

Book reviews

Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene by Nayanika Mathur (2021) 224 pp., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA. ISBN 978-0-226-77192-2 (pbk), USD 27.50.

Elephant Trails: A History of Animals and Cultures by Nigel Rothfels (2021) 256 pp., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, USA. ISBN 978-1-421-44259-4 (hbk), USD 42.00.

Entangled lives of humans and non-humans

In our pursuit of the modern version of conservation we have obscured much of the richness that for millennia has enmeshed the lives of humans with those of other animals. The western scientific notion of a species flattens the much richer, and often contradictory, ways in which animals are understood in their interactions with humans. For example, people view tigers in a myriad of ways: transformed humans, beloved by the gods, man-eaters, objects to adorn wealthy tourists, flagships for fund-raising efforts, ecosystem structurers, objects of ridicule and awe in zoos, stuffed animals, hybridizing with humans in graphic novels, and many more.

Animals' lives are so entangled with those of humans that the boundaries separating the two are not always clear. It is no surprise that some traditional Mexican jaguar costumes worn for ritual dances have mirrors for eyes that reflect the spectating humans, or that many cultures feature werecreatures: werebears, werejaguars, weretigers, and, of course, werewolves. The daemons, animals in a spirit form, featured in Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy are just the latest incarnation of the longstanding cross-cultural tradition that humans and animals are inextricably connected. A person's daemon is so much a part of that person that when the two are violently separated, death results for both.

We sit behind our desks writing articles about minimum population sizes and genetic structure, enchanted by the magic of GIS layers, statistical tests and peer reviews. Yet when we step out into nature, we are enchanted all over again by the non-human world: the deadly beauty of a goshawk stooping down from out of the clouds, the monochromatic richness of a bog in bloom or the glimpse of a bluefin tuna, breaking the ocean waves in pursuit of something that we can only think of as joy. Despite our best intellectual efforts, the species we study will not remain as objects of the scientific gaze, but

insist on shape shifting and demanding that we open our narrowed scientific minds to embrace the wider ways that humans and animals interact.

The conservation community has created an artifice in which humans must be treated separately from the other organisms that inhabit the earth. From studies of animal culture and intelligence to the contested arguments of compassionate conservation to emerging science of microbiomes with its thousands of microbe species making up the second human genome, we conservationists are being cajoled, tempted, educated and forced to think differently about the relationship between humans and non-human animals. These two books, *Crooked Cats* and *Elephant Trails*, enthusiastically join this effort.

Nayanika Mathur's *Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene* is a hard-hitting argument by a political scientist about the cultural (both human and leopard) and institutional ways in which big cats, particularly leopards, cohabit with humans in India. Based on years of fieldwork and inspired by a leopard that killed and ate seven people in the town where she was working, the author examines the ways that large, wild felids are reintegrating themselves in towns and cities throughout India. Her particular interest lies in the ways in which Indian political systems and individual citizens, moulded by the history and geography of the country, manage and interact with so-called 'crooked cats'—her umbrella term for leopards and tigers that attack, and often consume, people. This complicated set of interactions is cast within the overarching concept of the Anthropocene and the changes it brings to people and non-human nature.

The book is a fascinating look at the political ecology of human-eating big cats and the responses of humans from the relatively powerless to the more powerful as mediated through governmental bureaucracy. Through interviews across the spectrum of people involved with this problem, fieldwork with biologists, and examination of written records and social media accounts, Mathur paints a complex picture of the variation in leopard-human interactions in different social and economic settings. We learn of leopards left in peace as they rest on luxury cars in a hotel car park in one part of India, whereas elsewhere their presence is not tolerated. We also learn that in some parts of India there is a conviction that human-eating cats captured by the government are purposefully relocated to poor mountain communities to advance the government's desire to force these villagers off their land.

For a social scientist keenly tuned to issues of power and language, the author is surprisingly loose in her language regarding non-humans. She is enamoured with the term 'crooked' to describe big cats, and it occurs up to three times per page. 'Straight' leopards, on the other hand, receive no attention. She also likes terms such as 'beast' and 'rogue', refers to 'inexplicable' behaviour and describes some of the stories as 'tragic tales'. Yet these are very much normative terms based on human values; cats are crooked because they 'went off the straight and narrow path' (p. 1) even though later on she says that they are not to blame for this. The keen skills Mathur uses in seeking to understand the human side of this relationship are in little evidence when thinking about her story through the eyes of the leopards.

The author would like the book's argument to be more ambitious than it can support. For example, the incorporation of a climate change dimension at the end of the volume sits uncomfortably with the rest of the argument, and the claim that 'big cats are behaving and will behave more crookedly than before' (p. 157) strikes a sour note. Yet the book is well written and engaging and filled with the stories of individual animals and the ways their lives intertwine with the human worlds in which they also live. The work of conservation does not come out very well in this book and I am sure that a lively discussion will take place between that community and this author.

Nigel Rothfels' book *Elephant Trails: A History of Animals and Cultures* is a very different book: a gentle, sad rumination on how elephant lives have intersected with human ones and how we have used elephants to make sense of the world and our place in it. Featured are elephants in the sights of a safari hunter's gun, taxidermized and placed in a museum, flensed, cleaned and stored in museum drawers, paraded in circuses and displayed in zoos.

Though ostensibly about elephants, the book is really about people and how their perceptions of elephants have changed over time. And it's not about all people, but mostly those living in the developed world, particularly Europe and the USA. It is not about all elephants either, as the author seems more interested in those from Africa; elephants from Asia do make appearances, although mostly in zoos and circuses. The gaze and interpretations of that gaze are all human, and, even in this small subset of humanity, they can be extremely varied. The author quotes Romain Gary who in 1956 wrote: 'there is almost no

limit to what you can make an elephant stand for' (p. 5).

The author is a historian with a passion for elephants and a student of zoos, and the book reflects those interests. There are chapters on early Western accounts of the wondrous beasts that included stories of the virtues and strange attributes of these beasts yet to be seen by most authors; chapters on hunting of African elephants by the likes of the then-ex-president of the USA, Teddy Roosevelt, and the tension between the acknowledged threat hunting posed to elephants and the overweening desire for trophies and money from the sale of ivory; and a considerable part of the book is devoted to the acquisition, display and treatment of elephants in US zoos and circuses.

Throughout these accounts, Rothfels muses on what elephants think and feel and how human lives are affected by encounters with elephants. Of particular interest to him is the display of live elephants and the human gaze that watches them, including his own many encounters with zoo elephants and the people who care for them. The elephant trails of the title mark the many things that people think they know about elephants that, he argues, will always be structured by how they perceive these marvellous animals. Being afraid of mice, or wise, or fighting with dragons, or feeling grief are all human projections onto elephants that reflect more what we think about them rather than what elephants really are.

Both of these books illustrate the eternal intertwining of human and non-human animals and our hubris in believing we know what these other animals are. Ultimately, our lives are impoverished by the loss of non-human species; with their loss, we lose parts of ourselves.

KENT H. REDFORD (orcid.org/0000-0002-4883-822X, Redfordkh@gmail.com)
Archipelago Consulting, Portland, Maine, USA

Pathways to Success: Taking Conservation to Scale in Complex Systems by

Nick Salafsky and Richard Margoluis (2021) 305 pp., Island Press, Washington, DC, USA. ISBN 978-1-64283-135-1 (pbk), USD 31.00.

In 1998, Richard Margoluis and Nick Salafsky published *Measures of Success*, a book on designing, implementing and monitoring conservation and development projects. Soon afterwards the Conservation Measures Partnership incorporated many of the principles and processes discussed into the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (commonly referred to as the Conservation Standards). Numerous organizations have

since adopted the Conservation Standards, as well as other systematic planning frameworks, and the capacity for project design has generally improved over the last 3 decades. However, many practitioners still struggle with certain aspects of planning, especially in complex large-scale programmes, and it is this challenge that Salafsky and Margoluis address in *Pathways to Success*.

As the authors say in the preface, 'this book is intended as a guide to analytical frameworks and tools for conservation program managers and funders who want to increase the scale and the effectiveness of their work' (p. xviii). The focus is on 'lightweight, inexpensive, flexible and... useful' (p. xviii) approaches to plan efficiently and avoid planning paralysis. The book takes the reader through the main steps in project development, from design and implementation to monitoring, evaluation and the use of evidence, with a focus on which tools and approaches to use for large-scale programmes. The authors use a fictional North American coastal conservation programme to illustrate their ideas, which usefully involves diverse partners and covers terrestrial, marine and freshwater biomes. The book is dotted with figures illustrating planning processes, from situation analyses to the eponymous strategy pathways, and the text is broken up by some endearing sketches from Anna Balla.

Having been involved in conservation project planning most of my career, and an active user and proponent of the Conservation Standards, I was excited to read this book. In *Pathways to Success*, the authors meticulously capture and share their thoughts, lessons and ideas from years of practising the art of planning. It is a very thorough and extensive tome, although the level of detail borders on excessive at times; people unfamiliar with the Conservation Standards may find some parts rather dense. A more practical how-to guide would need to be structured more simply (like the Conservation Standards themselves).

I appreciated many of the authors' takes on key issues, such as how to link strategies across a programme and how to synthesize existing evidence, and I was pleased to see them encourage the sharing of data and evidence. I was especially interested in concepts introduced from other sectors, such as the thinking on impact trajectories derived from democracy studies and the approaches to going to scale based on systems thinking.

The book is generally based on the Conservation Standards but does not strictly follow the same terminology. For example, conservation targets have become target factors, and results chains have become strategy pathway diagrams. Natural and constructed indicators are among the other new terms used. The added value of these changes is

not evident, and they risk confusion. The main premise of the book—that the use of strategy pathways will better link different elements of a programme—will help many practitioners rethink their planning. But it would have been useful to explain how this approach can be used for planning projects that need to contribute to the goals and objectives of existing programmes (a common real-world issue that is not touched on directly). Another omission is any discussion of the pressure–state–response–benefit indicator framework. This allows indicators to tell a story of progress along a theory of change and is increasingly used to measure the contributions of programmes to global goals defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Sustainable Development Goals. I would also like to have seen some discussion of how counterfactual approaches, such as randomized control trials, can be used to enhance the attribution of impact. For people wishing to dip in and out of the book for guidance, a concise summary of what they need to do differently in large-scale programmes compared with smaller-scale projects would also have been useful.

Overall, however, this book represents a significant contribution to the conservation planning literature and will be a stimulating read for anyone interested in the topic. The thinking presented will help the conservation community continue to evolve to meet the challenges of delivering impact at scale.

P.J. STEPHENSON (orcid.org/0000-0002-0087-466X, StephensonPJ@gmail.com)
Laboratory for Conservation Biology, Department of Ecology and Evolution, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

Birds, Beasts and Bedlam: Turning My Farm into an Ark for Lost Species by Derek Gow (2022) 208 pp., Chelsea Green Publishing UK, London, UK. ISBN 978-1-64502-133-9 (hbk), GBP 20.00.

As a zoologist with a passion for UK conservation, I jumped at the opportunity to read *Birds, Beasts and Bedlam* after learning that it explores Derek Gow's work to convert his farm into a refuge for our threatened wildlife. Although the book delivers on its promised insight into the author's work to rewild in the UK with native species, an unexpected thread throughout its pages explores the conflicting viewpoints of academic researchers and conservation practitioners. Gow's strong opinions may be hard for some academics to stomach but are well worth a read by anyone seeking to understand a practitioner's perspective of UK conservation.