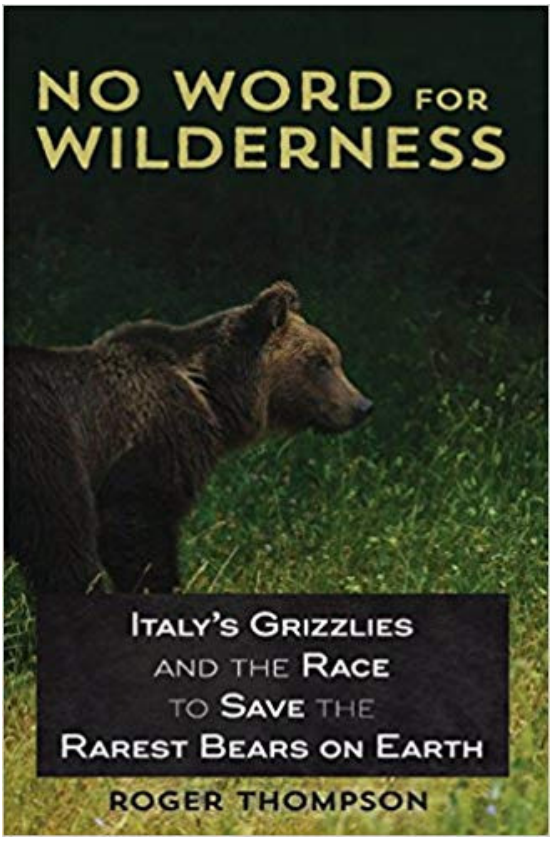
Review Essay

## Carol Gigliotti

# Another Word for Home

**Roger Thompson, *No Word for Wilderness: Italy's Grizzlies and the Race to Save the Rarest Bears on Earth*. Ashland Creek Press, 2018. $18.95 (pb), $28.95 (hb).**




My grandmother sailed with her father, step-mother, and siblings from Abruzzo, Italy to Ellis Island, New York in 1908, where she officially immigrated to the US. She was twelve. Like a war veteran, she was taciturn about her past, giving us few details about her previous life in Italy. Perhaps because of that reticence, I have harbored an intense desire to experience and understand the land where she was born. Although only 2

hours by car east of Rome, Abruzzo is known as the "green lung of Italy." Over two-thirds of Abruzzo's terrain contains the heart of the Apennines Mountain Range, the rest sloping languorously into the Adriatic Sea. Two of the highest peaks in the Apennines are contained within the boundaries of two of the three immense National and Regional Parks. Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga, Majella, the National Park of Abruzzo, and one regional park, the Sirente Velino, cover 300,000 ha of the Abruzzo region. Abruzzo has long been involved in protecting its natural heritage by pioneering the idea of conservation. The National Park of Abruzzo was initiated in 1923 to protect both flora and fauna from extinction. The other large parks mentioned above have been operating since the period between 1989-91 (Di Gregorio 9-11).

Within these parks and their surroundings live many unique species, such as the yellow and black orchid, also known as Venus's little shoe, once common throughout Europe and parts of Asia. While two plants endemic to Abruzzo, the Apennine edelweiss and the Marsican iris, are found only here, the European Beech tree found across the continent covers 60% of the three national parks in extensive forests. The Griffon vulture, the Eurasian Lynx, the Apennine golden eagle, chamois, and wolf (all subspecies endemic to Italy) draw attention to the endangered wild nature of Abruzzo (Di Gregorio 5-9). However, it is the plight of the Marsican bear, of whom only 50 are left, that sits at the center of Roger Thompson's new book, *No Word for Wilderness*.

While the IUCN classifies brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) globally as a species of least concern, the question of whether these Italian bears are a subspecies has become essential. Some argue that the Marsican bear (Ursus arctos marsicanus) is just another brown bear. Thompson, however, explains why that needs to change. If the brown bears of Abruzzo are to survive and thrive in their homeland, they need to be returned to the subspecies classification they were given a century ago. As Thompson writes: "To be correctly classified is to be honored as worthy of attention, and only that special binomial designation can provide a species the fullest protection available. The nomenclature matters because research is deeply wed to it. So is money" (87). It is this directness about the local and global interconnections of money and politics driving extinction that sets Thompson's book apart. If securing the future of a small surviving group of ancient bears in what has been called a backwater region in Italy may seem inconsequential to some readers, Thompson articulates in factual detail why it is not. Similar to other campaigns to save species, some successful, some not, the role of taxonomy looms large in saving the Abruzzo bears. The coastal wolves of North America (British Columbia and Alaska) and close neighbors of the bears of Abruzzo, the Apennine wolves, have benefited from the subspecies distinction in order to make a

case for their place on the endangered species list and the protections that entails. As I was writing this review, a *New York Times* article reported that geneticists have analyzed whole-genome sequences of 32 preserved wild tiger specimens from around the world, finding that instead of two distinct tiger subspecies there are six. The researchers involved in tiger DNA sequencing argue, similarly to arguments for the Abruzzo bears as a subspecies, that preserving the genetic uniqueness of an endangered species is as important as saving the entire species. Just as an individual tiger is different from another individual, one subspecies of tiger is genetically and culturally different from another subspecies. According to the tiger researchers, documenting and saving subspecies helps to preserve the genetic diversity, evolutionary uniqueness, and potential of the species (Nuwer).

Assuming that losing a subspecies does not really matter is not only bad science, but also a sign of disrespect of the species' uniqueness and the habitat in which they flourish. Hardly a helpful attitude towards protecting biodiversity or the contributions individual animals make to that universal manifestation of creativity. Thompson points out that people continue to see bears as all the same, when in reality each subspecies of bear has evolved through a symbiotic relationship with the characteristics of their habitat, "as unique as accents in human language" (73). As Thompson explains: "all creatures are part of a vast, invisible web of life whose gossamer threads barely hold together life on Earth. Break too many and the web collapses" (81). Science and its classification system have a role to play in convincing people of our dependence on this web of life. Thompson maintains, however, not only does science move at the speed of a sloth, species classification is only one part of necessary action needing to be taken to rescue the Abruzzo bears, and for that matter, other endangered animals around the world.

What is enticing and unusual in a book written by an author with a foot in academia — he is an Associate Professor at Stony Brook University and Director of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric there — and a foot in popular magazine and book writing is Thompson's detailed first person research on the individuals and groups in Italy whose actions work for and against saving the bears. Interviews with major players and stakeholders enrich Thompson's arguments concerning the importance of the "race" to save the Abruzzo bears. Paola Cuicci, a large animal biologist, has been pivotal in collecting the data needed to reclassify the bears as a subspecies. As the first researcher to undertake a systematic count of these bears since 1970, even if they were protected before that time and since, Cuicci's work "has proven beyond all doubt that without help, the bears of Abruzzo face imminent extinction. Without action, they will

disappear forever" (75). Due to the work of Cuicci and his fellow biologists, the very distinct qualities of these bears have been documented over the last 10 years. They are smaller in stature, have flatter, wider heads, with flatter molars, are essentially vegetarian, and seem to have evolved into a less aggressive inhabitant of the mountains and forests which they have shared with the Abruzzesi. Much of the information emerging about these bears is new to the scientific community and that will help make the case for a critically endangered status and, as Thompson insists, for what is the real goal of Cuicci and his associates: to make a change in humans' attitude towards the bears.

Cuicci has only been able to gather all this documentation in the last 10 years, after the Director of the Abruzzo National Park, the geographic epicenter for the bears in Abruzzo, was fired due to scandal. Thompson devotes several chapters to Franco Tassi's reign as "King" of the Abruzzo National Park. Tassi's role in initiating a conservation movement in Abruzzo as an early, though now outdated, model for National Parks was important. Native wolves, for instance, grew in number during his term and he was involved in the movement to put aside 10% of the land in Italy for protected areas. Italy reached that percentage in the 1990s, and today rests at 11%. However, by forbidding any outside scientists into the park to gather data on the Abruzzo bears, he stopped any new research such as Cuicci's until his firing. Thompson sees Tassi as a symbol of the political will that must exist in order for species such as the Abruzzo bear to thrive. It is not enough to reclassify a species in order to recognize how few are left. It takes a drive and passion to change the circumstances under which the species is slowly disappearing. While Tassi did not do that for the bears, he helped put in place the foundations of what is needed for it to happen.

Perhaps the most upsetting and formidable current challenge to providing a safe place for these bears, and many other wild animals, to survive comes from a source so surprising its explanation makes total sense. Thompson describes how this

> threat relies on invisibility, silence, and shadows. It feasts on inaction, creeping into daily lives without recognition. It grows through a subtle play of power that seems innocuous, if not utterly harmless, and it knows that as long as it stays out of sight, it will grow too large for any single person to stand against it.... (121)

If this sounds slightly ghoulish, it is. He is referring to the Italian Mafia's newest business venture: the beef industry. In Sicily and Calabria, the Mafia has exploited what

is called *urso civico*, or the civic use of public land. Limited private use of public land is allowed by Italian law, usually in the form of subsistence farming, including a few sheep or cows. In Abruzzo, the Camorra, a Mafia clan, has begun to take over public land, particularly the national and regional parks. "With deep wallets and even deeper savvy in negotiating gaps in the law, the Camorra, according to many in the area, has taken to livestock herding. The result has been devastating for the land and its wildlife. Especially Abruzzo's bears" (148). If one wonders how this could take place without pushback from the authorities, as well as the people of Italy, one only needs to read of how the Mafia employs burning cats thrown into the woods to start fires in the forests, makes assassination attempts on the directors of the parks, and poisons wildlife, including the bears, to place the risks of pushing back into perspective. While Thompson says seeing large herds of cattle grazing on public lands in the US would be unusual, I point to the enormous number of wildlife killed legally in the US by its own agencies, particularly Wildlife Services, an arm of the Agricultural services. In 2017 Wildlife Services killed 2.3 million wild animals primarily to benefit the agricultural industry, which now grazes large herds of cattle in national parks, forests, and protected lands in the US. If the Mafia use intimidation to demand the wild be bent to their agricultural business needs, then the differences in many cases between the Mafia and the US Wildlife Services' rationales for killing animals are only semantic. Livestock grazing occurs on some 260 million acres of US federal lands, including National Parks, and that number is growing under the Trump administration (Wuerthner). Across the globe, protected areas and wildlife are being overtaken by commerce and greed. The public lands of Abruzzo and the United States are simply two of those places.

Thompson's grasp of the intricacies of the situation in Abruzzo is formidable. For instance, he explains how the decline of the Maremmas, magnificent native dogs of Abruzzo, is a powerful image of what we are giving up. For Thompson, the Maremmas are both symbol and symptom of the end of the Pax Romana, a tradition of peace between nature and man in Italy. As superb protectors of their flocks, Maremmas have stood as guardians of that peace so the shepherds of Italy could willingly relinquish a certain number of their flock (often already dead) to scavenging by wolves and bears, thereby allowing the "nature tax," another tradition of Abruzzo. The shepherds understood that sharing the land with animals, such as bears, was a tax they paid for working the land. The Abruzzo bears, in over 1,000 years of co-existence, have never been reported to have attacked a human. The Maremmas have helped to keep this peace.

> The dog embodies a long-standing peace, forged over generations and paid for by offerings of goodwill, and it represents long-standing pride in what is possible if humans work with animals and not against them. They represent balance, even if a tentative one, and their pervasiveness is sign of health in the region. (159)

But Thompson adds, "Yet today the Maremmas are declining in Abruzzo."

This is a fascinating book, one that offers a microscopic view of the macro issues of species extinction: a unique animal in a unique ecosystem, the human actions that rupture the habitat, the safety, and the ability of a particular species to thrive and reproduce. It considers solutions on many fronts, some workable, others more illusory. But, in its thoughtful, beautifully written, and carefully documented narrative of the bears of Abruzzo and their plight, we realize we are faced with similar choices wherever we are. In other words, it is up to all of us, all over the planet, to step up and face the realization that everything we do is a choice either for animals, or against them. Wilderness is really another word for home.

**Works Cited**

Di Gregorio, Luciano. *Abruzzo.* 2nd Edition. Brandt Travel Guides, 2013.

Nuwer, Rachel. "Divide and Preserve: Reclassifying Tigers to Help Save Them From Extinction." *The New York Times*, 25 Oct. 2018. Online. Accessed 25 Oct. 2018.

Thompson, Roger. *No Word for Wilderness: Italy's Grizzlies and the Race to Save the Rarest Bears on Earth*. Ashland Creek Press, 2018.

Wuerthner, George. "Livestock's Impact on Wilderness." *The Wildlife News*. Online. Accessed 3 Oct. 2018.