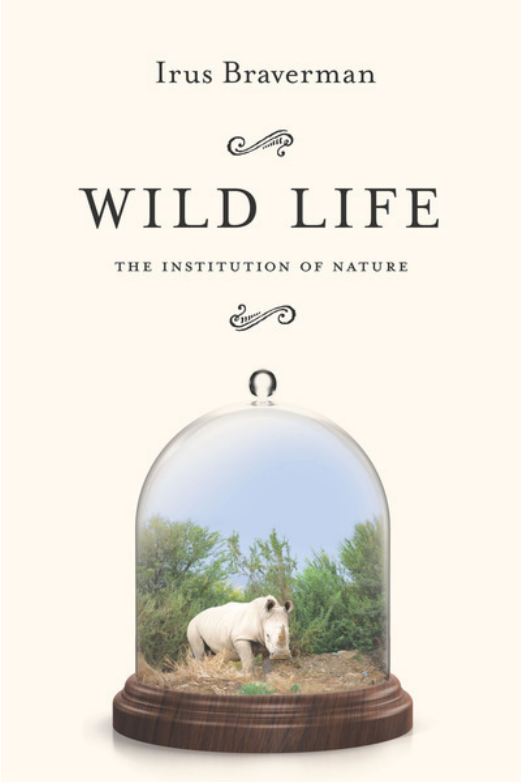
Reviews

Tobias Menely

"Wildness Without Wilderness"

Irus Braverman, *Wild Life: The Institution of Nature*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. 342 pp. $24.995 pbk.



Wild Life is a multi-species ethnography, a study of endangered species and the institutions that manage their survival. Braverman's central contention is that the division between conservation *in situ* and *ex situ* — literally "in place" and "out of place" — is unsupportable in an age in which all ecosystems are shaped by human activity. Aquariums holding endangered Polynesian tree snails in the London Zoo are, in her view, not categorically unlike a refuge where field biologists use radio-collar tracking and sophisticated databases to manage red wolf populations. This claim impels a wide-ranging investigation of conservation practices in this current phase of the Holocene/Anthropocene extinction, as the "biopolitical" institutions of the liberal state come to be dedicated to the sustention of the least "viable" species. In order to develop an "ethnographic account of the administrative structures and networks of the

emerging institution of natures" (11), Braverman has compiled a rich archive based on detailed and illuminating interviews with more than one hundred and twenty conservationists, from zoo professionals to wildlife biologists. In the diverse voices of these experts we see the textured and sometimes contradictory principles that motivate conservation in the twenty-first century.

Braverman's clunky "institution of natures" expresses one of her guiding suppositions: that our inherited concepts, particularly "nature" and "wilderness," fail to convey the "messy and productive entanglements of wild life" in the Anthropocene (232). The idealization of *in situ* conservation, she argues, relies on a discredited "idea of wild nature" (17). For example, the 2002 Convention on Biological Diversity, a treaty signed by 193 nations, defines conservation *in situ*, in the "natural surroundings" of a given species, as its "ultimate goal" (34). Similarly, the Endangered Species Act is premised on the idea that preservation is a matter of restricting or removing human activity, of withdrawing rather than managing. Ex situ conservation — the work of zoos, genebanks, and hatcheries — is widely regarded as a means to the end of returning animals to their "place of origin" (33). Institutional cultures, funding streams, legal regulations, databases, and even species taxonomies are largely organized around the *in situ*/*ex situ* division, even as the exigencies of conservation increasingly require flexibility and collaboration.

Braverman offers numerous examples of conservation, in practice, that fail to uphold this dichotomy, conservation in which "intensive human management" is a feature regardless of setting (158). To preserve Puerto Rican crested toads, for instance, concrete pools were built to replicate karst ponds destroyed by development. When captive-born golden lion tamarins are released, they remain closely monitored, tracked when lost in the jungle, and given veterinary care when ill. Red wolf pups are switched "between wild and zoo litters" in order to sustain genetic diversity (178), and "infertile wild" Puerto Rican parrots "are given captive eggs to foster" (150). The North American roseate tern is free-flying for most of the year but breeds in artificial nest boxes. Eastern hellbenders are "born wild, reared in captivity, and then transferred back to the wild" (135). The tycoon Richard Branson has repurposed a Caribbean island as a sanctuary for several species of Madagascar's endangered lemurs.

Braverman's previous book was an ethnographic study of the zoo as institution. *Wild Life* asks whether the entire planet has become a "megazoo" (98). There are more than 210,000 "protected" areas in the world, Braverman notes, and she provocatively asks

one conservationist whether zoos should be included on this list While conservationist rhetoric continues to romanticize natural ecosystems, such that even zoos attempt to simulate natural habitat, actual conservation practices are exemplified by the case of the Sonoran pronghorn antelope, transferred between "semi-captive" and "semi-wild" conditions (112). What, she asks, is "indigenous range" when all ecosystems are being rapidly altered due to not only human encroachment and management but anthropogenic climate change (140)?

For scholars working in animals studies, *Wild Life* offers a compelling, thickly descriptive model of multi-species ethnography — "anthropology beyond the human," as Eduardo Kohn puts it. While Braverman questions the mythic "identity of the animal as wild, exotic, and other" (63), she is attentive to behavioral and physiological variations among species and she raises interesting questions about species taxonomy and animal subjectivity. The six conceptually defined chapters are interleaved by short case studies that focus on individual species, such as the black-footed ferret, the red wolf, and the Tasmanian devil. Some are tragic, such as the story of the northern white rhino, and some are more hopeful. The California condor program, for instance, brought the entire wild population of 22 condors into temporary captivity, against strong opposition, before returning a sustainable population to the California wilds, where there are now more than 300 free-flying condors. Braverman also notes that the taxonomic categorization of species, which has significant implications for conservation practice, is often less than self-evident. Wolves and coyotes can interbreed. Conservation efforts have been shaped by debates about whether northern and southern White Rhinos represent distinct species or subspecies. The rejection of hybridization breeding strategies played a role in the extinction of the dusky sparrow.

At several points in *Wild Life*, Braverman wonders whether "the animal's perspective" should "be included when defining in situ and ex situ conservation" (114). A snail in an aquarium, after all, will have a different experience of captivity than a wolf in a zoological enclosure. Generally, though, the problem of animal subjectivity — of animals as thinking, perceiving, relating beings — is fairly attenuated in this book, which is no surprise given that conservation is organized around species and populations. Subjectivity becomes relevant insofar as conservation requires the maintenance of "behavioral integrity," animal knowledge of how to survive independently in the wild (215). Questions about animal point of view also appear in controversies about the competing claims of species conservation and individual welfare. Preservation often means capturing wild animals, as with the California

condors, or killing members of invasive species, predatory species, or surplus populations.

Such life-and-death decisions about individuals, populations, and species get at the heart of Braverman's ambitious and compelling assertion that conservation should be understood as a manifestation of biopolitics. These are the modern practices of governmentality, from laws and regulations to the use of databases and algorithms, organized around the state's imperative to, in the words of Foucault, "make live" (160). Certainly the institutions of conservation are resonant with a larger "biopolitical order" (107). Every pallid sturgeon, for example, is tagged with a "lifetime bar code" (109). "Through documentation, classification, quantification, and ranking," Braverman writes, "threatened species lists elevate the listed nonhuman species from the realm of mere, or biological, life, to that of a political life worth saving" (229). Biopolitics, in other words, helps to account for the "differential treatment between lives that matter most," such as endangered species, and "those that matter less," such as predators or non-native invasive species (151).

Braverman only gestures at the trickier historical question as to why biopolitical governance should extend to endangered animals (and plants), why species threatened with extinction should matter as political lives. To characterize conservation as "an affirmative and proactive biopolitical project" (189) does little to explain what motivates nation states, in a neoliberal age, to involve themselves in the messy and expensive work of conservation. This question seems especially relevant given that conservation often has the effect of limiting development and resource extraction, instigating intense clashes over land use (as the recent occupation of Malheur by anti-government militants attests). Braverman mentions the example of crested toad preservation, which helped "defeat Club Med's aspiration" to build a beach resort (27). Kierán Suckling, a director at the Center for Biological Diversity and Braverman's most loquacious informant, observes that "every acre preserved or taken back for wildlife is an acre out of Capital's hide. Thus Capital must destroy the very concept of nature and the independence of plants and animals" (46). Conservation, as a biopolitical program, may not be opposed to neoliberal capitalism, but it cannot be easily aligned with it either. Suckling suggests, moreover, that the demystification of "nature" — which he defines as the autonomy of plants and animals living in places where human intervention is minimized ("every acre preserved") — may actually serve the interests of unfettered development.

According to Braverman, "conservation biologists are often dualistic in their philosophy" — attached to "the ideal of human versus nature" — and yet "holistic in their practice" (226, 47). She notes that there has been a shift in the conservation community to seeing the in/ex divide in terms of "a continuum of management intensity," ranging from laboratories to national parks (95). Yet she refuses to "endorse" this "linear logic," and instead emphasizes "the inherent messiness and fluidity between and within the sites." Successful approaches to wildlife preservation, in her view, require a recognition that each case is "unique and therefore prescribes its own unique path for conservation" (226). Practices, however, are organized (or prescribed) by principles, and one of the principles that continues to motivate conservation is an idea of the biosphere's autopoetic resilience, as it is expressed in natural selection, in the ingenuity of individual animals such as the gray wolves recolonizing California, and above all in ecosystemic networks. The "fidelity of many of [her] interviewees toward the ideals of nature and wilderness" is based on the realization that the preservation of biodiversity largely occurs not through intensive management but through wilderness conservation, the restriction of human encroachment on self-organizing ecosystemic communities (11). It is worth remembering that *nature*, etymologically, refers to the self-generating properties of the living world. One wonders how to square Braverman's claim that "the existence of a natural ecosystem ... is increasingly unrealistic, and can be obtained only through intensive human management" with the infamous *Nature* article that estimated the economic value of global ecosystem "services" to be in the range of US $16-54 trillion (5). The problem is not hard to diagnose. Braverman's actual subject is endangered species, but, as is evident from the title of the book, her more tendentious claims require her to take these animals as stand-ins for "wildlife" and "nature" in general. In the margins of the story one can track the presence of wildlife the flourishing of which does not require intensive management, the predators (raccoons, coyotes, and red-tailed hawks) and prey (prairie dogs and mice) who share ecological communities with endangered species.

The aim of deconstruction — including the deconstruction of the human-animal binary, as Derrida insisted — is not to replace dichotomies with neologistic unities, such as "*inter situ hybrids*," or with an empiricism of infinite particulars (the "unique" case), but rather to *multiply* categories, to increase nuance, to recognize difference so as to see how systems intersect and overlap.

While I'm skeptical of Braverman's dogged assertion that in situ conservation is premised on a nostalgic fantasy, that there is no meaningful difference between zoological parks and vast refugia, *Wild Life* is a fascinating, timely, and significant book.

There is something undeniably haunting about a conservationist rhetoric that awaits a future in which a given "natural ecosystem" will be "back on its feet" (66). Braverman reminds us that for many threatened and endangered species no such future is likely. As long as states and non-governmental organizations dedicate themselves to the preservation of endangered wildlife (and how long they will do so in the ecologically simplified and geo-engineered twenty-first century is an open question), some species will live only through perpetual management.