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BOOK REVIEW

The Heart of the Wild: Essays on Nature, Conservation, and the Human Future, edited by B. A. Minter, and J. B. Losos; contributions by B. Adams, J. Berger, S. Clayton, E. Crist, M. L. Crump, T. L. Fleischner, H. W. Greene, H. Herzog, E. Marris, K. D. Moore, G. P. Nabhan, P. H. Raven, C. J. Schell, R. Shine, and K. Whyte, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2024, 280 pp., \$26.95/£22.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-691-22862-4.

The Heart of the Wild explores the raw beauty of a site that is both authentic and mysterious, an original place where nature and human emotions intersect. The various contributors allow one to feel deeply the power and splendour of the natural environment. The book cover touches upon an example that considers the conditions of our modern world. A straight road cuts through a coniferous forest, symbolising the coexistence between man and nature. This almost endless road leads towards imposing mountains, partially covered in snow, beneath a clear sky. The rays of the sun illuminate the mountain ridges, highlighting their magnificence. This contrast between the natural elements – trees, earth, snow, and sky – and the road that cuts through them invites reflection on the coexistence of man and nature, as well as the role of modernity in a conserved environment. The book teaches us how to keep these sanctuaries and their entire landscapes in their purest and most "wild" form, and to appreciate them for what they are.

Minter and Losos begin by presenting the central questions in this book (pp. 1-11). Their exceptional method is distinguished by the use of art, in its various purest and most famous forms, to touch hearts where words are insufficient or may fail to convey the message. Your reviewer feels deep admiration, for example, for the choice of paintings by 19th-century American artist Thomas Cole (pp. 1-11) as a starting point, to touch emotions and raise awareness about the relationship between civilisation and nature. Equally effective are the iconic illustrations of photographer Easton Adams (1902-1984) in environmental and cultural debates on the preservation of wild spaces, and to clarify the nuances of an idealistic view of "wilderness", often depicted as carrying no human trace, thus creating a "visual fiction" of pristine nature (pp. 100-107).

The Heart of the Wild also honours several other artists and thinkers who are all connected to how wild nature and its landscapes have been celebrated in culture, art, and ecology, such as Edward Abbey, writer and essayist, known for his work *Desert Solitaire* (pp. 11, 105, 115); Werner Herzog (p. 113), iconoclastic director and filmmaker, whose films on nature and the environment have often explored themes related to wild grandeur and human confrontation with nature; John Muir, Scottish-American naturalist and environmental activist, often regarded as the "father of the national parks system" in the United States (p. 75); and Rachel Carson (p. 105), ecologist and author, whose book *Silent Spring* played a fundamental role in raising public awareness about the dangers of pesticides and environmental protection. The book highlights their influence and the impact of their work on environmental awareness and the wild beauty of nature. The entire book is like unique poetry, through

the exceptional ability of the contributors to connect with nature to grasp every detail, and respond to the very complex questions of their work.

Their eyes perceive the slightest variation in colour, whether it be the nuances of a sunset or the reflections on a calm lake. Marris' curious gaze, for example, crossed paths with a badger near a retirement home, and described it in its natural habitat, seen by their consciousness as both proof and a symbol of the coexistence between human beings and wildlife (pp. 15-21). Marris thus proposed this event as demonstrating harmonious coexistence in "multispecies cities" or "wild urban cities" (p. 21).

The authors use diverse elements (animals, landscapes, ecosystems, human interactions) to convey central ideas. The dingo, for example, in the desert and semi-desert zones of Australia is seen by Losos as the master of survival and a guardian of balance in the arid ecosystem (pp. 36-45). It has been used to explore the complexity of human relationships with predators, highlighting their essential role in regulating ecosystems.

Symbols of the unintended consequences of human intervention include the infamous cane toad (p. 22) and several species of snakes, notably the garter snakes (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) in Manitoba, and as the pit vipers (*Gloydius shedaoensis*) on Shedao Island in China (pp. 34-39). Guided by awareness and wisdom, the book examines their cases with a perspective different from the usual one applied to what constitutes a nuisance in our environment. These cases remind me of a very interesting thesis defence on biodiversity in which I participated as a member of the jury. The candidate had presented as an issue the uncontrolled introduction since 2012 of the invasive alga *Sargassum muticum* (a brown alga) on the Moroccan Atlantic coast [1]. Although these invasive species are often seen as a threat to biodiversity, I instead see that nature has a unique ability to adapt.

A new balance, often influenced by anthropogenic factors, can emerge, transforming the ecosystem without necessarily causing its collapse. Generally, naturalists deeply connected to the elements of their favourite ecosystems feel the pain of the disappearance of many species and the degradation of nature. Shine, in *The Heart of the Wild*, encourages us to accept the current reality and find ways to conserve what remains, rather than lamenting what has been lost (p. 22). Thus, rather than attempting to eliminate or counter these species, it may be wiser to value this evolving dynamic. The prosperity of sardines along the Moroccan coasts may be a striking example of this successful adaptation and an opportunity to reinvent our relationship with changing ecosystems.

The book introduces an interesting reflection on the notion of "native" and "non-native" species. According to Shine, some argue that introduced species which eventually evolve and adapt to their new environment can be considered "native". The book also clarifies several other species categories to differentiate the effects and help understand the consequences of their introductions, including invasive species (e.g., ragweed in Europe, native to North America, which has invaded several European regions, disrupting ecosystems and increasing allergy problems); non-invasive species (e.g. bamboo - *Phyllostachys spp.* — in Europe); endangered species (e.g., the Iberian wolf, threatened with extinction in Spain because of the destruction of its natural habitat and competition with other species); and endomorphic species (e.g., cactus in arid regions of the Americas, sensitive to disturbances such as the introduction of non-native species). Shine maintains that truly "natural" ecosystems, i.e., those without human influence, are almost non-existent. "Shifting baselines" refer

to the phenomenon where each generation adjusts its expectations of nature based on what it knows, without always realising what has been lost (pp. 24-27).

Where art evokes an emotional response, science is thankfully present to strengthen and channel this emotion towards action. Wild nature is often an essential refuge for biodiversity. Its decline or collapse would lead to global crises (environmental, social, and economic) that directly threaten human communities. Scientists today propose ways to highlight any harm to biodiversity and, thus, indirectly to wild nature (Shannon-Wiener species diversity index, Simpson index, deforestation rate, abundance of key species, quality of natural habitats, etc.) [2].

Just as with the introduction of an invasive species, Emma Marris describes a walk along a concrete path in her neighbourhood. Moving away from the path, she discovers a small urban ecosystem that has formed around a drainage pipe, with plants and animals thriving despite the urban environment (p. 15). Marris thus suggests that nature is not simply defined by its purity or the absence of human intervention, but that human interaction — whether beneficial, harmful, or neutral — also influences *what nature becomes*. The interconnection between life and death in ecosystems is also perceived by Marris through the carcasses of dead animals in nature that she has observed. Their presence, according to the author, highlights how death contributes to life, reinforcing the interconnectedness of ecosystems.

This book subtly explores both the darkest and brightest corners of our relationship with domestic cats (p. 50). "What if cats had never been domesticated?" "Can we really 'own' a cat?" These are examples of questions that invite doubt about the idea of domesticating them, exploring the nuance between their independence and our desire for control. The question is indeed very difficult to resolve! It even took me back to some rather old family memories: the story of Mimi, a little cat that quickly won our hearts. But Mimi had a secret: an almost magical ability to multiply the members of our family. In no time, she gave birth to six adorable kittens that, in turn, followed her example with astonishing speed. What had started as a joyful experience quickly transformed into a complex management of this 'feline dynasty'. This personal experience taught me one thing: cats cannot easily be contained, neither by walls nor by our human plans. Currently, several practices are widely accepted and implemented to ensure harmonious cohabitation between animals and human beings, but many sensitive and complex questions remain open, ultimately demonstrating that these felines remain a little wild, even after millennia among us, and this is precisely what this book explores with great freedom and fascination.

This work left a significant impression on me with its evolving discourse. The position of "Man" in relation to "nature" lies at the heart of the authors' reflections. At the beginning of the book, Man is presented as a constituent part of wild nature, despite his disruptive effects. Gradually, we observe an increasing detachment of humanity from nature (p. 12). It is only at the end (p. 89) that the authors highlight that this "belonging" cannot justify destructive behaviour.

This change in perspective can also be interpreted as a tension between, on one hand, the acceptance of human impact on nature (seen as an integral part of our evolution) and, on the other hand, the recognition of humanity's responsibility towards this nature, which it continues to impact destructively. Kyle Whyte (pp. 71-83) presents the powerful and destabilising reality of "wild places" and "wildness," which were innocently "sought after." He skilfully deconstructs the myth of "pristine"

landscapes, national parks, and supposedly preserved environments, revealing how their creators, far from being innocent, often concealed aspects in the dominant narratives. Wildness has often been used to justify historical injustices, the dispossession of indigenous people, genocide, and violations of treaty rights. Furthermore, Eileen Crist advocates a state of wilderness (p. 76), with minimal human interference and less artificial modification, control, and use. For her, wild nature represents the original, dynamic, and unmodified manifestation of nature, uncontrolled by human hands. She argues for a world where wild spaces are left free to flourish, allowing non-human life forms to continue evolving and coexisting.

Eileen Crist perfectly complements Whyte's perspective (p. 84-89), defending the idea that wild nature is a space of freedom for ecosystems and non-human life forms. She sheds light on the tension between two opposing visions:

1. The utilitarian vision, where nature is seen as a resource to dominate and exploit.
2. The idealistic and ethical vision, where wild nature is valued for its autonomy, beauty, and ability to evolve independently of human intervention.

Crist strongly criticises the evolution of contemporary environmental discourse, which she calls "new environmentalism" (pp. 96-101). This trend, arising from an initial questioning of the ideal of wild nature (wilderness), focuses more on the sustainable use and management of nature to serve human needs. Crist dissects the fundamental difference between these approaches, mainly through their stance on human expansion on Earth. She thus introduces "Rewilding" as a philosophical vision that promotes a reduction in human activity and an active commitment to protecting and restoring wild areas.

Thus, through art, science, and well-established, conscious, and unique ideological reflection, the contributors to *The Heart of the Wild* remind us that wild nature, far from being an abstract notion, is at the heart of our survival and our future. This book is a vibrant call for the preservation of these vital spaces, for a more harmonious coexistence between humanity and the Earth, and for the awakening of consciences to protect the wild treasures that shape our world. With its rich and varied perspectives, the work encourages much-needed introspection on our responsibility towards the natural world and its inhabitants, at a time when ecological challenges and biodiversity crises demand urgent and informed responses.

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