

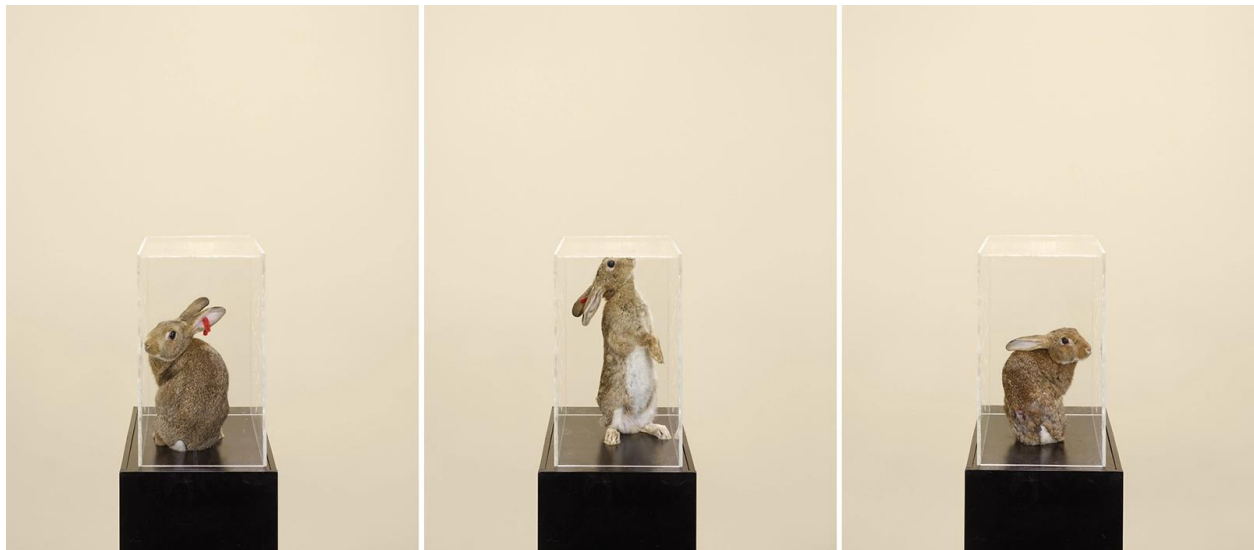
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A Peopled Wilderness

We must find new ways to act toward animals in a world dominated everywhere by human power and activity.

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Taryn Simon/Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Taryn Simon: detail of Chapter VI, from *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, 2011. From left to right: 37. No. 317, 23 Feb. 2009; 33. No. 309, 28 Jan. 2009; and 38. No. 318, 23 Feb. 2009. The rabbits shown were killed in an experiment conducted by the Robert Wicks Pest Animal Research Centre in Queensland, Australia, in which novel strains of a disease were introduced into the local population of European rabbits. The species was brought to Australia for hunting in 1859 and has no natural predators there. Since the 1950s the Australian government has used lethal diseases to control rabbit population growth.

Should we try to leave nondomesticated animals alone in “the wild,” imagined as their evolutionary habitat, but also known to be a place full of cruelty, scarcity, and casual death? Or do we have a responsibility to protect “wild” animals from scarcity and disease and to preserve their habitats? And what about predation of vulnerable animals by other animals? Could it possibly be our responsibility to limit that? Can we envisage such a thing as a multispecies society, where “wild” animals are concerned?

And what is “the wild”? Does it even exist? Whose interests does this concept serve?

My answers to these questions will be, in some cases, controversial. But my conclusions, albeit provocative, are also tentative, since we are searching for new ways to think and act in a world dominated everywhere by human power and activity.

The fascination of an idea of “wild” Nature lies deep in the thinking of the modern environmental movement. The idea is entrancing, but also, I believe, deeply confusing. Before we can make progress, we have to understand its cultural origins and the work it was meant to do for those who employed it.

Here, in a nutshell, is the Romantic idea of Nature: Human society is stale, predictable, effete. It lacks powerful sources of energy and renewal. People are alienated from one another and from themselves. The Industrial Revolution has made cities foul places where the human spirit is frequently crushed (as in Blake’s “dark Satanic Mills”). By contrast, out there somewhere—in the mountains, in the oceans, even in the wild West Wind—there beckons something truer, deeper, something uncorrupt and sublime, a type of vital energy that can restore us, because it is the analogue of our own deepest depths. Other animals are a large part of this “wild”: of Nature’s mysterious and vital energy (think of Blake’s “Tyger, tyger, burning bright”).

The typical Romantic scenario is that of a solitary walk in wild Nature: Chateaubriand describing a visit to Niagara Falls using stock Romantic tropes that have raised doubts ever since as to whether he ever went there; Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*; Goethe’s *Werther* flinging himself into the embrace of the winds; Shelley feeling, even, that he himself is the wind; Wordsworth’s lonely wandering ending in a more tranquil epiphany of golden daffodils; Henry David Thoreau taking to the woods around Walden Pond. “Wild” Nature summons us to deep emotions of wonder and awe, and through those emotions we are renewed.

Is this constellation of emotions helpful in thinking about how we ought to approach other animals? I believe it is not. The Romantic idea of “the wild” is born of human anxieties, particularly about urban and industrial life. Nature, in this conception, is supposed to do something for us; the idea has little to do with what we are supposed to do for Nature and other animals. The narcissism of the concept is usually explicit, as in Shelley’s constant “I,” or in Wordsworth’s final lines:

For oft, when on my couch I lie,
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Many nineteenth-century Romantics even had the idea that peasants and other poor people were part of Nature or closer to Nature, and ought to stay there in rural poverty rather than venture into the city and try to get educated. Tolstoy’s Levin in *Anna Karenina* finds peace when he drops his urban sophistication and joins the natural work life of the peasants. (And what would real peasants have thought of that pretension?) Thomas Hardy skewered this fiction in *Jude the Obscure*, showing its dire consequences for real poor people with intelligence and ambition; but the fiction endured. E.M. Forster still believes it when he represents Leonard Bast, in *Howards End*, as better off in the country: his mistake was to move to London and try to educate himself.

Instead of peasants, think of other animals, and you will see where I am going. Oh, those animals, so far below us, how alive, how robust they are! If only for a brief five-day safari we could share (from a safe distance) their world of violence and scarcity. Of course, we would never dream of living that life, but we feel a frisson by brief contact, and we feel more alive. (Many people on eco-safari think and talk in exactly this way.)

Nor is this Romantic fiction the peculiar property of newly industrial Europe and North America. Other societies have other variants on the idea of “natural” purity, energy, and virtue. We see it in ancient Roman obsessions with farming and agriculture as renewing sources; in Gandhi’s idea that the virtue of India’s people will be restored by rural poverty, spinning one’s own cloth, and so forth. People in many places seem to need to believe that their urban sophistication is bad and that they will become happier and better if they blend somehow with “Nature.” Usually the “blending” is pretty bogus, as with the immense sophistication with which the Romantic poets lay claim to rural simplicity. Fine, it’s still good poetry. My point is that this is an idea by and about human beings, not about Nature or animals or what they require of us. And the wonder involved in the Romantic sublime is similarly egocentric. It is not the sort of wonder that really turns us outward.

Some good has come of the Romantic idea of Nature. Because people wanted a certain type of experience, they preserved places that seemed to offer it. The Sierra Club and much in American conservationism had this origin, as did preservationist movements elsewhere. Often, today, people find physical and spiritual refreshment in “wild” places, and countries that have preserved them offer people a genuine good that has vanished elsewhere. But the good is all too often accidental: it is about us, not them. And there is much bad: glorification of game hunting, whaling, and fishing.

If by “Nature” and “the wild” we mean the way things go when humans do not intervene, that way is not so good for nonhuman animals. For millennia, Nature has meant hunger, excruciating pain, often the extinction of entire groups. When we compare “the wild” to the factory-farming industry, or to the less ethically sensitive forms of zoo captivity, it looks somewhat more benign; but used as a source of normative thinking in itself, the idea of Nature does not offer useful guidance. As John Stuart Mill correctly says, Nature is cruel and thoughtless.

Even the time-honored idea of the “balance of nature” has by now been decisively refuted by modern ecological thinking. When humans do not intervene, Nature does not attain a stable or balanced condition, nor does it attain the condition that is best for other creatures or for the environment. Indeed, to the extent that natural ecosystems do sustain themselves stably, it is typically on account of various forms of human intervention, such as spraying for damaging parasites, intervening to maintain a habitat’s vegetation, and policing against poachers. The “balance of nature” idea looks different from the Romantic idea, but it is really a form of it: our (urban) lives are marred by competitive anxiety and envy, but Nature is peaceful and balanced. This idea has its roots in human need and fantasy and is not supported by evidence.

There are certainly some good reasons not to intervene in the lives of “wild” animals. Two such reasons are (1) that we are ignorant and will make many mistakes, and (2) that intervention is often objectionably paternalistic, when what we ought to do is respect animals’ choice of a way of life. These are *prima facie* reasons only, however. Ignorance can be replaced by knowledge, as our ignorance of what is good for the children and the companion animals who live with us has, for the most part, been replaced by knowledge. Where we remain ignorant, society believes that

ignorance in such matters is not excusable: thus, a parent who refuses vaccinations for her children (or indeed for companion animals) is (in most circumstances) blameworthy for the ignorance that underlies that choice.

As for autonomy: we typically do not accuse governments of acting with objectionable paternalism when they adopt comprehensive social security or health insurance measures—or, indeed, when they adopt laws defining murder, rape, and theft as crimes and enforcing those laws. Where the basic wherewithal of life is concerned, we feel that people have a right to be protected (although anti-paternalists rightly insist that where adults are concerned, health choices remain personal to at least some extent). If we shrug our shoulders when animals are starving, aren't we saying that animals don't matter? And if we defend our hands-off policy by pleading ignorance of their good, how plausible is that plea when we're talking about matters of basic survival?

But this discussion, interesting though it is, presupposes that there is such a thing in the world as “wild” Nature: spaces that are not under human control and domination. It presupposes that it is possible for humans to leave animals alone. That presupposition is false. However large the tracts of land may be, all land in our world is thoroughly under human control. Thus “wild animals” in Africa live on animal refuges maintained by the governments of various nations, which control admission to them, defend them from poachers (only sometimes successfully), and support the lives of animals in them through a range of strategies (including spraying for tsetse flies and many other matters). There would be no rhinos or elephants left in the world if humans did not intervene.

In the US, “wild horses” and other “wild” creatures live under the jurisdiction of our nation and its states. To the extent that they have limited rights of nonintervention, free movement, and even a type of property rights, that is because human law has seen fit to give them these rights. Humans are in control everywhere. Humans decide what habitats to protect for animals, and leave the animals only what they decide not to use.

The air and the oceans might appear to be more genuinely “wild,” but what can happen in them is controlled in many ways by both national and international law, and shaped pervasively by human activity. The lives of whales and other marine species are constantly affected by human use of the oceans—by sonic disturbance, commercial whaling, plastic pollution, and much more. Law has been able to do little to rein in human greed. As for the air, humans are polluting it in ways that interfere greatly with the lives of birds. Human architecture and urban lighting cause countless bird deaths every year: light draws birds to it, disrupts their circadian rhythms, and alters migration patterns. Human activity also alters, and often destroys, bird habitats. But human activity can work to reverse these damages. If we decided not to engage in reparative projects, the result would be that the bad forms of interference would prevail unopposed.

One might grant that the current status quo is that humans dominate everywhere, while still recommending that humans simply back off and leave all the “wild” animals in all of these spaces to do the best they can for themselves. Even that proposal would require active human intervention to stop human practices that interfere with animal lives: poaching, hunting, whaling. And it would be, it seems, a gross abnegation of responsibility: we have caused all these problems, and we turn our backs on them, saying, “Well, you are wild animals, so live with it as best you can.” It is not clear what would be accomplished by this pretense of a hands-off policy.

Nor is it clear that we can ethically be standoffish, even in instances where we have not caused the problem. If we are there looking on, in control of and monitoring animal habitats, it seems like callous stewardship indeed if we permit mass starvation, disease, and other thoroughly “natural” types of pain and torment. We would be watching these calamities, but refusing to try to stop them. We’ll get to predation later, and that issue is truly difficult. But what about starvation and preventable disease, things that existing wild animal refuges routinely try to prevent—and things that very likely have human causes, at least in part?

An example is instructive. In Kyrgyzstan, a national park called Ala-Archa is divided into three zones: one where humans may hike and picnic, one where animals live without human interference, and one where the same animals breed and nurture young, again without interference—so to speak. The rationale is that rare species such as the snow leopard need protection if they are to sustain themselves and reproduce, and that all species function best in a multispecies world if the reproductive activities are segregated to some extent from other life activities.

All of this of course is totally artificial and requires constant intervention. Each habitat is set up and maintained so that animals can enjoy flourishing species-specific lives. Inside the animals-only zones there is much management as well, fostering successful feeding and reproduction. This arrangement is much better for animals than the one that would exist if all creatures collided together. We could even hypothesize that it’s the one that the animals would choose if they spoke, since it’s the one that best promotes health and flourishing. But in saying that, we are saying that animals, like humans, don’t choose to be abandoned without protectors: their hypothetical choice is for a world with decent stewardship promoting their flourishing. A non-“wild” world.

Here’s another example that casts doubt on the idea that the untouched skies are the last frontier of true animal freedom. New Zealand, unlike Australia, has almost no native mammals. It does have a variety of rodents and other small animals, mainly introduced by white settlers: rabbits, mice, rats. And, of course, it has domesticated animals, dogs and cats, many of which wander at large. But the islands contain an amazing variety of birds—not predatory birds, which might have an edge in the competition with the rodents, but many species of small songbirds and several small native flightless birds (kiwi, weka, kakapo).

As you can easily imagine, the little birds and to some extent the parrots are at risk from the rodents and the cats. And if the “course of nature” had prevailed, many avian species would by now be extinct, and, more germane to my argument, many small birds would have been torn apart and died in agony. Outside Wellington, I visited a bird sanctuary that is in effect a large avian semi-zoo. Humans may enter and hike, though they have to pass inspection lest they feed the birds or carry in with them any rodent, dog, or cat. Rodents, dogs, and cats are kept out by a high netting that encloses many acres of land. It is three-sided, meaning that birds may leave if they choose to do so, seeking food outside. But it is carefully calculated to be a barrier too high for any of the usual rodent suspects to cross: a demonstration at the entrance shows how high rabbits can jump, how high cats jump, and what sort of thwarting of the climbing capabilities of each has been put in place. Birds are free—precisely because the space is controlled.

These two cases show that freedom and autonomy for animals are not incompatible with intelligent human stewardship. Indeed, they typically require stewardship, because Nature is not a glorious site of freedom. If humans try to renounce stewardship, in a world where they are

ubiquitously on the scene, shaping every habitat in which every animal lives, this is not an ethically defensible choice or one that promotes good animal lives. The only options before us, in the world as it is, are types and degrees of stewardship. We need to face this fact head-on, or else we will not have a good debate about how to exercise the power that we indubitably have.

The “wild,” I’ve said, is a place of both scarcity and violence. Today many people who care about animals think that we ought to inhibit human violence against them (poaching, hunting, whaling) but do nothing to interfere with the violence of “Nature” (hunger, drought, predation). Can this common attitude be defended?

My approach focuses on the life chances of individual creatures: they ought to have the chance to live flourishing lives. Suffering and the chance to exercise various forms of agency are the two things that matter. From the perspective of creatures who are victims of “Nature’s” violence, the fact that it’s all “Nature” is no consolation. As Mill says, they often suffer even more horribly: starving is among the most painful forms of death, as is being torn limb from limb by a pack of wild dogs. A bullet to the brain would definitely be better than that, even if the former deaths are “natural” and the latter human-inflicted.

Nor, when we are aware of our own control and stewardship, do we actually think in the hands-off way I’ve characterized. In defending human action to protect animals against floods, famine, and drought, I am not making a radical proposal; I am reporting common thinking and practices. Just as nations that have animal reservations inhibit poaching, so they inhibit the influence of “natural” disasters—most of which have human causes in the background anyway. When we can do this, then, it seems that we must.

Predation, however, seems different. Stewards of large animal reservations not only do not inhibit predation; they often strongly encourage it. They behave, then, very differently from companions of domesticated animals, who typically discourage their companion dogs and cats from feasting on little birds or hunting foxes, even though that behavior is part of the typical repertory for some breeds. That is, they typically treat their companion animals rather like children: they channel natural aggression in the direction of some form of substitute activity, preventing frustration of instincts, but also preventing harm to others. Just as a child is steered in the direction of competitive sports rather than human carnage, so a cat is steered to a toy or a scratching post rather than to a bird.

Isn’t the animal’s capability to lead its characteristic form of life being frustrated? Yes and no. A capability may be described in multiple ways. We could say that what is typical of cats is the capability to kill small birds. We could also say that what is typical, and crucial, is the capability to exercise predatory capacities and avoid the pain of frustration. What is inherited is a general tendency that may be expressed in more than one way. In a multispecies world, where we all have to inhibit some behaviors in order to live peacefully together, it makes sense to focus on the latter, more general description of the capability, unless we have overwhelming evidence that this approach doesn’t work, that cats without bird-killing are depressed and miserable. This is not what evidence shows us. A cat needs some outlet for its predatory nature—just as a human does. But there is no reason why this outlet must be one that inflicts horrible suffering on a victim.

Why don’t we think this way when we’re dealing with predation in “the wild”? There is a good reason for the asymmetry. We are very ignorant, and if we tried to interfere with predation on a large scale, we would very likely cause disaster on a large scale. We basically have no idea of

how species' numbers would change, what shortages would be created, and we are totally unprepared for dealing with the likely consequences of such interventions. The only way we could protect weaker creatures from predation is by turning larger animal reservations into zoos of the bad old sort, with each creature or group in its own enclosure.

Short of going down that road, however, there is no feasible idea of substitute behaviors comparable to the role of such a concept in the lives of companion dogs and cats. In a typical zoo setting, people may try to arrange a substitute: for example, giving a tiger a weighted ball to exercise its predatory capacities, while feeding it meat that has been humanely killed. Here is what the San Diego Zoo said in 2020 about the diet of its leopards:

At the San Diego Zoo, our leopards are generally fed a commercial ground meat diet made for zoo carnivores, and are offered an occasional large bone, thawed rabbit, or sheep carcass. To keep their hunting skills sharp, wildlife care specialists occasionally offer the cats a meatball "hunt," where part of their food is rolled into balls and hidden throughout their habitat.

This displaces the torture from the hunt to a factory farm visitors do not see. That is not an improvement. Synthetic lab-grown meat or even plant-based meat would be far superior. Even a humanely killed animal would be superior, since predation deaths are usually very painful. Without separate enclosures of the kind found in zoos, however, such substitutions would not be possible.

The philosopher Jeff McMahan, in a newspaper op-ed, has speculatively suggested engineering predation out of existence. That idea would solve the separate enclosures problem, but it simply doesn't show respect for most of these animals, who should not be blamed for their tendencies. (They have not evolved to be educable like dogs and cats, and though many of them exhibit social learning, it is of the sort characteristic of a predator species community.) And elimination would surely create a chaos of population overgrowth that we are unprepared to deal with.

Those, then, are the good reasons for moving very cautiously against predation, if at all. On the other hand, the suffering of vulnerable creatures and their premature deaths matter greatly and seem to demand some type of intelligent action. It simply is not among the goals that make up the form of life of these creatures to be eaten by predators. Their form of life is their own, and they seek to live it undisturbed, just as we do, even though at times we too are also prey for aggressors. These species would not have survived if they were not pretty good at escape. To say that it is the destiny of antelopes to be torn apart by predators is like saying that it is the destiny of women to be raped. Both are terribly wrong, and demean the suffering of victims. It is an unfortunate fact that in "the wild," animals' desires for peaceful life meet so frequently with frustration and pain.

There are also some very bad reasons for not moving against predation. Part of the Romantic idea of "the wild" is a yearning for violence. Blake's Tyger and Shelley's West Wind are emblems of what some humans feel they have lost by becoming hypercivilized. A longing for (putatively) lost aggression lies behind a lot of people's fascination with large predatory animals and indeed with the spectacle of predation itself. People who manage animal reservations know that predation is a sure tourist draw. On my visit to a fine reservation in Botswana, I found that one of the most eagerly sought-after sights was that of a rare species of wild dog leaping in a pack upon an antelope and tearing that animal limb from limb even before it was dead. From the start of the hunt through the excruciating death and the obligatory division of the spoils to the

final scene in which the vultures cleaned the carcass, rich tourists in my jeep watched with avidity, leaving their tent colony at 4:00 AM to do so; and it was a rare one or two who reacted with horror and aversion.

People have unsavory sadistic tendencies, and they fashion entertainments to gratify them. Just as the Romans satisfied bloodlust in part through violence involving animals (including elephants, to which Cicero and Pliny strongly objected, although they didn't object to the torture of humans), so too today my highly respectable Botswana tourist establishment was making money from vicarious sadism. Moreover, the animal reservation is geared as a whole to this exercise: the wild dogs are highly endangered, and much effort is made to preserve them. I am agnostic about the desirability of preserving that species, but I think here the central concern prompting preservation is a bad one: money from sado-tourism.

There are some modest interventions with predation that we should contemplate, while holding off on the larger issue. The first is not to make money from sado-tourism. Just as foxhunting, another human sport torturing animals to satisfy human sadism, has been rendered illegal, I would argue for restricting predation to spaces with no humans, as has wisely been done in Kyrgyzstan. There would be a lot less carnage if it were not semi-staged for a human audience. In a large reservation it may not be possible to keep humans entirely away from predators, but there's no need to make a point of taking tourists to see predation, much of which occurs at dusk or at night anyway.

Second, where there are instances of animal–animal cruelty under human stewardship, we may cautiously find at least some ways to intervene: for example protecting, as is often done, the weaker or rejected member of a litter or a nest from destruction. The New Zealand bird reservation is a marvelous instance of this. They keep out the rabbits, rats, mice, and cats, who have plenty of food anyway, since those are very resilient species. Of course, this displaces the predation and habitat depletion done by these creatures onto other small creatures outside the reservation, so my approval is questionable. But New Zealand's birds are extremely vulnerable, because they did not evolve to escape this type of predator—the predatory species are mostly not indigenous to New Zealand. And people can and do provide some substitute food for the other animals that does not involve predation. Cats may be fed humanely killed meat or fish, which is at least somewhat better, or lab-grown meat, better yet. So I think on balance the nation's decision to protect the birds is defensible.

How much further can we go in this direction? We need to press this question all the time. A pair of rare piping plovers, who in 2019 nested at Montrose Beach in Chicago, found to their dismay that a skunk had eaten their three eggs, which were close to hatching. They then laid another egg, and the Park District installed a new, stronger enclosure around the nest to protect it. Will anyone dare object to that on grounds of “unnaturalness”? In late July 2021 four chicks were hatched, and two have been successfully raised to young adulthood. Once hatched, the chicks were no longer confined to the enclosure, and two seem to have succumbed to predation, in the vulnerable period before learning to fly. Should there have been even more protection of the young chicks? Probably not, since they would then not have learned how to be plover adults.

Third, there are some instances of predation that are permissible, at least in my theory, opening up food sources for many animals. Killing insects does not inflict a harm of which my theory of justice for animals can be cognizant, because my theory insists that sentience is a minimal threshold for justice. This opens up food sources for many creatures. And killing rats and some

other nuisance animals can sometimes be covered under a self-defense principle—although limiting rat fertility is always preferable, as is beginning to be understood.

In short, we need serious ongoing discussion of the predation problem and what to do about it, and we need to keep searching for imaginable future solutions, such as substitute animal behaviors, where this seems possible without harmful frustration. (The cats in Kyrgyzstan are engaging in substitute behavior when they find food without killing birds.) We need above all to convince people that predation is a problem. Too many people grow up excited and enthralled by predation, and this has had a bad effect on our entire culture. It's important to keep pointing out that antelopes were not made to be food; they were made to live antelope lives. The fact that so often they do not get to live those lives is a problem, and since we are in charge everywhere we need to figure out how much we can and should do about it. Above all, we need to face up to the responsibilities entailed by our ubiquitous control over animal lives and habitats, working not to blight animal lives, as we so typically do, but to contribute to animal flourishing.

This essay will appear, in somewhat different form, in Martha Nussbaum's *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, to be published by Simon and Schuster in January 2023.