

ETIENNE BENSON

from
WILD LIVES

TO WILDLIFE AND BACK

ABSTRACT

This article briefly sketches the history of the terms “wild life” and “wildlife” as they have been used in the United States since the late nineteenth century. It argues that “wild life” began to be used to refer to a class of living things at the beginning of the twentieth century and that it was only in the 1930s that “wildlife,” written as a single word, came into widespread usage. The emergence of this concept paralleled the development of the field of wildlife management around the idea that wild living things, as such, could be the objects of human study and control. “Wildlife” solidified divisions between humans and animals, nature and culture, that had been fluid in the late nineteenth century, when it was possible to describe both bears and tourists as enjoying “a taste of wild life.” The article concludes with two suggestions: historical research on wildlife would be strengthened by work on the history of the concept of wildlife, and ideas about human–animal relationships that prevailed before the relatively recent emergence of this concept and have persisted in its shadow might provide inspiration for new kinds of wildlife history.

IN THE UNITED STATES the history of “wildlife” begins in the 1930s or perhaps at the end of the nineteenth century. Of course there were wild animals within the historical borders of the United States and in the geographic area presently occupied by it long before 1900, and it is not unreasonable for present-day historians to use the word “wildlife” to designate those living things. But it was only in the 1890s, in connection with a new understanding of the frontier,

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that the two-word term “wild life” began to be used to mean something like what we mean by wildlife today, and it took the emergence of the profession and ideology of wildlife management in the 1930s for the single-word form to come into widespread use. Until then, it was overshadowed by other terms with different meanings, such as “game.” When Peter Matthiessen’s *Wildlife in America* was published in 1959, the first word in its title was younger than some or even most of its readers, depending on when one begins to count. In this essay I sketch the history of this deceptively simple word and argue that an examination of the assumptions built into it points toward some new areas of research.¹

One can find the term “wild life” in American texts before the last decade of the nineteenth century, but it meant something quite different from what wildlife would come to mean in the twentieth century, even in contexts where one would most expect to find a modern usage. Take an article about James Adams, the inspiration for the *Grizzly Adams* television series of the 1970s, which appeared in the *American Naturalist* in 1886. The article noted that Adams kept one of his tame grizzly bears under tighter rein than the other because she “was over a year old when captured, while the other never had any taste of wild life.” Or take an 1889 piece in the *New York Times* that described the “taste of wild life” enjoyed by urbanites vacationing in the Adirondacks. Both articles addressed topics within the domain of wildlife history, but neither used “wild life” to designate a class of beings analogous to that designated by “wildlife” or “game.” Instead, “wild life” signified a way of life or even a lifestyle. That lifestyle could be tasted by tame grizzly bears and overcivilized New Yorkers and was epitomized by frontiersmen, Indians, outlaws, and wild animals—all those whose manner of living was opposed to “civilized life.”²

At the turn of the twentieth century, American conservationists such as William Temple Hornaday appropriated “wild life” as a term for wild animals that was broader in scope, more scientific, and less tied to sport hunting than “game.” But the frontier connotations lingered and arguably gave Hornaday’s usage much of its appeal. In 1902, on the occasion of the opening of his Wild West show in Manhattan, Buffalo Bill boasted to the *New York Times* that European horsemen “find that they have much to learn about horses when they attempt wild life in the West.” The same year, at Hornaday’s urging, the New York Zoological Society resolved “in view of the destruction of wild life in Alaska” to encourage the enactment of “game laws” in that state. For Buffalo Bill, the term “wild life” continued to designate a rapidly vanishing frontier way of life, a theme touched on in Louis Warren’s and Jon T. Coleman’s essays in this forum. For Hornaday, whose influential polemic *Our Vanishing Wild Life* appeared in 1913, it designated a class of living things historically associated with the frontier but now threatened by the continuation of frontier lawlessness in an industrial society. As civilization advanced and the “wild life” of the frontiersman retreated into history books

and entertainment halls, the “wild life” of ducks and deer—understood primarily in numerical terms, as in John Sandlos and Yolanda Wiersma’s essay in this forum—would be preserved through the extension of government power into new domains of American life.³

The generation of conservationists that followed Hornaday did not immediately take up his use of the term “wild life,” and it remained rare in U.S. newspapers, magazines, and zoological journals into the 1920s. (The situation was somewhat different in other Anglophone contexts.) The most influential of Hornaday’s successors continued to focus their attention on “game” as late as the early 1930s. In that decade, however, Aldo Leopold and his colleagues successfully advocated a new approach to “wild life” conservation based on the manipulation of habitats and population levels by scientifically trained experts. The emergence of wildlife management and its integration into the growing federal administrative apparatus described by Bob Wilson in this forum was accompanied by the consolidation of “wildlife,” soon written as a single word, as the object of management. (“Habitat,” too, as Peter Alagona argues, was articulated during this period.) Certain kinds of wild animals needed to be managed to survive in human-dominated landscapes without harming human interests; certain kinds of people had the expertise to manage them. Wildlife managers and manageable wildlife were, in this sense, coproduced.⁴

Matthiessen’s *Wildlife in America* thus appeared at the end of a period during which “wild life” was transformed from a term for an uncivilized way of life into a term for a category of living things subject to expert management. Matthiessen’s text reflected this history as well as the burgeoning confidence of wildlife managers after the Second World War. When herpetologist Archie Carr reviewed the book for the *New York Times* in 1959, he criticized Matthiessen’s decision “to restrict the word ‘wildlife’ to animals with backbones, leaving as some unstipulated kind of life all the teeming spineless creatures.” (As Lissa Wadewitz argues in this forum, even some wild vertebrates have frequently failed to count as “wildlife.”) But he did not question two of Matthiessen’s most fundamental assumptions: that the proper subject of a book titled *Wildlife in America* was a set of living things rather than a way of life and that the survival of these things depended on their management by what Matthiessen called “informed and principled professionals.” In the five decades since, historians of wildlife have increasingly challenged the second assumption, but they have left the first largely untouched.⁵

Why should the history of “wild life” and “wildlife” that I have sketched here matter to historians? There are at least two reasons. First, historicizing these terms might make us more attentive readers. Historians have largely ignored the shift from the nineteenth century’s “wild life,” which blurred the culture/nature and human/animal divides, to the twentieth century’s “wildlife,” which reinforced them. One token of this neglect is the ubiquity of references in the scholarly literature to Hornaday’s *Our Vanishing Wildlife* (rather than

Wild Life). We need to look more critically at our actors' fundamental concepts, taking recent work on "wilderness" as a model. Such investigation might reveal that the distinction between "wildlife" and other kinds of life is as debatable as the distinction between "wilderness" and other kinds of spaces and that the story of how "wildlife" has been produced is more interesting than the story of how it has been preserved. It would also encourage further attention to the crucial role of experts in constructing both the concept of "wildlife" and the living things it has come to designate.⁶

Second, a critical history of the concept of wildlife might help us write in new ways about the living things it is supposed to describe. Looking back at pre-"wildlife" texts that describe the "wild lives" of frontiersmen and grizzly bears in similar terms, we might find inspiration for histories—like those presented by Dawn Biehler and Jen Martin in this forum—that do not invoke and reinscribe unbridgeable gaps between humans and animals and between wild and tame. (We would, of course, have to be wary of the hierarchical tendencies that marred nineteenth-century social-evolutionist thought.) Such a history would complement our usual focus on the numerical abundance and geographic distribution of wild creatures with a new emphasis on their ways of life, understood not as the inevitable result of species membership but as the outcome of historical processes involving biology, circumstance, agency, and chance. In comparison to most of what has been done under the rubric of wildlife history, this "history of wild lives" would be more attentive to nonhuman agency, to liminal figures, and to the ways in which the lives of human and non-human animals have been intertwined.⁷

Etienne Benson is a research scholar at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and the author of Wired Wilderness: Technologies of Tracking and the Making of Modern Wildlife.

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NOTES

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2. John Dean Caton, "Domestication of the Grizzly Bear," *American Naturalist* 20 (1886): 435-36; "Luck with Rod and Rifle," *New York Times*, October 1, 1889.
3. "The Taming of Cayuses," *New York Times*, April 20, 1902; "To Protect Wild Birds," *New York Times*, January 15, 1902; William T. Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wild Life: Its Extermination and Preservation* (New York: New York Zoological Society, 1913).
4. Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Claims about the incidence of *wild life/wildlife* are based on searches of historical databases; details available on request.
5. Archie Carr, "The Need to Let Live," *New York Times*, November 22, 1959; Matthiessen, *Wildlife*, 228.
6. For references to *Our Vanishing Wildlife*, see, for example, Mark V. Barrow, Jr., *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7; Louis S. Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 26.
7. See S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 25 (2010): 545-76.