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Forget Fertility, Get Feral. Review of George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life*

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Abstract

What's more important to our planet's future than little children? Global warning is about them, we're told, and it's on their behalf that we have to do better. Climate scientist James Hansen titled his memoir and climate science primer *Storms of My Grandchildren*. Naomi Klein's fertility struggles frame the closing act of her epic *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. In Ben Lerner's climate dread novel *10:04* the protagonist navigates bureaucratic and emotional mazes to donate sperm to a friend. Fertility = future. Get it?

Disciplines

Demography, Population, and Ecology | Place and Environment | Sociology

Comments

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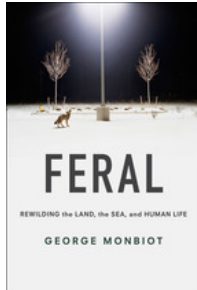
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FORGET FERTILITY, GET FERAL

DANIEL ALDANA COHEN



FERAL: REWILDING THE LAND, SEA, AND HUMAN LIFE

George Monbiot

University of Chicago Press, 2014

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February 1, 2015— What's more important to our planet's future than little children? Global warming is about them, we're told, and it's on their behalf that we have to do better. Climate scientist James Hansen titled his memoir and climate science primer *Storms of My Grandchildren*. Naomi Klein's fertility struggles frame the closing act of her epic *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. In Ben Lerner's climate dread novel *10:04*, the protagonist navigates bureaucratic and emotional mazes to donate sperm to a friend. Fertility = future. Get it?

British journalist George Monbiot, best known for his *Guardian* column, once sang in this choir, insisting that his newborn daughter should not inherit a scalding planet. In his 2007 book, *Heat*, a blueprint for rapid greenhouse gas reductions, he seats her on his lap while writing a chapter on low-carbon cement.

But she has almost vanished from his most recent book, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life*. What's going on? *Feral* outlines an optimistic, enchanting vision of life that environmentalists can rally behind: rewilding. "The ecosystems that result [from rewilding]," Monbiot writes, "are best described not as wilderness, but as self-willed: governed not by human management but by their own processes." But isn't a massive effort to protect great stretches of nature, in order to unleash their dynamism, a distraction from more urgent, technical efforts to protect future generations from climate chaos?

Or maybe it's the other way around. Maybe it's the image of children, lighting a path to the future with a halo of family values, that distracts from climate change's more immediate political and existential questions. What about us grown-ups, alive and struggling in the present? Caught in the claustrophobic circuit of restaurant, office, smart phone, bar, and gym, the North Atlantic middle class is forgetting how to live. And that's what passes for prosperity. The growing ranks of the unemployed and working poor are battling just to survive with some decency.¹ Obsessing over children won't solve these crises. Just the opposite: the fertility fetish defers reckoning with what Monbiot calls our ecological boredom. Deprived of adventure in the great outdoors, our vitality wilts and our politics wither.

Monbiot's revelation starts in his garden. He scoops up a "white comma," the larva of a bronze-backed beetle. Seized by instinct, he devours it. Its juices taste "sweet, creamy, faintly smoky, like alpine butter." His mind flashes back to an exhilarating episode during his investigative travels in the Brazilian Amazon. He comes to after this memory and sees how his life has shrunk. He can't go on just "sitting and writing, looking after [his] daughter and house, running merely to stay fit." A few pages later, he's devouring raw mackerel off a hunting blade while jealous crows look on. For the first time, he writes, "I had caught more energy than I had used."

Although Monbiot has been a marauding journalist in West Papua, on the Horn of Africa, and in the Amazon watershed, he calls his journey into the fledging

rewilding movement the most exciting of his life.²

Sensual eccentrics aren't always appreciated. British journalists and academics have mocked *Feral* for its autobiographical sincerity. I asked a leading British cultural scholar of climate change if he had read the book. He gave me a pleasant, patrician smile. "No," he said, "I hear it is mainly about George."

Fair enough. But not George alone—at least, not quite. For he does not just ponder, chase, hunt, kill, and eat animals in *Feral*. He also becomes them, passing through the "invisible wall that separated [him] from the ecosystem." Monbiot compares himself, at various points, to a porpoise, a heron, a bear, and a corncrake. He travels through time. Wielding a trident in waist-high water, he's overcome by what he calls a "genetic memory," the echo of a prehistoric instance of identical sensations.

All this adds up to a bigger picture. Monbiot draws on adventures new and re-told, a mess of reading, fresh interviews, and archival research to flesh out the advances in ecological science that inform the rewilding movement. Charismatic mega-fauna, from mastodons to beavers, are not just important for acting as mirrors to our projecting egos. Through "trophic cascades," huge animals enliven ecosystems from the top down.

For instance, researchers have found that greater numbers of bigger whales yield vaster swarms of plankton, krill, and fish. This results in part from whales releasing fecal plumes near the water's surface, facilitating contact between sunlight, nutrient, and plankton. Another cause is the enormous quantity of water that whales churn when surfacing from the deep, dragging plankton up into sunlit shallow waters. (This biomass also absorbs carbon and eventually buries it in the oceans' floor—more whales could cool the planet.) Meanwhile, the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park has yielded increased species diversity—plant and animal—and even created more consistent, well-formed waterways. Now that wolves hunt deer from water's edges, trees and shrubs there thrive, extend roots, and stabilize riverbanks' soil.³



Humpback whale breaching. Photograph by devra / Flickr

Ecosystems' once astonishing plenty thrived in large part because of

monstrous beasts, most of which were extinguished by the earliest human hunters. These giant gardeners were not just affable woolly mammoths and ten-foot kangaroos, but also bloodthirsty predators like the saber-tooth tiger, marsupial lion, and short-faced bear. Readers of Elizabeth Kolbert's *Sixth Extinction* will recognize accounts of all that is being lost. But they won't find her melancholy tone. Not all of the "keystone species" that disproportionately shape ecosystems are gone. Monbiot argues that the Yellowstone and other cases demonstrate that an ecosystem's decline can be reversed. Often, as in Britain, a decent start can be made with measures as mild as reintroducing beavers to areas they once inhabited. Or take a recently protected area of New England shoreline, where restrictions on fishing caused the number of scallops to increase fourteen-fold in just five years. We're not doomed to a lifeless planet.

Still, rewilding is controversial. Forget the financial questions. Compared to the hoards of treasure we'll need to renovate and rewire our energy systems, or provide decent health care and education and sanitation to eight billion people, rewilding's budget is microscopic. The main barriers are prejudice, narrow corporate interests, and necessary democratic deliberations.

At sea, well-organized, profit-driven industries adamantly (and myopically) oppose anything with even a whiff of conservation about it. On land, the story is more complex. First, rewilding requires greater stretches of territory than conservationists can typically secure. Second, contra the practices of many established conservationist groups, notions of a static, "natural" state inherited from some prehistoric equilibrium must be abandoned. Embracing ecological uncertainty is unsettling. Finally, restoring trophic cascades means re-introducing displaced species, like mountain lions, or the analogs of extinct ones, like elephants for mastodons. People are understandably wary of big, scary animals.

The social challenges multiply in places like North America, where indigenous nations have their own, long-standing projects for ecological restoration. In practice, rewilding efforts would require extensive negotiation and collaboration. Monbiot harshly condemns rewilding projects that are imposed from above.

We might still wonder whether we're ready to unleash the forces we've spent centuries working to master. Doesn't nature belong outside of us, a realm of necessity to transcend? Monbiot's prose exemplifies a more interesting perspective, expressing at once a childlike and erotic intimacy with the wild. "The oaks had put out embryo leaves as minutely serrated as mouse paws," he writes. "The fronds of the horse chestnuts in town, which had hung like empty gloves, began to stiffen and splay. Bracken unrolled leaflet by leaflet like a Mandelbrot set." I don't even know what a Mandelbrot set is, but I'm enchanted, and I think I'd like to have one.

"[A] knot in brick-red breeding plumage ran along the sand dipping its head, then took off with a long swooping whistle," he writes. "A bumble bee trapped in the surface film broadcast frantic barcode ripples: sound made visible." Or: "[The spider crab] looked like the grab used to lift crushed cars in a scrap-metal yard. Its claws were more than two feet from tip to tip, powerfully ridged and bossed, crenallated on the cutting edges ... It bulged with the suggestion of muscle like a Roman suit of armor."

MONBIOT WANTS ALL OF US TO HAVE THE CHANCE, STARTING TODAY, TO REINVIGORATE OUR LIVES.

Over and over, Monbiot deploys the precise vocabularies and unexpected analogies that George Orwell implored us to substitute for

bad abstraction in political writing.⁴ When politics get cruel, Orwell argued, lazy abstraction veils the authentic, troubling truth. Orwell did not pose precision and concreteness in opposition to the abstract *per se*. These were, rather, autonomous encounters with general principles, meticulous detail and fresh images exposing an active mind at work. “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity,” Orwell wrote. Monbiot is as clear and sincere as Orwell could wish for—and he is hopeful, too.

Monbiot’s analogies not only perform intellectual vigor in general; their substantive threads entwine human and nonhuman activity, weaving the human spirit with creature, land, and sea. Human freedom depends on the freedom of the wild, but the magic of the wild depends on human art. Monbiot’s anthropomorphism of ecology is abstract and encompassing, an enlightened, secular pantheism for the 21st century. Getting feral, as I see it, means injecting environmentalism with the adrenaline of an insurgent, democratic modernism.

Monbiot doesn’t abandon his family at *Feral’s* close. Macho feats aside, he isn’t outlining a masculinist vision of authentic survival. Still, his war on ecological boredom puts generational turnover in its place—a necessity for human survival, but hardly the master metaphor for living well. And rewilding is a social project. In conjunction with a broad expansion of social and economic security, Monbiot wants all of us to have the chance, starting today, to reinvigorate our lives, in spells long or short, through plunges into realms of unfettered, unhuman life. Complex, often tedious eco-policies are bound to a violent romance with the earthly cosmos.

What if hunting wild pleasures of the flesh helped fuel an arduous overhaul of industrial economies? Of course, not every adventure-seeker will kayak, like Monbiot, under driving rain into swollen seas. Some would rather be disoriented and bruised underground. Getting feral doesn’t mean giving up on children. It means *not* giving up on ourselves. Putting people and planet before profits, starting right now, will take hard work. It needs to be worth it—also starting right now. In a warming world, it won’t be enough to wonder, “What is to be done?” A second question is just as vital: “How should we *live*?”

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1 In an essay in *Jacobin* titled “Seize the Hamptons,” I addressed the class dimensions of leisure and climate politics more directly, exploring how the French workers’ movement in the 1930s won ordinary people time and money to vacation outside cities.

2 Readers will wonder if he has almost abandoned the social concerns that drove his work so far. In fairness, Monbiot secured his social justice credentials with investigative volumes on each of these regions, an in-depth assault on British New Labour’s public-private partnerships, a blueprint for a bottom-up globalization, and an ongoing effort to arrest Tony Blair for war crimes. His column continues to investigate such themes. *Feral* doesn’t forget social and economic inequalities and the reader will have an easy time connecting these to his argument.

3 Monbiot has since produced videos to accompany a detailed essay for the *Guardian* on trophic cascades. A video explaining wolves’ re-introduction to Yellowstone has been viewed nearly 14 million times. A second film explores whale poo.

4 See George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon* (April 1946).

Daniel Aldana Cohen is a PhD candidate in sociology at New York University, where he researches the urban politics of climate change and is a founding member of the Superstorm Research Lab. His writing has recently been published by *Jacobin*, *Dissent*, *Metropolitica*, the *NACLA Report on the Americas*, and the *Center for Humans and Nature*.

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