

Rewilding Literature: Catalyzing Compassion for Wild Predators through Creative Nonfiction

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As I write, wolves in Washington are once again making front-page news. A young wolf from the so-called Huckleberry pack was gunned down from a helicopter, with the wolf's shooter contracted by the state to remove up to four wolves in response to sheep depredations on leased grazing land. Conservationists are angry that, for the second time in two years, wolves in this region are dying because they're behaving like wolves in wolf country. Agency spokespersons defend their actions by arguing that the Huckleberry pack poses an ongoing threat to livestock.

When my husband and I moved to the Pacific Northwest eight years ago to study large carnivores, wolves were iconic

ghosts of a wilder past, having been exterminated from Washington by the 1930s. But not long after our arrival, the unexpected happened. Wildlife biologists discovered an active wolf den within state boundaries, from which five wolf pups emerged like ambassadors of a lost era. Many people celebrated, and I was among them. I was also concerned. Wolves were being killed both legally and illegally in the Northern Rockies, only a few years after they were famously reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park. I hoped things might play out differently here given that Washington is a mecca for wildlife enthusiasts. Now I'm not so sure.

For much of my adulthood, I have struggled with how to best use my writing skills to benefit wildlife, especially in controversial situations like the one surrounding wolves. In my work as a conservationist and a field biologist, I could compose an op-ed expressing my view that wolves who kill sheep are not criminals, and that it is we humans who must reform our ways if we want wildness (and people) to thrive in the future. I could co-author a scientific article summarizing how wolves and other apex predators help to regulate natural communities, or I could develop a brochure explaining their ecological role to a broader audience. I could draft a grant proposal seeking funding for pertinent studies, edit a book of research methodologies for fellow field biologists, or create a website with graphics and pretty pictures. The problem is, I've already done all this in my career—many others have done all this and more. Yet wolves are still being shot from helicopters.

In this paper, I will explore how writers of creative nonfiction can use their craft to foster empathy for wild predators and promote compassion on their behalf. More specifically, I'll examine how several notable authors have employed literary devices like figurative language,

anthropomorphism, juxtaposition, and point of view to make scientific knowledge about predators more palatable and persuasive to readers.

Rewilding Our Hearts

We live in a time replete with information about biodiversity loss, climate change, and other environmental catastrophes. Scientists warn that half of the species existing today may be gone by the end of this century. Large mammalian predators are especially vulnerable to extinction because of their inherently low population densities, slow rates of reproduction, and susceptibility to persecution by people. We're also faced with overwhelming evidence that our own species is to blame for what has now been deemed the Earth's sixth mass extinction, putting us right up there with asteroids and volcanic eruptions in our capacity for global devastation.

Still, we continue to operate as though this potentially apocalyptic scenario pertains to a planet whose fate is not our own. Information overload no doubt plays a significant role in our lack of collective action; most of us can only take so much gloom and doom before turning to red wine and chocolate or Monday Night Football. Not long ago, I walked with hundreds of women, men, and children in downtown Seattle as part of a climate change march that rallied citizens worldwide. At the same time, more than 68,000 Seattle Seahawks fans set an attendance record at CenturyLink Field. Final score? Seahawks 1, Climate Change 0.

As we chanted past bustling restaurants and curious apartment dwellers peering down from their balconies, I reflected on what it would take to empty the football stands and fill the streets with people cheering for polar bears, wolverines, and the millions of human beings whose survival

is threatened by our warming climate. More numbers? Bleaker projections? I know that good science is critical to gauging our ecological predicament and planning for the future, but after two-plus decades working in conservation, I've come to embrace that inundating people with data does not in itself enhance wisdom or transform behavior. In *Rewilding Our Hearts*, animal behaviorist Marc Bekoff writes:

When we make decisions that damage the environment or harm animals, it is rarely because of a lack of knowledge and concrete data. Rather, losses to biodiversity, inadequate animal protections, and other negative impacts are typically due to problems of human psychology and social and cultural factors. Science alone doesn't hold the answers to the current crisis nor does it get people to feel compassion or to act differently.

As a pathway to saving species and reversing environmental destruction, Bekoff encourages his readers to deeply imagine the world from the perspective of wild beings and to act accordingly—to “rewild” their hearts and minds. He borrows *rewilding* from the field of conservation biology, which broadly defines the term as landscape-scale conservation aimed at maintaining core wilderness areas, reconnecting them via corridors of habitat, and restoring apex predators. Applying this concept to humans, Bekoff sees the process of rewilding as “a personal journey and transformative exploration that centers on bringing other animals and their homes, all ecosystems, back into our heart.” Intuitively, rewilding counteracts unwilding, “the process by which we

become alienated from nature and nonhuman animals.” This distancing, Bekoff argues—a hazard of modern life—erodes our innate connection with wild nature and thus our willingness to defend it.

Few scientists outwardly share Bekoff’s passion or sensibilities when it comes to animal welfare and its relationship to conservation. Among conservation biologists, however, he is hardly alone in emphasizing the role of human values in protecting wild predators. Carnivore ecologist Cristina Eisenberg expresses sentiments similar to Bekoff’s in her book *The Carnivore Way*: “Science and environmental law can help us learn to share landscapes with fierce creatures, but ultimately, coexistence has to do with our human hearts.” Peer-reviewed papers on this topic abound in the scientific literature, and the value-based challenges of coexisting with predators are frequently discussed at wildlife conferences and meetings.

Although predator conservation is widely recognized as a people problem, the goal of increasing human tolerance for wolves and other top-level carnivores is not easily accomplished. In some cases, financial incentives have been an effective tool for promoting nonlethal predator management and reducing poaching, though a scientific review conducted by Adrian Treves and Jeremy Bruskotter suggests that money doesn’t buy tolerance in people who are heavily influenced by social factors fueling anti-predator values (e.g., peer group norms, government-sanctioned killing of predators).

A scientific cure for intolerance has yet to be discovered, but Bekoff’s approach is more holistic than prescriptive. His overarching message is this: To truly care about the well-being of others—whether they travel on two legs or four, slither through muck or soar through the sky—requires imaginative

empathy and an open heart. What would it be like to be a mother wolf being chased by a helicopter, or a hungry polar bear with no ice in sight? For that matter, how might it feel to be a third-generation rancher losing sheep to wolves, or a grief-stricken activist impassioned to speak for creatures with no voice?

Biologists are reluctant to anthropomorphize wildlife, citing the myriad mysteries of animal minds. Nonetheless, the line separating human and nonhuman behavior, once considered solid, has become fuzzier in recent times. Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy described grief in elephants, for instance, and Jane Goodall documented intercommunity aggression in chimpanzees not unlike that exemplified by human warfare. Despite such valuable revelations, it is beyond the reach of science to fully comprehend the emotional lives and motivations of other species. But as Bekoff points out, this limitation in no way justifies our mistreatment of nonhuman animals.

“As a scientist,” Bekoff writes, “I know that it’s never enough to simply imagine another animal’s perspective. But as a person, I know that it’s never enough to accept unclarity or uncertainty about animal minds as a reason not to care for them, or as an excuse for inaction or willful harm.” Bekoff further posits that our attitude about the otherness of animals is linked to our behavior toward fellow humans; indeed, human rights atrocities across the globe are a sobering reminder of what happens when perceived differences between “us” and “them” become grounds for abuse. Sociological research published by Kimberly Costello and Gordon Hodson demonstrates that devaluing animals because they are different from us actually predicts prejudice toward human outgroups (e.g., immigrants, other races).

It's Story Time

One of the great gifts of literature is that it allows us to inhabit the stories of others and acquire new insights. Literary scholar Suzanne Keen contends that reading promotes narrative empathy—vicarious feelings and perspective induced by narratives about another. During times of crisis, insights derived from narrative empathy might even help nudge us toward pivotal change.

In her essay “Creative Responses to Worlds Unraveling: The Artist in the 21st Century,” author Ann Pancake—whose political novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, unearthed the ecological and social evils of mountaintop removal in Appalachia—explores how writers can help kindle compassion in readers who have become desensitized to global trauma and cataclysmic forecasts:

I believe literature is one of the most powerful antidotes we have to “psychic numbing.” It’s not easy to actually feel, with our hearts, with our guts, overwhelming abstract problems that don’t directly affect us, especially now, with so many catastrophes unfolding around us, and it’s tough to sustain compassion for the nameless souls struggling with those catastrophes. But we do have great capacity to empathize with the personal stories of individuals.

Pancake suggests that, unlike journalism—and, I would add, science writing—creative writing tends to reveal the interior lives of its characters. “If the writer can evoke these interior lives with complexity and compassion,” Pancake continues, “the reader’s understanding of social injustice and environmental

disaster is dramatically broadened and deepened.” This task obviously becomes all the more challenging when crafting stories about nonhuman animals, whose interior lives are available to us only through projection and speculation. Such stories are thus prone to sentimentality on one end of the spectrum and emotional detachment on the other.

Many works of fiction, especially children’s fiction, evoke empathy for animals by telling the story from their imagined point of view. Popular examples range from classics like E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* and Jack London’s *Call of the Wild* to Garth Stein’s more contemporary *The Art of Racing in the Rain* and Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone*. But how does one convey the perspective of spiders or dogs or elephants in nonfiction in a way that is moving, believable, and true? To further up the ante, how can nonfiction literature help tame the lions, tigers, and bears of our imagination and rouse compassion for wildlife generally presumed to be dangerous to humans?

Natural history and other scientific background is key to demystifying wild predators and debunking myths about the risk they pose to people; my shelves overflow with technical books whose well-researched content has the potential to defuse most anti-predator rhetoric—if only facts possessed such persuasive powers. But the societal shift needed to cultivate a more peaceful coexistence with predators and to rescue them from the dark corners of our subconscious demands that we both learn about and *become awakened* to the many forms of life with which we share the Earth.

For too long, storytelling has exploited human fear and misunderstanding of wild predators at their ultimate expense—a legacy perpetuated in today’s popular media. Global threats to large carnivores call for a new body of literature that encourages respect for these animals versus vilification and

widespread persecution. As Jack Turner puts it in *The Abstract Wild*: “The necessary work of science produces information, but what we need are stories, stories that produce love.”

The Tiger

By combining scientific information and storytelling techniques borrowed from fiction, creative nonfiction writers have the potential to draw readers into the unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable emotional territory necessary to rewild our hearts and minds. As with fiction, gripping material is helpful; Suzanne Keen cites research showing that readers are physiologically aroused when characters are involved in a suspenseful situation. John Vaillant’s 2010 bestseller, *The Tiger*, for example, thrusts readers into a crushing narrative about a man-eating tiger in the Russian Far East, which in turn acts as a portal to the complex dynamics of poaching, politics, and illegal trade that threaten tigers worldwide.

Catalyzing empathy for any wildlife is problematic enough, but to do so for animals capable of eating us is especially difficult. Written with the flair of a murder mystery, Vaillant’s book could have easily characterized the tiger as a psychopathic killer undeserving of ethical consideration or species-level protection. Alternately, a story told from the perspective of the starving tiger might have trivialized the human issues relevant to their conservation.

So how does Vaillant awaken his readers to the plight of an animal preying on poverty-stricken people in post-Perestroika Siberia? He goes to great lengths to illustrate the socio-political, cultural, and ecological factors underlying the tragic conflict around which the story unfolds. Through his dialogue with villagers, wildlife investigators, and others, Vaillant reveals that this particular tiger has been reduced to

stalking people because his human-induced injuries preclude him from successfully hunting anything else. Once we learn that the man-eating tiger “had been shot an extraordinary number of times” and that “this tiger had absorbed bullets the way *Moby-Dick* absorbed harpoons,” we come to better understand, if not condone, his killing of humans for food. Concludes the investigator in charge of the case: “It was men who were responsible for the aggression of this animal.”

Many of the villagers co-inhabiting the tiger’s territory, including his first victim, have resorted to poaching wildlife for lack of other economic opportunities. Vaillant doesn’t refrain from describing the threat tigers can pose to people—this threat is obviously central to his story. But by juxtaposing the hardships experienced by tigers with those of the marginalized human communities dependent on the same landscapes and resources, we come to empathize with the wild predators as well as the people. The author shows us that all the characters in his story, humans and nonhumans alike, are trying to eke out a living in a harsh environment, and that their well-being is intimately connected. At times, Vaillant explicitly compares tigers and humans to stimulate further empathy for the former:

Both of us demand large territories; both of us have prodigious appetites for meat; both of us require control over our living space and are prepared to defend it, and both of us have an enormous sense of entitlement to the resources around us. If a tiger can poach on another’s territory, it probably will, and so, of course, will we. A key difference, however, is that tigers take only what they need.

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Here, Vaillant counters the stereotypical image of tigers as killing machines, emphasizing that it is humans who are actually guilty of taking more than we need to survive. Although Vaillant effectively employs juxtaposition and other literary techniques to engage readers in the wild predator's point of view, some readers (especially scientists) may find his imaginative prose overly anthropomorphic at times. Consider his premise that the man-eating tiger was actively seeking revenge on poachers:

The Amur tiger's territoriality and capacity for sustained vengeance, for lack of a better word, are the stuff of both legend and fact. What is amazing—and also terrifying about tigers—is their facility for what can only be described as abstract thinking. Very quickly, a tiger can assimilate new information—evidence, if you will—ascrbe it to a source, and even a motive, and react accordingly.

Given that we cannot know how the tiger perceives his victims, to attribute his actions to vengeance seems a gratuitous leap. Regardless, it is a testament to Vaillant's skill as a writer that even skeptics will question their assumptions about the tiger's ability to think and feel. Through his well-crafted story, the author helps elucidate the extent to which we are jeopardizing the future of tigers—and ourselves.

Would a cautionary tale about poaching be nearly as compelling if another imperiled animal took center stage—the leatherback turtle, say, or the little-known pangolin (a burrowing mammal whose overlapping scales have been likened to the leaves of an artichoke)? It certainly could,

depending on the storyteller; Susan Orlean penned a bestseller about the illegal collection of rare orchids. But given our innate fascination with predators, they serve as especially potent fodder for creative nonfiction. One need only read the editorial pages about wolves to recognize that large, meat-eating animals possess a unique and paradoxical charisma that renders them at once alluring and odious. Throughout history, predators have been objects of both veneration and loathing in human culture.

Monster of God

Science writer David Quammen explores this paradox in his meticulously researched book *Monster of God*, for which he traveled to several remote areas of the world where humans still have a perilously intimate relationship with native large carnivores (e.g., Asiatic lions in India's Gir Forest, brown bears in Romania's Carpathian Mountains). Quammen proposes that wild predators historically provided us with stories of both heroism and humility, thus helping us to define our place in nature: "For as long as *Homo sapiens* has been sapient—for much longer if you count the evolutionary wisdom stored in our genes—alpha predators have kept us acutely aware of our membership with the natural world." How? "They've done it by reminding us that to them we're just another flavor of meat."

Not surprisingly, Quammen argues, those big-bodied predators sometimes characterized as "man-eaters" (e.g., tigers, brown bears, great white sharks) occupy an especially dark and prominent place in the human mind, with the very term itself commemorating "an elemental experience—the experience in which, on rare occasions, members of our own species are relegated to the status of edible meat." Further,

he postulates, although fear of death obviously looms large, the idea of actually *being consumed* pushes predators into a category of horror all their own.

“The extra dimension of dread,” Quammen writes, “derives largely from ancient concerns about funerary observances and the deceased’s prospects in an afterlife. Respectful, decorous disposal of the mortal remains has been important across virtually all times and cultures.” I concur with Quammen’s theory, as it seems that most humans hold a strong aversion to the desecration of dead bodies. I can’t help but wonder, in fact, if this notion of desecration also plays a role in the venomous reaction some people have to livestock depredation by wild carnivores—especially given that livestock are typically destined for the slaughterhouse (where dismemberment occurs behind thick concrete walls). Once, while I was wolf-watching in Yellowstone National Park, a fellow observer turned to me and unabashedly confessed his hatred of wolves. His reason? Because they killed some of his friend’s sheep and chewed away their “butts.” The man appeared to be much more upset about the sheep’s desecration than their untimely deaths.

History, mythology, and prejudices aside, wild predators pose little risk to modern humanity, and man-eaters are notably rare. Fortunately, there are many stories worth telling about these intriguing animals that don’t revolve around their consuming people, and creative nonfiction can help make these stories inspirational to the reader.

In her essay cited above, Pancake reminds us “...the transformative properties of literature are not limited to its content. Literature’s form, too—its style, structure, figures of speech, tone, mood, formal originality, and experimentation—evoke in readers fresh and profound understandings.” Some

of the most influential books I've read about predators are effective primarily because they make masterful use of such elements, with predation being almost incidental to the author's exploration of form and his or her own interior world. In other words, the author's story is projected through his or her experience with predators as much as the predator's story is projected through the author. By the end of the narrative, it is usually the author, not the predator, who is transformed.

A Sand County Almanac

Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* provides a classic example of transformation. One of the most influential conservation thinkers of the twentieth century, Leopold is considered by many to be the father of wildlife management. He came into his early career at a time when few questioned the ethics of killing predators, including Leopold himself. In *A Sand County Almanac*, the author weaves together personal narrative and exposition to convey the evolution of his perspective as a scientist and a passionate advocate for nature.

For purposes of organization, the book is divided into three sections of essays: Part I: *A Sand County Almanac*; Part II: *Sketches Here and There*; and Part III: *The Upshot*.

In his foreword, Leopold describes these sections as: Part I, a collection of seasonal observations from his family's farm in Wisconsin; Part II, reflections on key episodes influencing his identity as a conservationist; and Part III, philosophical questions pertaining to how we should proceed in our relationship with the land and its wild inhabitants. Although each section stands alone in terms of tone and style, the sum becomes greater than its parts because Leopold invites us into the personal journey that led him to his ponderings in Part III. If he hadn't earned our allegiance to both him and the

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wildness he loves through the descriptive and narrative prose comprising Parts I and II, he might have lost us with the more polemical material presented in Part III. But by “The Upshot,” we’re convinced: We need to *do* something to save those honking geese, those dancing woodcocks ... that dying wolf.

Anyone attuned to environmentalism, even one who hasn’t read Leopold’s work, is likely familiar with his elegy for a dying wolf. “Thinking Like a Mountain” appears roughly halfway through the book, in the sketches dedicated to Arizona and New Mexico. Leopold begins this essay by arguing for the unique element of mystery with which wolves infuse the landscape—a mystery felt by virtually all who encounter wolf country (“only the ineducable tyro can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves”) but fully comprehended by none but the land itself (“only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the wolf”).

Leopold goes on to tell us about his own epiphany regarding wolves, which, according to historians, occurred in 1909 in eastern Arizona’s Apache National Forest. Leopold recalls that he and a companion were eating lunch by a river (later identified as the Black River) when they noticed a female wolf returning to her pups. The men impulsively opened fire, and Leopold notes that “when our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassible slide-rocks.” Already, we’re empathizing with the injured wolves through the eyes of a reformed wolf killer, whose diction betrays that he no longer views them as varmints but rather a family broken by violence. It is the next passage, however, whose tone of redemption has reverberated through generations of environmentalists and others who care about wildlife:

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We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Typing these words of lament into my laptop, I felt a tremendous emotional blow—even after reading them so many times over the years, and knowing full well that Leopold's more enlightened attitude toward wolves realistically took decades to evolve. Why, then, is this scene so powerful to me and to millions of other readers? Because Leopold *metaphorically* captures the moment when his heart was rewilded, and restores our faith that such a transformation is possible. He also connects his audience with the predator's point of view. Here again is Pancake:

Artists are also translators between the visible and invisible worlds, intermediaries between the profane and the sacred ... Literature re-sacralizes by illuminating the profound within the apparently mundane, by restoring reverence and wonder for the everyday, and by heightening our attentiveness and enlarging our compassion.

If Leopold had limited himself to scientific prose, he likely wouldn't have been able to serve as an intermediary between

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the profane (killing a mother wolf) and the sacred (wild nature). Instead, he chose to engage in what Bekoff calls “deep ethology,” a practice in which the seer tries to imagine him or herself as the seen. By “thinking like a mountain” and seeing himself through the eyes of the dying wolf, Leopold was able to inspire compassion and reverence for a culturally maligned species and for the land itself. I’d venture to say that Leopold also became a better scientist as a result of this practice, capable of exploring visionary ecological ideas like those he put forth in Part III (e.g., “The Land Ethic,” “Wilderness”). Bekoff points out that deep ethology is not simply an exercise in ethics but that “these intuitions can sometimes be the fodder for further scientific research and lead to verifiable information, to knowledge.”

As demonstrated by Leopold and a growing number of writers, the merging of scientific exploration and personal exploration is a pillar of creative nonfiction focused on predators and other wildlife. Authors who share their inner process to this end help readers probe their own deeply held beliefs about wild nature.

Into Great Silence

In the prologue to her memoir *Into Great Silence*, orca biologist Eva Saulitis refers to a transformation like the one depicted in Leopold’s green fire essay as an “origin moment”—a phrase she attributes to nature writer Susan Cerulean. Saulitis describes an origin moment as a profound experience in which one’s perspective is dramatically altered, one’s “assumptions about the world overturned.” It becomes evident in the book that such experiences served to challenge her training in objectivity and sparked her imagination as an artist.

Saulitis’s story of discovery is both intensely personal and

profoundly ecological. The memoir centers on a catastrophic oil spill that devastated wildlife populations in south-central Alaska, as well as many human communities that were tied to them. Just after midnight on March 24, 1989, the infamous *Exxon Valdez* ran aground and dumped eleven million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound. More than twenty years later, Saulitis retells this tragic tale through the filter of her own experience as a field biologist studying orcas in the area. With the well-publicized particulars of the spill considered old news, she strives to move her readers in a fresh and visceral way. Here, Saulitis recounts her feelings of helplessness in the wake of the spill, when she was only twenty-five years old: “No matter what, the oil will pour from the ship’s breached holds. The oil will spread. It will coat rocks and barnacles and kelp and otters and harbor seals and birds. It will kill orcas. It will change everything I know, everything I love.”

And that it did. According to the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council, the spill ultimately fouled 1,300 miles of coastline, killing billions of fish and an estimated 250,000 seabirds; 2,800 sea otters; 300 harbor seals; 250 bald eagles; and 22 orcas. Saulitis renders these unfathomable numbers real by intertwining her own story as a woman with breast cancer with that of the wild predators she observes (Saulitis died of breast cancer in 2016). The result is part celebratory, part elegy—an inspiring marriage of scientific inquiry and heartfelt reflection.

Saulitis’s elegant prose brings the place and its vivid characters, both human and wild, to life. Over the course of her book, we not only get to know Saulitis and her fellow researchers as real people with human flaws, but we develop relationships with killer whales who are, notably, given names: Eyak, Eccles, Ripple Fin. Their naming reflects distinct physical

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attributes—fin shapes, scratches, and other scars—that allow orca experts like Saulitis to tell them apart. Through her intimate observations of orca behavior, we come to see the orcas as individuals—mysterious yet familiar, wild but not totally free given the dire circumstances of the oil spill. We learn, too, that each pod (a group of related whales traveling together) has a unique dialect of calls, further allowing Saulitis and her readers to identify with these magnificent mammals of the sea. And to mourn their deaths when they succumb to the spill.

Yet orcas are also killer whales. Rather than glamorize or gloss over their role as formidable predators, Saulitis delves into the murky emotional territory she discovers through watching orcas hunt. Below, she describes an encounter with four orcas catapulting a porpoise in the air and eventually causing the creature's demise:

I leaned across the dash, snapping photographs, my heart pounding, a sob stuck in my throat. Finish it off, I thought. Get it, I thought. “Oh my God, oh, my God, oh, my God,” I said aloud to no one ... Here was nature, red in tooth. Here was suffering. Here was death. Here was the black-and-white, muscled, ruthless will to survive.

The author makes us privy to her efforts to reconcile predation and death—a reconciliation made all the more poignant given her own struggle with cancer. Consider this passage:

Yet the idea of co-evolution—predator and prey influencing each other over millennia—spins what seems merciless, the absence of moral order, into something elegant, a dance of survival.

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Perhaps within the chase itself, animals enact what is already encoded deep in their cellular structure. Because death is fate. And animals—us included—are born knowing how to die.

With exceptional candor, Saulitis blurs the lines of scientific inquiry and self-exploration such that her readers cannot help but see orcas from her empathetic point of view, and to be struck with the injustices that spilled forth from the *Exxon Valdez* that ominous March night. Saulitis evokes the ecological effects of the spill primarily by illuminating its ramifications on her interior world, which were deeply etched in her memory and captured in her research logs and journal.

Saulitis also grapples openly with the scientific paradigm itself, alluding to the need to balance biological investigation with other ways of knowing. As an ecologist committed to doing exhaustive (and exhausting) field research with orcas, she nonetheless recognizes that her role as the seer is one of careful contemplation as well as observation. After using a hydrophone to record orca calls, for example, Saulitis asks herself what she's really learned as a result:

It was as if an inverse relationship existed between data and knowing, as if the small pictures needed to accrue, the window into their lives first get more clouded, before the glass cleared and a big picture clarified.

Later in the book, Saulitis continues: “It takes decades for the final alchemy to occur: observation into insight, data into understanding, knowledge into wisdom. Eyes of innocence, turning questions over to the mind, mind working the

questions until the grit rubs off and some truth emerges.” Saulitis consistently incorporates humility and uncertainty into her writing in a way that, paradoxically, inspires confidence in her integrity as a scientist and a person. She dedicated her career to searching for deeper truths in the waters of Prince William Sound. Like Leopold, she found those truths through the eyes of a wild predator.

The Ninemile Wolves

In *The Ninemile Wolves*, his widely acclaimed book about wolves in Montana, Rick Bass conjures a unique blend of scene, exposition, and reflection to transcend biology and immerse his readers in the wonders of wild carnivores. Although Bass doesn't shy away from promoting his pro-wolf stance, his lyrical style both softens and strengthens his message such that only the steeliest of readers could part ways with *The Ninemile Wolves* without heightened respect for wolves—if not chagrin for our own species' cruelty on their behalf.

Wolves are travelers by nature and generally don't lend themselves well to intimate observation; most wolf researchers spend a lot of time chasing signals from radio collars and following tracks and other signs. Given this limitation, Bass's persuasiveness on behalf of wolves lies mainly in his ability to engage readers with his distinctive persona and that of his main character, wolf biologist Mike Jimenez. We quickly come to recognize these men for their commitment to wolves, and to empathize with the wolves from their unique and impassioned perspectives. While Bass presents himself as a philosophical thinker with scientific leanings, Jimenez is portrayed as a biologist who wrestles with the ethics of wolf management. The two personalities complement each other well, serving to both challenge and validate one another's sentiments on the

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scientific approach to understanding wolves.

Bass's persona is that of a gentle iconoclast. From the start, he makes it clear that—although he's scientifically informed—his opinions will not be constrained by the decorum of science: "I can say what I want to say. I gave up my science badge a long time ago." Thus, we come to know our narrator as a knowledgeable person who can be trusted to express himself, even if his opinions sometimes serve to test those of Jimenez and the other biologists with whom he associates. Bass emphasizes his identity as an independent thinker repeatedly throughout the book: "The wolves' nutritional demands are greater than, with extra hunting required to take care of the pups and, I propose (*which I can do, being a writer and not a biologist*) [emphasis added], it's possible that the rest of the pack gets plain restless during the denning period."

In the passage above, Bass invokes science to explain what might be going on when livestock depredation increases during the spring pupping season, but then speculates at a more anthropomorphic level. He further invites us into his worldview by revealing his inner conflict about wolf management and the difficulties faced by those working to move it forward. Bass's humble, self-deprecating voice tempers his unorthodox ideas to help make them more palatable to those who could otherwise shun them. Consider his ruminations on how wolves might find comfort in a train whistle:

A train's faint moan reaches us from the next valley, and I wonder what the wolves think of that—if they ever call back to it. Is it outlandish to think maybe that's one of the things that drew them to this valley—that they were lonely, and

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liked its sound? I'm thinking like a poet. I'm thinking foolishly, stupidly.

Here, Bass appeases his more scientifically inclined audience by deeming his own thinking outlandish, yet nonetheless succeeds in encouraging us to think like a wolf. The benefits of conceding one's idiosyncratic ideas in this way are acknowledged in Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*: "The spectacle of baring the naked soul is meant to awaken the sympathies of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist's self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor ... Part of our trust in good personal essayists issues, paradoxically, from their exposure of their own betrayals, uncertainties, and self-mistrust."

Bass is a man unafraid to question his own beliefs. Meanwhile, Jimenez's character—formally rooted in science but as passionate as a proud father about the animals he studies—brings additional credibility and balance to Bass's musings about wolves. At one point, Bass conveys his amazement about how wolves are somehow able to trail one another over huge expanses of time and space. Jimenez clearly shares his awe, and replies: "They just *follow* each other. Nobody ever gave 'em that kind of credit." Together, Bass and Jimenez embolden readers to reconsider their preconceived notions concerning wolves.

In a sense, Jimenez is depicted as a lone wolf himself, out there doing what needs to be done on behalf of the predators who have breached his scientific boundaries. By revealing Jimenez as a conflicted person in his own right, Bass stimulates empathy for his role as a government scientist. Anecdotally, I found Jimenez to be true-to-form with the character Bass created in his book when I spoke with him at a wildlife

conference in Oregon. After listening to his presentation about wolf recovery in the Rocky Mountains, I solicited his opinion on the government-sanctioned killing of an entire family of wolves in northeastern Washington—wolves that were allegedly habituated to cattle. He earnestly replied that lethal control “definitely makes you sad” but comes with the territory of wolf recovery, thus echoing one of his quotes from *The Ninemile Wolves*: “The goal is to recover the population. The problem is that you do it through individuals—and when you deal with ‘em on a continuous basis, it’s real tough. You try not to get involved.”

Fortunately, writers are less constrained. Like Bass and the other authors discussed in this paper, I consider it part of my mission to get emotionally involved with the predators I study and to relay this emotion to my readers. Alas, *The Ninemile Wolves* is especially pertinent to my current conundrum about wolves in Washington as I try to strike a healthy balance between my identities as a field biologist, an advocate, and an artist. As Bass contends: “It’ll break your heart if you follow this story too closely, and for too long, with too much passion. It’s never going to end. At least, I hope it doesn’t ever end.”

The Snow Leopard

The works of creative nonfiction discussed above are just a sampling of those presumably written in part to help ensure that the story of the planet’s wild predators, and the animals inhabiting those stories, never end—at least not because of us. There are many other important books in this category (e.g., *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen, *Of Wolves and Men* by Barry Lopez, *Jaguar* by Alan Rabinowitz, *Dominion of Bears* by Sherry Simpson, *The Wolverine Way* by Doug

Chadwick, *Grizzly Years* by Doug Peacock), and I assume the list will grow dramatically in the coming years given the plight of predators around the globe.

Although these books are as different in form and style as they are in subject matter, they are unified in their commitment to telling the truth about predators *and* telling it slant, to borrow from Emily Dickinson. Some authors rely heavily on observations while others focus their field glasses more inwardly. Peter Matthiessen never saw a single snow leopard during his two-month journey in the remote Himalayas of Nepal but nevertheless managed to bring this ghostly animal into public awareness by transporting his readers to the glacial shadows where snow leopards and blue sheep dance the ancient dance of predators and prey everywhere.

Matthiessen's brilliant book compelled me to ask myself: What does it really mean to *see* a snow leopard? As both symbols and keystones of wildness, can predators really be disentangled from the experience of place? Recently, during a behind-the-scenes tour at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo, I was graced with the presence of a flesh-and-blood snow leopard—even touched his fur with my fingertip. Yet it occurred to me as I looked into those icy-moss eyes that Matthiessen encountered more snow-leopard-ness in the northern reaches of Nepal than I or a million other zoo-goers could imagine by gazing through the bars of a cage. I do hope and believe that watching animals in captivity can ignite the imagination and help generate long-term change. But only among those glacial shadows could the true essence of the snow leopard's wildness be absorbed through the human senses and translated to words on a page—an eternal gift that Matthiessen left us upon his death in 2014.

Concluding Thoughts

There's no getting around the fact that predators can be frightening, and that they're occasionally dangerous to humans. But each of the authors above presents us with the notion that there are other ways to see these powerful creatures, and that, if we can begin to strip away our biases and judgments, we can coexist with them in the future. As Turner proposes: "We might still, at this late moment, hold a predator—the ultimate Other—to our heart, might actually come to love its wild and utterly different life, might actually achieve a unity." If we don't, we are destined to suffer a great loss with profound ramifications. No more polar bears. No more tigers. No more grizzly bears. No more lions. *These* are the fears that keep me awake in my tent at night.

And then there is the importance of language itself. Although it doesn't benefit predators to rob them of their wildness by taming the terms used to describe them (to call a grizzly bear *cuddly*, for instance), Bekoff reminds us: "The words we use to refer to animals strongly influence how we view them and the actions we take to protect them." (Interestingly, the term *predator*, which means plunderer in Latin—*praedator*—has come to connote victimization and exploitation in our society.) We must choose our words carefully when writing about wildlife and use language that helps move people toward a more empathetic point of view. Turner writes: "Old ways of seeing do not change because of evidence; they change because a new language captures the imagination." He continues:

Some people fear that extending a human vocabulary to wild animals erodes their Otherness. But what is not Other? Are we not all

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from one perspective, Other to each and every being in the universe? And at the same time, and from another perspective, do we not all share an elemental wildness that burns forth in each life?

An excellent example of language as catalyst emerges from the work of biologist Gordon Haber, whose forty-three-year study of wolves in Alaska culminated in Marybeth Holleman's *Among Wolves* after Haber's death in 2009. Haber spent his long career fighting for wolf protection, and advocated the use of the word "family" to describe a social group of wolves because "pack" tends to have negative connotations:

The use of the term "family" with regard to wolves is sometimes belittled in Alaska. However, any biologist who belittles the use of this term for wolves or other species reveals his or her ignorance of the scientific literature and knowledge about one of the most active areas in all of science—sociobiology—and may also be betraying his own underlying social or political agenda.

Which brings me back full-circle to Washington's Huckleberry wolves. A few days after one of the wolves was shot from the air, officials announced they had accidentally targeted the pack's alpha female. More to the point, they had lethally removed—*killed*—a mother with young pups on the ground. Ultimately, the rancher involved agreed to move his 1,800 sheep to another area for the remainder of the season. Conservationists cried too little too late. The fate of the remaining Huckleberry family is unknown.

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The world is awash in gray. Sometimes men who kill wolves later become their champions, and occasionally, good people lose livestock or even their lives to wild predators. Injured tigers prowl villages because they are unable to hunt their natural prey; dispersing wolves travel hundreds of miles in search of mates. Yes, there are many, many stories to be told. Some of them even hold the power to rewild our hearts.

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