Bouchard on Lapham and Waselkov, 'Bears: Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Perspectives in Native Eastern North America'

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Sometimes one can judge a book by its cover. Bears: Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Perspectives in Native Eastern North America is a direct work of scholarship. It is called Bears; it says it is a book about bears in Indigenous cultures, and that is exactly what it delivers. Thankfully, it matches this directness with a compelling collection of essays and perspectives that shed light on what is a fascinating and underappreciated topic. The twelve essays written by a combination of seventeen archaeologists and anthropologists examine effectively a single species—the American black bear—in a variety of contexts. The book focuses primarily on the woodlands of the eastern United States, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. While one chapter deals with modern British popular culture, the majority are concerned with the immediate precontact and colonial periods. If you have ever had any questions whatsoever about bears and their place in Indigenous societies, then look no further.

How should we categorize this book? The authors combine and balance archaeological evidence with deep ethnographic studies of past and contemporary cultures. The volume as a whole combines strands from several recent trends in environmental humanities. It is centered on relations between humans and nonhuman actors, both as an animal history and a study of the role of nonhuman persons in cultural worldviews, what the introductory essay describes as “perspectivism” (p. 2). Readers will find valuable points about food history, material culture, the Atlantic world, forest ecologies, and Indigenous politics. The case studies provide a cohesive and compelling case for studying Indigenous communities in the eastern woodlands widely, and one walks away drawing far-ranging connections despite the individual studies having looked at so many different sites and moments in time. There is something of interest for everyone in this (quite large) volume.

Running through the chapters is a quandary that had previously perplexed archaeologists. There is rich ethnographic evidence which makes clear that bears were important to culinary, cultural, religious, and exchange practices of varied Indigenous communities across the eastern woodlands. At the same time, the archaeological evidence is extremely, even surprisingly, sparse at many otherwise fruitful dig sites, a problem catalogued in several essays in this volume. As the concluding essay puts it, “the black bear [is] among the most socially consequent of species in Native eastern North...
America, despite a meager presence of their remains at many archaeological sites” (p. 271). The essays are able to overcome this problem by carefully working through both the ethnographic and the archaeological evidence in tandem, demonstrating that the specific ways bear remains were used in most cases accounts for their limited physical remains, while strengthening the argument in favor of their outsized importance in Indigenous ritual, cosmology, politics, and cookery.

The book is framed by two synthetic essays written by the editors, which help make sense of the various case studies. The introduction, by Heather A. Lapham, outlines the purpose and themes of the work as a whole. It offers a useful summary of recent changes in archaeology-anthropology on the treatment of animals and a discussion on the turn toward persons-other-than-humans in our analysis. The final essay (chapter 12), by Gregory A. Waselkov and J. Lynn Funkhouser, then attempts to resolve the issue of archaeological versus ethnographic evidence by drawing on the work of the previous chapters. Together these are very useful chapters for those new to the topic or interested in the general place of bears in Indigenous history. Likewise, chapter 1, by Waselkov, provides an excellent overview of the ethnographic evidence for bear-human relationships. This chapter will be extremely useful for historians as well as archaeologists working on Indigenous societies in the eastern woodlands. This chapter points to an essential role of bears as a food source across the eastern woodlands, primarily in the form of bear grease.

Thereafter, the chapters offer a quick array of case studies. Chapter 2, by David Mather, closely examines the archaeological evidence for the role of bears in ceremonies in Minnesota. Chapter 3, by Thomas E. Berres, examines the role of the great white bear in Menominee cosmology, myth, imagery, and ritual. Chapter 4, by Ralph Koziarzski, likewise considers the spiritual and economic place of bears in Meskwaki communities. Chapter 5, by Terrance J. Martin, looks at black bears in the western Great Lakes region, focusing on recovered perforated bear mandibles. Chapter 6 combines the work of Christian Gates St-Pierre, Claire St-Germain, and Louis-Vincent Laperrièrre-Désorcy on the role of bears in Iroquoian societies. This is one of the richest chapters, combining extensive archaeological investigation with ethnographic sources to offer a thorough, multilayered image of the place of nonhuman actors in Iroquoian cultures. Chapter 7 is a wide overview of bears in southern Appalachia and the Piedmont by Lapham. Chapter 8, by Heidi M. Altman, Tanya M. Peres, and J. Matthew Compton, zeroes in on the use of bear grease (“better than butter!”) in Cherokee communities. Chapter 9, by Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman, looks at the ethnohistory and archaeology of bears in the southeastern woodlands. Chapter 10, by Ashley Peles and Megan C. Kassabaum, studies bears and ceremonies in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Chapter 11, by Hannah J. O’Regan, offers a unique perspective by considering North American bears in postmedieval Britain. As the chapter shows, black bears played a prominent role in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British culture, linking American woodlands with British homes. To note two important examples from O’Regan’s study, the famous bearskins worn by Grenadier Guards are made of Canadian bear skins, and the children’s character Winnie the Pooh was inspired by a Canadian bear brought to Britain during the First World War.

Several themes unite these different chapters, even if they cover a number of different times and places, and suggest how this volume might be useful to those who study the environmental humanities. One is the matter of materiality: how bear remains were repurposed, manipulated, and used by humans. This is where the archaeological work really shines, and those interested in material culture will find much of interest. Mather uncovers a variety of black bear remains, some altered by
humans and some not, in human habitation sites in Minnesota, while Martin focuses on one part of the bear—the mandible—to track usage by humans in the Great Lakes region. Second is the question of food. Bears were a crucial source of oil and fats in many parts of the eastern woodlands, a fact noted consistently in the ethnographic records. Waselkov notes both textual and visual evidence for the harvesting and exchange of bear grease in the colonial period, while the study of Iroquoian societies includes a deep dive into the culinary uses of bear grease and meat. Third is the place of bears in cosmology, myth, and ritual practice in the eastern woodlands. Berres’s essay, for instance, both reconstructs Menominee cosmology broadly (note the useful diagram on page 73) and then delves into reconstructions of the story of the long-tailed great white bear to explore the place of bears in this tradition. Fourth is the place of live bears in Indigenous (and in one case, British) cultures. Several essays note the presence (attested to in ethnographic literature) of live bears, especially cubs, in Indigenous communities. Chapter 1 offers numerous written evidence for this widespread practice, and O’Regan carries this over to the British Isles.

Although the essays are engaging and accessible, two issues might limit this work’s appeal to environmental scholars. First, the essays are all interesting, but they tend to reinforce and repeat the same ideas rather than always introduce something entirely new. The reader will quickly note the same points, and sometimes even the same historical examples, appearing again and again in the different chapters. These essays are meant to serve as case studies, and part of the book’s value lies in the breadth of evidence it is able to bring together. The introductory and concluding essays end up doing much work to tie everything together in a satisfying way and have the most to offer nonspecialists. Those who work with the histories of Indigenous societies in the eastern woodlands, animal histories, food history, or other topics may want to focus on a couple of the case studies rather than read through the entire thing. Second, the parameters of the volume necessary limit some of its usefulness. Because of the black bear’s range, it is really the only species discussed at length; if you are interested in other kinds of bears, look elsewhere. Though the geographic scope is quite wide, by and large all the studies deal with the same ecologies. Those interested in other kinds of animals, or Indigenous communities beyond the eastern woodlands, will have to look elsewhere.

Even so, Bears is well worth integrating into any research about humans, animals, foodways, and ecologies of eastern North America in the precontact and colonial periods. Although all the contributors are archaeologists, the book is written in a way that is eminently accessible to nonspecialists. The book is thoroughly illustrated with maps, photographs, artwork, and diagrams. The evidence is presented in a clear and readable way. The many chapters on ethnography, culture, and food will be welcome to historians, anthropologists, and others. For those interested in human-animal histories and relations, this should be welcome reading.


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