood. A *Seattle Times* reporter recently complained that the "same people who recoil from hunting deer, shooting ducks, or trapping muskrats blithely . . . poison slugs in their vegetable gardens, and spray-bomb aphids on their rose bushes."[18] Skeptics often ask animal-rights advocates how they can eat plants in good con-

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