

**Nancy Langston.** *Climate Ghosts: Migratory Species in Anthropocene*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2021. 208 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-68458-065-1.

**Reviewed by** Kerri Clement (University of Idaho)

**Published on** H-Environment (July, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

## **Kerri Clement on Nancy Langston, *Climate Ghosts: Migratory Species in Anthropocene***

Migratory species present poignant and heart-wrenching examples of the complexities of living in and moving through a changing ecological and social climate. The sheer weight of the tangled web of climate change, settler colonialism, and environmental racism for these species can often feel overwhelming and obscure solutions. Yet, in *Climate Ghosts: Migratory Species in the Anthropocene* (2021), Nancy Langston supplies three examples of seemingly impossible and precarious recovery stories for migratory species that offer ways forward for anyone interested in addressing environmental inequality and climate change's impacts on migratory species.

The guiding question of the relatively short book is, Why are migratory species' population numbers continuing to fall despite restoration efforts? Langston chose those declining and threatened species, in particular caribou, sturgeon, and loons, that she calls "ghost species" because of their cultural and spiritual connections in the "boreal north" (p. xx). She uses a plethora of sources, including oral histories, government reports, and scientific papers, to show how changes in wildlife management intersected, and continue to do so, with the worsening climate change. Langston includes personal anecdotes of traveling the

landscapes, for example in Idaho, where the large mammals once roamed, which provides interesting perspectives on a historian's literal view of the landscape that instructors might find useful for the classroom. She weaves elegant, yet straightforward, stories about the three species that show how the inclusion of Indigenous people's history and current relationships with these species fundamentally changes the species' stories from extreme loss and extinction to stories about responsibilities and recovery. Langston concludes that including Indigenous leadership in wildlife management holds promise for addressing population loss.

One of her central arguments is that when migratory species disappear, human cultures, especially Euro-American settlers, swiftly forget about the animal's travels and even presence in the landscape. Thus, based on human relationships, especially Indigenous, with animals, Langston ties the importance and necessity of their restoration and protection to humanity's future. Langston organizes the book by species, with caribou enjoying two chapters over the sturgeon and loon's singular chapter. Within each of the chapters, the author lays out detailed histories of each species in the

boreal north and in particular the Great Lakes region.

The caribou chapters are the most detailed and expansive both in terms of chronology and geography. Langston traces, largely from a settler standpoint but with some inclusion of Indigenous history, how settlers and their governments have addressed or failed to address declining caribou numbers across boreal landscapes in the United States. In the first caribou chapter, Langston discusses the ecology of Great Lakes caribou and their migration patterns and how humans' relationships with caribou changed over time. Langston starts with Indigenous history and archeology before swiftly moving to settler hunters and wildlife scientists and managers. One of the strengths here is how Langston walks her reader through how ecologists and wildlife managers created knowledge about the animal and then acted on that knowledge while ignoring Indigenous knowledge and experiences, to the detriment of the caribou and the Indigenous relationship with the species. The chapter concludes with a strong example of a settler-led attempt at caribou restoration in Minnesota in 1938 that failed, according to Langston, because the project neglected to properly account for caribou migration but most importantly, because Anishinaabeg "rights and relations" to caribou as a continuation of settler racism "doomed the project to failure" (p. 41).

The second caribou chapter brings the history of settler and Indigenous caribou management up to the more recent past by covering the rest of the twentieth century and pays particular attention to changing relationships with predators like wolves, changing ecological conditions related to climate change, and changing relationships around the globe between Indigenous people and caribou. Langston focuses on the nexus between caribou, people, and a changing climate and tries to look forward for all concerned. The concluding section of this chapter, "Lessons from Caribou," asserts that because the relationships between humans

and animals like caribou are "embedded at every point in the environment," "sustaining those connections" is vital to preserving both species (p. 70). One of the best and hardest-hitting points is Langston's contention that settler refusal to address climate change and its impact on "vulnerable" caribou becomes a "self-fulfilling prophecy" of destruction that, in a sense, excuses settlers from working toward restoration of the species (p. 70). Yet, as Langston shows in these chapters, the relationship between humans—especially Indigenous peoples—and caribou has long-reaching negative cultural and ecological implications that could lead to extinction of the species. The lesson from caribou, Langston concludes, is that climate change is not a reason to "give up on management strategies" but rather that human policy decisions and refusal to act will condemn the mammal to extinction (p. 72).

The lake sturgeon chapter stands out as a strong example of Langston's deft usage of sources and storytelling. She shows how people, especially settlers, created knowledge about sturgeon over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how cultural, political, and material factors affected the relationships between settlers, Indigenous peoples, and sturgeon. Langston poses sturgeon contamination and population crashes as environmental justice issues, and the central story of the chapter is one largely of settler exploitation of the living fossil and subsequent decline of the lake sturgeon populations. Indigenous-led restoration efforts, however, offer a path forward to restoring the lake sturgeon, and Langston tells the story of the Menominee Tribe's work as an example of successful direct human intervention that helped the fish begin to recover former migration corridors. Langston, importantly, contends that the successful Menominee restoration efforts also functioned as a form of scientific and cultural breakthrough for both the fish and the tribe. As with the caribou chapters, Langston suggests that intensive restoration efforts, in collaboration with or led by Indigenous peoples, show how settlers

must “come up with new ways of thinking about wildness that acknowledge continuing entanglements between humans and nonhumans” (p. 104). In other words, to address human-caused climate change and its effects on migratory species like sturgeon, humans, especially settlers, must renew and revitalize our connections to those species by honoring and incorporating Indigenous knowledge, activism, and leaders.

The book concludes with the proverbial loon “in the coal mine” (p. 130). In this chapter, Langston traces the complex relationships between loons, settlers, and Indigenous peoples. Like the other chapters, it concentrates largely on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how changing climate and cultural attitudes toward the migratory bird affected its existence. Due in part to water toxicity and climate change, loon populations across the boreal north have fallen dramatically in the recent past. Langston discusses how the interconnected relationship between water, habitat loss, climate change, toxic chemicals, and cultural attitudes toward the birds contribute to population declines. In the end, Langston asks her readers to grapple with the consequences of turning a blind eye to these migratory climate ghosts while also offering an Indigenous story as a hopeful alternative that asks humans to approach species restoration from a position of relational responsibility rather than settler exploitation and hand-wringing.

*Climate Ghosts* ambitiously engages with and speaks to several different literatures, including environmental history, animal history, and critical Indigenous studies. Langston's practical and detailed approach goes beyond many historical and academic studies, which often only critique the roots of modern problems, to offer instead a path forward for those in the literal and proverbial field of wildlife management and climate change. Her emphasis on foregrounding and following Indigenous knowledge and activists is not new but offers compelling and detailed stories of success

and strategies for the future. Readers inspired by her work would do well to check out the work of critical Indigenous scholars like Kyle Powys Whyte, Zoe Todd, Clint Carroll, and Lindsey Schneider.

Langston's work also offers examples of the power that humans hold in the stories that we tell—or don't—about animals like caribou, sturgeon, and loons. The book offers many concrete examples of how stories and culture informed and conversely, were informed by settler ecology and policy. While this narrative is quite bleak at times, it does offer hope by suggesting that we can use the power of stories, including Indigenous and historical, to inform changes in policy that address the future of these proverbial climate ghosts. When these species reappear, often because of tribal efforts leading restoration, the memories and stories of both settler and Indigenous peoples related to these animals return as well. For this reason, instructors in various undergraduate classrooms and folks outside the academy will find the entire work or even selected chapters to be useful teaching tools as examples of both detailed historical analysis and narrative. Finally, humanists more generally will find this book interesting because it shows how historians can advocate for policy changes by telling histories. In the end, through the stories of caribou, sturgeon, and loons, *Climate Ghosts* challenges its readers to examine personal and societal relationships and responsibilities to migratory species.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Kerri Clement. Review of Langston, Nancy. *Climate Ghosts: Migratory Species in Anthropocene*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. July, 2022.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57276>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.