

[Brewster on Minter, 'The Fall of the Wild: Extinction, De-Extinction, and the Ethics of Conservation'](#)

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Ben A. Minter. *The Fall of the Wild: Extinction, De-Extinction, and the Ethics of Conservation.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 192 pp. \$29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-17778-8.

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Discourse on extinction—both as distinct from and intertwined with climate change—has become common in academic and popular spheres, particularly since the 2014 publication of science writer Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. Announcements of additions to lists of extinct species are ever more frequent; just a few days prior to this writing, the US Fish and Wildlife Service announced twenty-three newly extinct fish and bird species.

In *The Fall of the Wild: Extinction, De-Extinction, and the Ethics of Conservation*, Ben A. Minter outlines the “moral frictions” inherent in attempts to balance conservation of species with respect for “the wild” (p. 12). The book runs the gamut of conservation techniques: specimen collection and field research, zoos and nature preserves, assisted colonization, and de-extinction via genetic rescue. While these practices vary widely, including in their adoption of an environmental ethic, they are united through “the jettisoning of older constraints on our manipulation of nature and the transformation of norms and ethical relationships premised on our exercise of restraint on the landscape” (p. 119).

Minter’s book provides a useful overview of current practices of and debates in conservation, in an engaging manner accessible to nonspecialists. Along with many other works in environmental studies, Minter interrogates the concept of a “true nature” or “authentic wilderness,” ideas that have particular import for conservationists—and perhaps doubly so for those of a more traditional bent. When discussing the history of zoos and the recently proposed “Zootopia” project at the Givskud Zoo in Denmark, for example, Minter points out that “our understanding and image of the wild ... is at least in part a mythic one” (p. 58). The investigation of this idea—a pure, unadulterated wilderness—as it relates to the diversity of conservation practices is one of the book’s valuable contributions. Though (rightfully, to my mind) hedging the question of whether or not we are living in the Anthropocene, Minter demonstrates the many ways that a conservation ethic cannot be “all or nothing.” Instead, we must recognize the biological, material, and conceptual complexity of cohabiting this planet with nonhuman others: “Accepting a more nuanced cultural and technological narrative about the wilderness, though, doesn’t require rejecting the idea that a meaningful sense of the wild is available to us, even in this age of accelerating human influence and control” (p. 59).

Thus pursuing conservation in our times is messy work, as particularly illustrated by Minter’s discussion of de-extinction and its proponents. While many de-extinctionist goals remain unmet

(particularly the return of an extinct species), their philosophical position has important implications for conservation specifically, and for an environmentalist ethic broadly. Minter shows valid concern for the ways de-extinction promotes a specific ethical position in which humans remain both superior and central, pursuing “the sublime qualities of wild nature for a celebration of our own technological ingenuity, power, and control” (p. 108).

This philosophy, often called eco-pragmatism, is practiced by de-extinction advocates, such as Stewart Brand and members of the Breakthrough Institute, who evangelize on global stages, spreading the gospel of humanity’s technological brilliance. Minter (rightly) demonstrates the dangers of eco-pragmatism, which uses traditional pragmatic philosophy (à la John Dewey) as an “intellectual cover” for technocratic solutions (p. 11). Minter goes so far as to argue that de-extinction is not, in fact, a conservation strategy at all, as it lacks a sound environmental ethic and paints humanity as masters of the natural world.

In contrast to eco-pragmatism, and as a possible foundation for conservation practice, Minter advocates for what he calls “pragmatic preservationism” in the book’s final chapter. This involves a return to the values of a particular strand of (US) conservationism to promote more active interventions to preserve biodiversity in the face of dramatically shifting environmental conditions. Pragmatic preservation is particularly animated by what Minter sees as “lack of an appeal to history, that is, an anchoring in the traditions and values that have long shaped conservation philosophy and practice” in the debates on conservation strategy in the Anthropocene; such ahistoricism is particularly common among eco-pragmatists (p. 80).

Pragmatic preservation includes a return to some of the practices and philosophies of the giants of “traditional conservation,” particularly those of Aldo Leopold (1887–1948). Minter promotes a revival of Leopold’s approach because it “suggests that the responsibility to maintain viable populations of vulnerable species (without destroying land health) overwhelms the commitment to traditional conservation methods” (p. 93). Here, traditional conservation methods involve the preservation and protection of species in their original habitats, in contrast to other methods that might ensure the survival of species by translocating them to other milieus (different habitats or captive environments). By advocating for direct, “radical interventions” for conservation, Leopold was “ahead of his time” and represents a key figure for conservationists today (p. 83).

Here lie the limits of Minter’s argument, limitations not unique to this book as they are common among environmentalists. First, the privileging of luminaries of the American conservation tradition positions these figures and practices outside of historical and cultural forces. For example, unlike the commercial hunters who “pushed the [great auk] to the wall long before their rarity attracted the eye of collectors and curators,” Minter depicts scientists and conservationists’ motives for collecting as not susceptible to the influence of the market or other motives (p. 18). The belief in the separability of natural history from capitalism permeates museums and other institutions today, as they maintain the appearance not only of scientific objectivity but also of invulnerability to the ideologies of capitalism. But, as many have shown, the practices of natural history and conservation are not separate from such ideologies; in fact, they contribute to their creation and perpetuation (see, for example, Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* [2004]; Stephanie Rutherford, *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power* [2011]; and Jennifer Tyburczy, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* [2016]). A conservation ethic under climate change must

recognize the role capitalism plays in both the creation of the conditions of environmental crisis and the traditions of conservation practice that continue to the present.

Similarly, a conservation ethic should look to Indigenous knowledges for alternative ways of relating and conserving species—not in an extractive relationship but one of humility and reparation. Minter points to the decimation of the American bison as a touchstone for the nation’s conservation movement, as “possibly no species embodies *our* conflicting impulses to destroy and protect nature as fully” (emphasis added). As is common in much environmentalist discourse, the Western perspective slides into the “our”; one particular way of being becomes the way of being human: “the bison was intensively exploited (hunted) by humans” (p. 39). A very specific group of humans was responsible for this exploitation, and they should not become representative of humanity as a whole. Like many other discussions of the bison and the role it played in conservation, Minter makes no mention of the accompanying violence against the many Indigenous groups who not only depended on the bison for survival but also had a different way of coexisting with them. This omission is not unique to Minter’s work; it is common in environmental studies writ large. But addressing it is paramount for any project striving for ethical orientations in this time of climate upheaval.

With these aspects in mind, Minter’s proposal becomes a call for the conservation of conservation. While thinkers like Leopold certainly have valuable insights to offer contemporary environmental ethics, a conservation ethic to meet the current ecological emergency must also reckon with the violences of its past and reimagine new relations with species.

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