

Consider the Vulture: An Ethical Approach to Roadkill

By Jonathan L. Clark



Roadkill is disgusting. Many people just want it removed from the roads as quickly as possible, and they don't care where it goes. In Pennsylvania, most of the deer carcasses that are collected from the roads end up in landfills. But is this a respectful way to treat the dead? And what about the vultures and other scavengers who would otherwise eat the carcasses? We need an ethical approach to roadkill that considers the vultures as well as the deer.

* * *

You can pack only so many deer carcasses into the back of a pickup truck, and it's starting to get late in the day anyhow. If we're going to make it to the landfill by 5 p.m., Bill says, we need to drive there now. It's mid-November in Pennsylvania, when collisions between automobiles and deer are at their peak. I'm riding along with Bill, one of the independent contractors the Pennsylvania Game Commission hires to remove carcasses from the roads.^[1]

Earlier in the day Bill taught me how to get a carcass into the bed of the truck. You tie a rope around the neck, drag the carcass to the truck, and then lift it onto the weathered wooden board that serves as a ramp. Then you climb into the bed and use the rope to pull the carcass up the board. Bill let me load two, and he loaded another eighteen or so. That's the load we're hauling to the landfill.

Bill stops the truck on the road that leads to the entrance to the landfill. He gets out, walks around to the back of the truck, and covers the load with a blue plastic tarp. The people who work at the landfill don't want waste flying around, he says, though hair is the only thing escaping from the back of this truck—that and the smell of decomposition. At the entrance we pull up next to a small building that looks like a tollbooth. As Bill exchanges greetings with the woman inside, I notice that we're parked on a scale, which says the truck weighs 8,900 pounds. Bill fills out a form, checking "commercial waste" to

identify what's under the tarp.^[2] He hands the paperwork to the woman, and she waives us through.

We drive up a dirt road, toward the active face of the landfill, where front-end loaders bury the newly arriving trash. Bill stops the truck again—this time to remove the tarp. A sign says you must be wearing a hard hat to exit your vehicle beyond this point. Bill's not wearing one, and neither am I, so I guess we'll be staying inside the truck. As we drive toward the face, I see two yellow front-end loaders plowing trash. I also see several turkey vultures circling low in the sky, above the netting that surrounds the area like a backstop. Aside from a few airborne plastic bags, the area is surprisingly tidy, not strewn with trash, as I had expected it to be.

We leave the dirt road and enter the face. Bill backs the truck up beside one of the front-end loaders and then flips a switch, causing a hydraulic mechanism to lift the bed of the truck into the air. As he shifts the truck into drive and inches forward, the carcasses tumble into a pile on the soft ground behind us. He flips the switch again, lowering the bed, and drives back out to the dirt road.

The vultures continue to circle. “Hey, we can take care of those deer for you—no charge,” I imagine them saying. But they will not be eating venison today. The front-end loader is already plowing the carcasses into the pile, and soon they'll be mixed in with all the other trash. On our way out we stop again at the booth. According to the scale, we just dumped 2,300 pounds of carrion. I wonder how many vultures that would feed.

* * *

The landfill was not the first place we encountered scavengers that day. Earlier, when we stopped to pick up a dead buck, I noticed that an animal had been eating the carcass, back-end first. Bill said it looked like the work of a

coyote or a fox. They tend to eat the backside or the eyes first, he said. As we pulled up to another carcass, which was lying in the grass behind a sign, I saw a black bird out of the corner of my eye. “There’s a crow!” I said. Turns out it was a turkey vulture. The bird flew away when Bill approached the carcass with the rope. It was warm that day, so I also saw lots of maggots. Occasionally they would roll down the board after Bill hoisted a carcass into the truck. Maggots were still feeding on some of the carcasses when we dumped them at the landfill.

Over the years Bill has encountered other animals feeding on carcasses as well, including owls, eagles, and red-tailed hawks. One time he found a carcass covered in fox scat. He thought the fox might have been trying to stake a claim. But if scavengers had property rights, Bill would be out of a job, so off to the landfill it went.



Photo by Magnus Manske, Wikimedia Commons. 2007.

* * *

After riding along with Bill that day, I started wondering about the morality of turning dead deer into “zoological garbage.”^[3] If how we treat the dead influences how we treat the living, then the most obvious question is whether this is a respectful way to treat the dead.^[4] Yet the experience of stealing carrion from scavengers, only to then throw it away, led me to start thinking about this question in a slightly different way. I started wondering how we might respect the dead in a way that also respects the animals (and other organisms) who eat them.

This wider, multi-species understanding of respect does not preclude us from eating roadkill, composting it, or otherwise using it for our purposes. But if we take this ethic seriously, we will often be obliged to leave a carcass for the vultures and the foxes and the maggots and the beetles and all the other hungry creatures with whom we share this world. This obligation seems especially clear when, as in the case of the fox who defecated on that carcass, or the turkey vulture Bill and I scared away, they have already staked their claim on it. I don't worry all that much about the microbes who inhabit the anaerobic conditions of the landfill where Bill and I dumped all those carcasses. I figure they already have enough to eat. And besides, the fox and the turkey vulture got to the carcasses first. “Finders, keepers,” as they say.

* * *

In *Apologia*, Barry Lopez recounts a road trip he took from the Oregon Cascades to South Bend, Indiana.^[5] Along the way he stopped to remove dead animals from the road, dragging the deer and carrying the smaller animals into the nearby grass or brush. Asked why he bothered, here's how Lopez replied:

You never know . . . The ones you give some semblance of burial, to whom you offer an apology, may have been like seers in a parallel culture. It is an act of respect, a technique of awareness.^[6]

Lopez's gesture illustrates the multispecies ethic I have in mind. He does not presume that the bodies are his, to do with as he pleases. He moves them, yes, but in doing so reduces the chances that a scavenger will also get hit. He pays his respects to the dead, and then he goes on his way, leaving the bodies behind to nourish others.

Had Bill and I done what Lopez did, I'd like to think that the deer would have accepted our gesture. Surely they would rather be eaten by a turkey vulture than entombed in a landfill. Or maybe that's just me projecting my own preferences onto them. But I do know one thing for certain: the turkey vultures and the other scavengers would have accepted our gesture—and with relish.

* * *

In an era of tight budgets, why don't we just drag deer off to the side of the road—far enough away so that scavengers don't become roadkill themselves—and then let the scavengers and decomposers provide their clean-up services for free?^[7] Why do we dedicate so much time, money, and sheer physical exertion to transforming carrion into trash? The most common explanation I've heard is aesthetic. Understandably, rotting carcasses disgust many people. They don't want to see them or smell them or watch vultures tear them apart. Some people may also prefer not to be reminded of their own mortality, particularly when they're driving. And maybe some people think it's disrespectful to allow a carcass to rot on the side of the road.

Adopting an ecological perspective helps us think about death and decomposition in a more positive way. Instead of fixating on the sight or

smell of the rotting carcass, or on the violent death that produced it, a wider, ecological vision enables us to appreciate that a carcass is also a source of life. [8] When we adopt this perspective, as Henry David Thoreau did, “[w]e are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast.”[9] Thoreau did not deny that decomposing carcasses stink. In fact, he makes a point of telling us that he once had to take a different path home to avoid the smell of a rotting horse. Yet his disgust did not lead him to think of that carcass as zoological garbage in need of removal. Rather, for Thoreau the smell of decomposition was ultimately reassuring, reminding him of “the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature . . .”[10]

I’m not suggesting that roadkill is a good thing because it’s good for vultures and other scavengers. What I’m saying is that good things can come out of bad things, and we make a bad thing worse when we prevent this from happening. So even as we try to reduce the number of animals we collectively kill on our roads, we should also remember that each death we cannot prevent provides an opportunity for new life, if only we allow natural processes to unfold. Yes, during the transformation of death into life we may have to catch a glimpse of something we don’t want to see, or a whiff of something we don’t want to smell. But maybe our willingness to endure these kinds of experiences is part of what it means to pay our respects to the dead. And maybe the more attention we pay to the animals on the side of the road, the more we will come to understand that roadkill is as much about life as it is about death.

Jonathan L. Clark is an associate professor of sociology at Ursinus College, where he’s also affiliated with the environmental studies department. Jon has published in the fields of animal studies and the environmental humanities. This post is based on field notes from his new research project, on roadkill, titled “Moving through a More-than-Human World.” You can

email him at jlark@ursinus.edu and follow him on Twitter @jonlclark.

Bibliography

Heinrich, Bernd. *Life Everlasting: The Animal Way of Death*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

Lopez, Barry, and Robin Eschner. *Apologia*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998.

Palmer, C. Eddie. "Dog Catchers: A Descriptive Study." *Qualitative Sociology* 1, no. 1 (May 1978):79-107.

Rolston, III, Holmes. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Taylor, Chloë. "Respect for the (Animal) Dead." In *Animal Death*, edited by Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, 85-101. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. In *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, edited by Brooks Atkinson. New York: Modern Library, 1992.

Suggested Reading on Roadkill and Vultures

Desmond, Jane. *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-Animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Fallon, Katie. *Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird*. Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2017.

Koelle, Alexandra. 2012. "Intimate Bureaucracies: Roadkill, Policy, and Fieldwork on the Shoulder." *Hypatia* 27, no. 3 (August 2012): 651-669.

Kroll, Gary. "An Environmental History of Roadkill: Road Ecology and the Making of the Permeable Highway." *Environmental History* 20, no. 1 (January 2015): 4-28.

Soron, Dennis. "Road Kill: Commodity Fetishism and Structural Violence." *Topia* 18 (Fall 2007): 107-125.

van Dooren, Thom. *Vulture*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011.

[1] Bill is a pseudonym.

[2] According to the executive director of the landfill, this classification was used because Bill has a regular charge account.

[3] C. Eddie Palmer, "Dog Catchers: A Descriptive Study," *Qualitative Sociology* 1, no. 1 (May 1978): 83.

[4] Chloë Taylor, "Respect for the (Animal) Dead," in *Animal Death*, eds. Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2013), 100.

[5] Barry Lopez and Robin Eschner, *Apologia* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998).

[6] Lopez and Eschner, *Apologia*, n.p.

[7] Bernd Heinrich, *Life Everlasting: The Animal Way of Death* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 91.

[8] Holmes Rolston, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 238-39.

[9] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 298.

[¹⁰] Thoreau, *Walden*, 298.

Related

[For a true war on waste, the fashion industry must spend more on research](#)In "Aesthetics"

[How we discovered pollution-poisoned crustaceans in the Mariana Trench](#)In "Body burdens"

[We can't recycle our way to 'zero waste'](#)In "Economics/Economies"