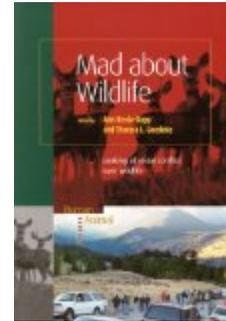


Ann Herda-Rapp, Theresa L. Goedeke, eds. *Mad about Wildlife: Looking at Social Conflict over Wildlife*. Leiden: Brill, 2005. 286 pp. \$79.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-04-14366-1.

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Constructing Wildlife

I need to begin this review with a disclosure. I was asked by the editors of *Mad about Wildlife* to contribute a chapter to the volume. As things worked out, I withdrew in order to concentrate on another project. I have been familiar with this book project almost from the beginning and eagerly looked forward to its publication.

It goes without saying that interactions between humans and wildlife grow ever more contentious and have in some instances rivaled the intense divisiveness of the conflict over abortion. The need to understand these conflicts is pressing, not least because these conflicts typically fracture what otherwise might conceivably be a broadly shared sense of responsibility for the environment in general and wildlife in particular.

Such consensus, as the editors and contributors to this volume make clear, has a vanishingly small chance of emerging any time soon. This is so not because people do not care about the environment or wildlife. At so general a level, it might even be said that “we are all environmentalists.” The problem, explored through the case studies in this volume, is that people mean very different things when they invoke “nature,” the “environment,” or “wildlife.” To put this in the language of this volume, people “construct” river otters, doves, and prairie dogs, to cite only three of the case studies presented, in radically different ways. Fish farmers and sport fishers in Missouri see the river otter as a scourge, an animal whose uncontrolled existence is an anathema to their livelihoods or to the sport fish fishers revere. For those whose livelihoods or recreational pursuits are not impacted, the otters are

enchantly graceful and their playful antics entertaining. To trap or not to trap, that is the question.

The contributors to this volume all work within the sociological tradition known variously as symbolic interactionism or social constructionism. The central premise of research in this tradition is that social actors actively construct reality. The same object can mean quite different things to different people, depending on their past experiences, the social networks within which they move, and the ways they make a living, to name only three of the more important variables with which sociologists typically work. The aim of this volume is to explore several ongoing conflicts over wildlife, conflicts which essentially revolve around the appropriateness of consumptive uses (fishing and hunting) of wildlife and, as is often woven into the conflict, the appropriateness of management strategies adopted by federal and state agencies generally charged with responsibility for wildlife.

To a person, the contributors to this volume carefully avoid taking sides. The point of social constructionist analysis is that there are no correct or incorrect positions. As Ann Herda-Rapp and Karen G. Marotz show in their chapter, Wisconsin dove hunters see doves as elusive and thus sporting targets that are also delectable; and when their numbers are not checked, they are a threat to crops. Hunting doves, from this perspective, produces multiple benefits. And with appropriate hunting regulations, there is no chance that the species will be in the least jeopardized. Opponents of the hunt, by contrast, con-

strue doves as vulnerable, harmless, and a living symbol of the yearning for peace.

It would seem reasonable to turn, in such instances, to wildlife professionals who, after all, know what doves “really are.” If only the world were so simple. Wildlife and fisheries professionals do not escape the subjectivity of hunters or animal protectionists, though their professional training and experience provides them with what might be called a vocabulary of objectivity. This vocabulary notwithstanding, professionals also construct characterizations of otters, or doves, or cattle egrets. Experts’ eyes may be less clouded by sentimentality and they almost always can provide at least some more or less hard data about a given critter’s reproductive cycle, habitat needs, and so forth. But this way of looking at a species is just that: a way of looking.

This important point is implicit in most of the chapters in *Mad about Wildlife* but it is made explicit—forcefully and convincingly—in Lawrence Felt’s essay, “You Can’t Eat ‘Paper Fish.’” “Paper fish” is the way locals in the Canadian Maritimes refer to the biologists’ computer models of the in- and off-shore cod fishery. If there ever was an example of how scientists become trapped by their own models (okay, “social constructions”) this is surely one.

One of the common misconceptions about the social constructionist perspective is that it leads to a slack relativism—everyone is entitled to their own view and there is no Archimedian point from which one can judge. The essays in this volume, while not explicitly joining this issue, nonetheless give ample ground for rejecting this critique. All views may be legitimate, at least in the eyes of the proponents, but this is not to say that the consequences of adhering to one view or another of prairie dogs, or wolves, or cod are not consequential. We can—and have—thought all kinds of things regarding our fellow humans as well as the plants and animals with which we share this planet. Some of those thoughts have proven ruinous.

Mad about Wildlife is a serious contribution to the contentious debate in which we are engaged over our proper relationship to wildlife. It is lamentable that the publisher has priced the book well out of the reach of the general reader (my copy cost \$90.00 in paperback!). On the other hand, the editors have put together a volume that makes few concessions to the general reader. Most of the chapters begin with a review of social constructionist literature befitting a graduate school literature review; this is followed by a methodological apolo-

gia that will drive all but the most determined reader to distraction. This is too bad because the content of almost all of the chapters is compelling and informative. For those who are willing to endure or skip the throat-clearing, here is what you will learn:

–Reintroducing a top predator into a national park (wolves) is complicated, not least because wolves mean one thing to long-time residents adjacent to the park and quite another to recent celebrity second-home “residents” (Rik Scarce), but it is less complicated than reintroducing a predator (river otters) into a thickly settled state where sport fishing and aquaculture are well-established features of the economic and social landscape (Theresa L. Goedeke);

–Popular imaginings of wildlife are fueled by old-fashioned rumor (Veronique Campion-Vincent on the return of wolves to France) and by the internet chat rooms of deer hunters (Carol Miller);

–How the flagrant poaching of an iconic Elk changed the law governing wildlife in Colorado (Robert Granfield and Paul Colomy);

–How doves, prairie dogs, and cattle egrets can be heartwarming to some and infuriating to others, much to the consternation of state agencies charged with coming up with a policy that brings everyone together (Ann Herda-Rapp and Karen G. Marotz, Brett Zollinger and Steven E. Daniels, and Stella Capek, respectively);

–How experts reluctantly have begun to pay attention to locals who are the repository of decades of intimate contact with a “resource” (cod) (Lawrence F. Felt).

Mad about Wildlife is written for graduate students in the burgeoning fields of environmental studies, environmental sociology, environmental conflict resolution, and human dimensions of wildlife. General readers who are willing to skip the literature reviews and “cut to the chase” will also find much to savor. Each of the essays in this volume invites the reader to question his or her assumptions about wildlife and the nature of our relationships to wild creatures. Wildlife watching is rapidly gaining in popularity. Taken together, these essays suggest that people watching can be fun, too.

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