Anthropology Book Forum
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Alagona, Peter S. *The Accidental Ecosystem: People and Wildlife in American Cities*. University of California Press. ISBN: 9780520386310

What does it mean to be a 'good' urban animal? Is there a coexistence code of conduct that one has to learn? Since animals can't read municipal or homeowners' associations' notices, how can the rules of the game, set by humans, be meaningfully communicated to wild animals? In 'Accidental Ecosystem,' Peter S. Alagona makes the case that an interspecies etiquette goes both ways. It's also a work in progress: indeed, a matter of "actively trying to work out a new ethic for living with animals" (p. 99).

In Accidental Ecosystem we learn that there may, in fact, be such thing as a 'good' urban animal, insofar as good means *adaptable.* Just as domesticated animals become 'friend-shaped' (neotenous and round), urban animals quite quickly differentiate from their wildland cousins by often becoming fatter, having more offspring, living longer, becoming bolder, louder and more curious. Birds adjust their pitch to drown out traffic noise. Black bears become less territorial and more willing to compromise for grub. At the same time, coexisting with humans is a tightrope walk. When urban animals transgress some unwritten code of conduct, by coloring outside the lines – behaviorally, trophically or geographically – they are put in their place in various disciplinary mechanisms and practices: lethal control, hazing campaigns, relocations, or naming and shaming in the media as rowdy rebels.

A standout of the book is that these disciplinary responses to unwanted urban animal presences are depicted with a brutal honesty and cover all of the United States. As a result, *Accidental Ecosystem* makes clear they are not well-coordinated interventions, but all too often a "long drawn out, costly, violent, ineffective and largely pointless boondoggle (p. 170). This failure to communicate with urban wild animals is owed to several things, we learn throughout. First, urban ecology, while it is improving, is still systematically ignored, underfunded and set aside for study of pristine Nature with a capital N. Second, unlike in the countryside, where landowners steward their own properties, there is no clear mandate for who is to manage wildlife in the city, nor is there a clear revenue stream for doing so.

A latent theme of *Accidental Ecosystem* is mobility: learning to moderate one's mobility as a wild animal. But mobility can also be used as a weapon: blocking roads, climbing poles to chew off power cables, opting to nest in undesirable places. As Mavhunga (2011) tells, an animal's success depends on the management of its mobility. This becomes exceedingly important for an urban animal. In examining pest control and culling, Alagona argues that the "decision to launch a response should depend on an animal's behavior—whether it appeared injured or sick or was acting aggressively—and not its mere presence." In so declaring, he taps into what scholars of wildlife management understand to be a *categorical* vs *situational* rationale for culling various animals (Crowley et al., 2018). Categorical is when the mere presence of an animal triggers lethal control—it is simply a matter of out place. Invasive species fit the bill. Situational is when coexistence is the ambition, but an individual animal has not managed to stay in its lane. It may have demonstrated excess boldness, predated on domestic animals, or shown willingness to interbreed with pets. This conditionality of coexistence is a theme well worth scholarly attention today.

Along with mobility, there is a general geographical strand in the book, focusing on ecological infrastructures, waterways, zoos as 'pulling' sites for wild animals, suburban interfaces, road crossings, changing ideas of animal territory and fragmented habitats. Alagona also has a metabolic strand, which could perhaps be teased out more, that declares "you are what you eat" (p. 90) and documents the novel trophic interactions in which urban animals engage. This is illustrated also historically: the dung produced by horses, left on Victorian city streets, provided breeding ground for parasites, diseases and odors. Today and tomorrow, the 'emerging' character of zoonotic diseases, which proliferate in dense, multispecies congregations—like the urban—dominates the agenda and fears around biosecurity. Certain species are more suited as vectors, amplifiers, or sentinels of such diseases than others. Getting an environmental philosopher's take on the ecology and epidemiology of this proves highly digestible. Tapping into the ostensive irrationality of human-wildlife relations more broadly, we also see how some species get excessively blamed or scapegoated for various messes and harms to public health, compared to actual culprits.

The concept of waste is central in a straightforward way: it is the foundation for much wildlife to congregate in human areas. Waste may be thought of as a hotspot for human-wildlife relations. Managing waste is essential to managing wildlife. Alagona traces the rise of this general philosophy well; that is, a gradual reorientation from treating the symptoms of an illness, nuisance wildlife, to addressing underlying causes. This is connected to what wildlife

managers now informally refer to as a bottom up or 'field of dreams' approach (after the Kevin Costner movie quote: "If you build it they will come"). Addressing habitat is the key issue. You can make an ecosystem 'boring' to animals to deter them, as has characterized airport design (Bauer et al., 2019), and you can make it juicy by throwing in what Alagona later calls subsidies: resources coming in from outside the ecosystem – such as a feeding station. The notion that we can manage and improve our relations with wild animals via managing habitat is a hopeful and doable one, as we are not there yet.

The book's strength is in showing how this is not enough, and that sometimes we need to deal with problem animals that arrive in our midst, and these responses have historically been pretty amusing. Broad trends on nature relations are described, and show how changing aesthetic ideals and attitudes to wilderness inform the city's response to wildlife. Urban animals can become famous, made into mascots, turned into social media accounts, broadcast via nest cameras to livestreams. This has been picked up and made relevant in the context of Covid lockdown by Turnbull et al. (2020) in 'Quarantine encounters with digital animals,' where intimacy without proximity is achieved through the screen. Some examples of especially memorable urban animals in this book, with whom the public has formed a mediated attachment, include the Pittsburgh Bald Eagles (whose nest is livestreams), cows and bulls that escape from the abattoir to become vigilantes and Pedals the bipedal bear in New Jersey. The latter also had a strong social media presence, which worked against him: a hunter stalked out his whereabouts online and killed him with a bow and arrow.

The people who are sent to deal with these animals—to reason with them by appeal to the interspecies etiquette—are also mentioned. "Bear whisperer" Steve Searles and his hazing campaign of black bears in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s provides the perhaps most intriguing scholarly point of entry. His quote to the LA Times, that "Dead bears learn nothing" points to a potential shift from the shoot first, ask questions later approach that has characterized pest control in the past, to one of communicating the rules of the game through aversive conditioning—rubber bullets, bats, shouting, noisemakers and more. Is communicating across species boundaries with clear signals that are intelligible across different species' perceptual umwelts (Von Uexküll, 1992), the way forward for coexistence, then, I ask? It may appear absurd to expect this of animals, but the fact is we do operate with the expectation. Alagona quotes Caddyshack the movie, in which Bill Murray's groundskeeper says of the nuisant gopher on the golf course "I think it's about time somebody teach these varmints a little lesson about

morality and what it's like to be a decent, upstanding member of a society" (p. 169). Clearly, we have an ambition to teach wild animals.

The book concludes with a beautiful metaphor: the author finds a robin's nest that is a perfect "postmodern collage" (p. 213) of scraps of napkins, paper towels, cigarette butts, nylon and aluminum foil. It reconnects to the concept of waste, of sharing space, of hybridities. The stories told of multispecies encounters in cities are the grand narratives and sensational events. If the book has a blind spot, therefore, it is in its omission of those everyday vernacular encounters with wild animals that escape viral media. Projects like 'Meet your wild neighbors,' collating urbanites' garden camera footage of unexpected wild critters, and accounts of feeding wild boar in cities (Kowalewska, 2019), should going forward lend ethnographic on the ground detail to this philosopher's account. Indeed, it is perhaps in the everyday individual encounters that are the locus of the truly accidental.

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Erica von Essen is an associate professor of Environmental Communication, who works with changing human-wildlife relations in the Anthropocene at the Social Anthropology Department of Stockholm University. Her research examines new roles that animals come to play in society, with new moral implications and manifestations of multispecies encounters.