Reckoning with Empires: Global Environmental Politics and the Decline and Fall of Nature

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Rachel DeMotts. 2017. *The Challenges of Transfrontier Conservation in Southern Africa*. Lanham MD, US: Lexington Books.

David Johns. 2019. *Conservation Politics: The Last Anti-Colonial Battle*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Rosemary-Claire Collard. 2020. *Animal Traffic: Lively Capital in the Global Exotic Pet Trade.* Durham NC, US: Duke University Press.

The natural world is going to hell in a handbasket. That is now a perception widely held across the globe, reinforced by the occasional issuance of national and international surveys of the declining state of biodiversity both from governments and from major environmental interest groups. Some readers will also recall that not very long ago Bill McKibben (1989) went so far as to suggest that we should declare "the end of nature;" a motion that Jedediah Purdy (2015) later seconded by instructing us that we all needed to learn to live in and with a world "after nature" (unless perhaps we could be happy constructing our own nature, which Braverman (2015) claims we have been doing for some time).

These observations are deeply disconcerting, because they appear to mean among other things that, depending on where you start to count, a half century or more of determined and often quite imaginative legal and policy interventions at all levels of government and across the globe have conspicuously failed to halt nature's decline. So, who or what is to blame? And what do we do about it?

For many years, several decades in fact, again depending on where you start to count, the scholarly search for answers to these questions has created a burgeoning, inter-disciplinary literature about environment and empires (Crosby 1986; MacKenzie 1988, 1990; Grove 1995; Butlin 2008; Beinart and Hughes 2009). This is a fascinating body of work in which major attention is given to the culpability of imperial ambitions for the decline and fall of nature around the world, and most especially to the marriage of those imperial ambitions in the long nineteenth century to industrial capitalism; the latter featuring as the principal engine through which colonial nature has been turned into commodities and profitably exploited. The urge to exercise dominion over distant people and places, peoples and places that imperialists have imagined can be usefully understood as little more than resources needed to keep the homeland alive and well, and morally and legally superior (Fitzmaurice 2014), has on this account fueled a vigorous, often ruthless, sometimes criminal, frequently inept, and thoroughly unsustainable exploitation of nature across the globe. Long story short -- the consequences of imperialism and colonialism for nature have been devastating.

But is this how we should reckon with the significance of empires for environmental change, and for the politics that have shaped relationships between people and nature in colonial and more recently in post-colonial political regimes -- by saying that in essence the decline and fall of nature that concerns us today and makes us worry about the future viability of life in many parts of the planet is mostly empire's fault?

That is the conclusion to which David Johns would like to drive us by characterizing contemporary environmental politics across the globe as "the last anti-colonial battle." It is, he believes, a battle that can be won if we approach it as a giant problem in political engineering, where the objective is a drastic re-balancing of the power to manage nature in favor of awakened, aroused and skillfully mobilized mass publics. This is a political action arena in which Johns has notable expertise. His central argument is that the decline and fall of nature, which he reduces to the loss of species and healthy ecosystems, is best understood as a consequence of the human imposition on the non-human world of a colonial relationship of exploitation and domination.

He asks in successive chapters of his book, which pulls together and republishes pieces he previously published elsewhere, how this domination originated and was accomplished politically (chs. 1-2). And then asks how it can be counteracted by asking what seem to him to be the right questions (chs. 3-6), by "taking the offensive" and learning from other political movements (ch. 7), by applying those lessons with the help of the science of conservation biology to various terrestrial and marine environments (chs. 8-12), and by foregrounding in global environmental politics what he calls "the human obligation to the wild" (ch.15).

This same political engineering theme is echoed but on a much more micro scale by Rachel DeMotts, who is at pains to point out how much more successful the creation of trans-frontier or peace parks in Africa would be if the outcomes they yield on the ground could be meaningfully shaped by the people who live on that ground, or who did live on it before implementation of the peace park idea required their removal. Her specific focus and the site for her detailed field research is the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park in southern Africa; an initiative that supposedly "takes down the fences" (p. xiv) between three existing national parks in Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

The contribution claimed by DeMotts is essentially that better policy outcomes for peace parks can be engineered by taking public participation in decision making more seriously, above all by acknowledging the legitimacy of the claims local people make that the nature enclosed by the peace park belongs as much to them as to anyone else, probably more so. Her description of the imperious way the officials charged with planning, establishing, and managing the park treated local people (chs. 3-4) and forced many of them to resettle (ch.5), the empirical core of the book, is disheartening, even difficult to read. But it is very much in line with other instances of forced removal in the creation of African wildlife parks, referenced by DeMotts. And it raises a bigger and more important question that unfortunately, given the limits within which DeMotts framed

her dissertation research, she does not treat at length, namely whether, as Bram Büscher (2013) argued earlier, the international peace park idea that has diffused across Africa represents an unacceptable resurrection of colonialism.

So, while the bright light DeMotts shines on the lack of real public participation in African wildlife conservation is fascinating, her argument that re-engineering such participation would solve a lot of problems seems to miss the mark. Although the scholarly impulse to analyze the environmental consequences of the scramble for colonies that was ended by the First World War in Africa is very much alive and well (Gissibl 2016; Schauer 2019), it is not a scholarship concerned first and foremost with re-engineering structural defects in the balance of power between the various interests caught up in that scramble and its aftermath. It is instead pre-occupied with stubbornness and ignorance; with the extent to which assumptions about how to manage resources successfully in distant colonies, most especially the charismatic wildlife in British and German East and Central Africa, were undercut by the refusal of metropolitan elites in London and Berlin to engage in any meaningful way with conditions on the ground. Or rather, and perhaps more pointedly, by the inability of distant elites to adapt their own received and much cherished ideas about how and for whose benefit the natural world ought to work to the possibility that in distant colonies it could and should work differently.

This is a form of conceptual imperialism, now cleverly identified by Michael Dove (2019) as something that extends to the world of plants as well as to the world of animals. And it was a much more important precursor to and perhaps even a necessary precondition for the decline and fall of nature, both in Africa and elsewhere, than defects, of which there were many, in the political engineering of imperial and colonial regimes.

And in the case of the British empire the influence of conceptual imperialism continued to be felt even as the empire began to be dismantled. As Schauer nicely demonstrates, post-colonial regimes took their cues about how to manage what the newly independent states wanted to think of as their nature from ideas the empire left behind; ideas which wildlife imperialists had embedded in the "elephant treaties" (Adam 2014), now the crown jewels among global regimes for the conservation of biodiversity.

It is indisputable that over time, and not just in the period when nineteenth century European empires were in their prime, both in Africa and elsewhere, the demands imperial centers placed on their colonial peripheries for resources induced major environmental changes in those colonies. This conclusion holds not only across different regions of the world but also across a variety of resources, whether it be minerals, forests, fisheries, rivers and lakes, coasts and deltas, wildlife, or land cleared of plants to produce, often on a plantation basis, other plants more valuable in international commerce. It even holds albeit in strikingly different ways for the autonomous empires of China (Marks 2012) and Japan (Totman 2014).

The actual and potential environmental changes induced by imperial demands have typically been judged to be so alarming that only very ambitious legal and political

responses have seemed sufficient to the task of saving nature, before its too late. Some current manifestations of those ambitious proposals surface in the books considered here, ranging from a call for the massive mobilization of public participation in the still ongoing global battle against colonialism, to the complete abolition of wildlife trading, to the designation of international peace parks to conserve charismatic megafauna.

It is equally indisputable, however, that none of these proposals, which are not individually without some merit and academic interest, has much chance of real world success. The notion, for example, that global environmental politics can be radically transformed through a massive feat of political engineering that stimulates and organizes vigorous outbreaks of public participation in environmental policy making, across all the world's varied political systems, has a superficial implausibility that is hard to shake off, notwithstanding the energy and sincerity with which it is advanced. And in the case of wildlife trafficking and habitat protection we have sufficient experience with previous policy interventions to know that the imposition of trade bans and the designation of new conservation fortresses, even big ones that span national boundaries and link ecosystems, are very imperfect instruments for saving nature (Brockington, Duffy and Igoe 2008; Duffy 2010; Gissibl, Höhler and Kupper 2012; Weber et al. 2015). One might go so far as to say that based on the evidence we have at hand these interventions create at least as many problems as they solve, for post-colonial peoples as well as for post-colonial nature.

If contemporary students of global environmental politics nevertheless feel compelled to offer such sweeping proposals for change, how do we explain that? The charitable assumption is, of course, that ambitious even drastic proposals to reverse the decline and fall of nature that can be attributed to imperialism are well-intentioned and are calibrated by their authors to match the perceived severity and urgency of the global environmental crisis that the marriage of imperialism and capitalism over several centuries has arguably bequeathed to us.

But suppose that in the *longue durée* (Guldi and Armitage 2014) the significance for environmental change of colonial moments (Roberts 1990) and their accompanying imperial mindsets is more complicated than this. Suppose to put a finer point on it that while attempts to reckon with relationships between empires and global environmental change in the context of relatively recent European imperial ambitions might very well explain much of what we think we would like to know about these relationships in the case of the British, French, German, and perhaps the latter day Spanish empires, what if anything would it tell us about the Greeks and the Romans, about the Aztec and Inca empires, about the Mongols and the Ottomans, about the Hapsburgs, and about the relatively autonomous Chinese and Japanese empires not caught up to the same extent as others in processes of global commercial exchange? These empires all left environmental footprints, which were more or less enduring.

But was the wreaking of environmental damage by these various empires as devastating across all empire cases as it was by most accounts in the most recent sub-set of cases of principal interest to scholars of global environmental politics; cases in

which British, French, and German imperial ambitions in Africa, for example, loom particularly large?

It is hard to see that that would be true, because the Aztecs and the Mongols, for example, did not have the technology for environmental transformation (Headrick 1981, 1988) that the British, French and Germans confidently but sometimes mistakenly brought to nineteenth century Africa (Davis 2007; Davis and Burke 2011) or that the British and the French and the Spanish brought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with less powerful technology, to Asia and the Americas (Melville 1994), along with the Portuguese and the Dutch. There were critically important differences too in the reliance different empires placed in places where they had colonies on colonist and indigenous labor to fulfill their economic ambitions, instead of relying on imported slave labor.

So, reckoning with the significance of empires for global environmental change needs to take account of the fact that there are interesting differences over time in empires as well as in the extent to which their impact on environmental change can be correlated with several plausible independent variables, of which technology and the availability of labor and capital for export commodity production are certainly among the most important.

All of which then raises the question of how appropriate and useful it is to imagine that across the long arc of history empire can be a useful category of analysis for understanding global environmental change. And the further question of what exactly it is about different empires, considered independently of time and space, that invariably renders them inimical, albeit in diverse ways, to environmental sustainability.

The quick answer to these questions and the one that has predominated in past studies of empires and environment is that imperialists wanted control over the nature they encountered in various ways in various distant places, and usually over the people too, through ingenious mechanisms of direct and indirect rule, because imperialists were confident that they could imagine and profitably realize ways to extract use values from the natural and human resources in their colonies that were simply beyond the ken of the people who already lived in the places where colonies were established and sustained, ultimately by force of arms.

From a theoretical point of view this makes the key processes that various empire projects have set in motion over time the processes of exploitation and exchange through which colonial resources are commodified and consumed. And a great deal of time and effort and publishers ink have been expended to good effect to explain how this political economy dynamic played itself out in different empires, in different parts of the world, at different moments in time. And to explain, too, how imperial experiences of interactions with nature stimulated enhanced environmental sensibilities, as the environmentally destructive impacts of exploitation began to become apparent and understood (Grove 1995). And, when a different political economy dynamic began to take hold in response to these sensibilities, how efforts to internalize some at least of

the costliest of these externalities, most notably perhaps species extinction, found their way into law and policy.

But are empires to be understood first and foremost as powerful engines, at least for a time, of the economic exploitation of nature, invariably bringing environmental destruction in their wake? The downside of this view is its deflection of our interest away from what is a much more fundamental political process at work in empires, one that is arguably antecedent to economic exploitation, namely the process of subordination; the process by which distant places and people are enclosed within an imperial regime and denied a life of their own, until and unless they again achieve independence.

This is close to the point at which Rosemary-Claire Collard begins her analysis of the global trade in exotic animals to be used as pets. She tracks across various species the process by which animals are captured in Central American biosphere reserves (ch. 1). She then examines the mechanics of their exchange at exotic animal auctions in the United States (ch. 2). And finally she unfolds the process by which the rehabilitation of former pets is attempted at a wildlife center in Guatemala (ch. 3). Her book is an important and original adaptation of commodity chain analysis to living things. "My overarching questions in this book are," she writes, "How do living things…come to appear as if they do not have lives of their own. (How) are their lives made not their own?" (p.18). And I think her answers, which seem to me to begin to give empirical substance to the philosophical arguments advanced by Christine Korsgaard (2018), bid fair to have a major impact on the way we think about the history and effects of changing relationships between people and animals, including those attributable to empires.

Indeed, Collard begins by observing that the practice of keeping exotic animals as pets goes back thousands of years to some of the earliest efforts at empire building and colonialism, when wild animals were captured, collected, and displayed by political and military elites to animate assertions of and claims to power. "With the onset of European imperial expansion," she writes, "captive animals and colonized people were put on display in colonial centers, standing in for conquered distant territories, (as) a demonstration of the 'spoils of empire' and a testament to….colonial power" (pp. 10-11). Such displays signaled that political enclosure had occurred and that subordination of the human and non-human subjects in the resulting colonies would ensue, along with the extraction of many of their natural resources.

By the time exotic animal keeping moved into Victorian private homes, for reasons explored by Harriet Ritvo (1987), the principal rationale for it had changed. Large numbers of people now believed it was both possible and acceptable to keep exotic pets as objects of affection and sentimental attachment. So, the spatial scale across which the enclosure and subordination of exotic animals is enacted shifted over time from empire and colony, if you will, to cages and aquaria in suburban living rooms. But Collard makes it quite clear that this shift in the scale of pet keeping has had no impact on the willingness of people who say they keep exotic pets because they *love* them to acknowledge that what they are really doing is cutting their loveable pets off

from what Collard calls the complex history of their own being (p.24) and therefore from the relationships with their own environments that their life history entails.

Although Collard does not go so far as to say so, it is reasonable to imply from her work that the imperium homeowners now exercise over exotic birds kept in cages is essentially no different from that humans have exercised over all animals for many centuries past. And her book assuredly establishes that, if global environmental politics is going to meet the challenge of controlling the defaunation the exotic pet trade has set in motion (Weis 2018), that imperium will have to be broken, with the most likely first step being the stiff regulation, perhaps even the closure, of exotic animal markets.

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