

Wild animals in the era of humankind

Theme session proposal – “Animals in the Anthropocene: Human-animal relations in a changing semiosphere”

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Given that anthropogenic environmental change occurs practically all over the planet – we can rightfully ask: What is nature, in a world where no wilderless is strictly speaking left? Similarly we should ask: What is a wild animal in the Anthropocene, the era of humankind?

Of course, there *is* still wilderness – just as wild animals still exist. We can safely assume that animals do have a nature – in other words that there is something about animals, their needs and their ways, that does not change – despite all our efforts to make animals fit in with us, by breeding, taming and socialization, more or less violent wildlife management etc. This is valid even for the most adaptable animals. Given these presuppositions, one could claim that wildlife management should ideally be based more on human adaptation to animal ways than on animal adaptation to human ways. More or less mutual human-animal adaptation has occurred throughout our co-evolution with other species. For a recent review of the recovery of large carnivores in Europe, which argues that “large carnivores and people can share the same landscape”, see Chapron et al. 2014 (p. 1517). The moral problem arises when adaptation is forced and not to the benefit of both parties.

The number, distribution and density of livestock make them important ecological players. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (FAO 2006), livestock currently account for a fifth of the total terrestrial animal biomass, and pre-empt thirty per cent of the Earth’s land surface, areas which were once habitat for wildlife. “Indeed”, reports the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, “the livestock sector may well be the leading player in the reduction of biodiversity” (ibid, pxxiii).

More than a quarter of terrestrial surface is today used for grazing, and a third of all arable land is used for feed crops (ibid, 271). Altogether, cropland and pastures cover more than a third of the Earth’s land mass. As of 1700 they amounted to around a tenth. Today the expansion of pasture areas into natural ecosystems has essentially come to an end in many parts of the world, though it still occurs in Latin America and central Africa (ibid, 256). While cropland expands in both Latin America and parts of Asia, pastures are currently diminishing in Asia. In EU15 (the 15 oldest EU members), both arable land for feed crops and pastures are of smaller reach today than they were a generation ago. In other words, while wilderness areas by some measures are retreating in some parts of the world, they are expanding in others.

This session welcomes contributions that address matters of the wild and wilderness in light of anthropogenic environmental change, including rewilding and conflicts with agricultural interests. It further welcomes papers that discuss different approaches and methods within wildlife management, for instance use of technology. Another relevant topic is the role of killing in management of wild animals – and the ethical question: Should anthropogenic mortality in wildlife management be minimized?

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References

Chapron, Guillaume et al. 2014. Recovery of large carnivores in Europe's modern human-dominated landscapes. *Science Magazine* 346 (6216): 1517–1519 (online: DOI: 10.1126/science.1257553).

FAO 2006. *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*. Available online: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.htm>.