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Of elephants and men

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

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Abstract: Baker & Winkler’s target article is well-researched and thought-provoking, but I do have four points of contention: (1) The proposal to entrust elephants to traditional mahout culture has restricted elephants’ freedom of movement and reproduction and (ab)used them. (2) The concept of “indigenous” simultaneously reifies and denigrates the “noble savages”, privileging only human indigenous groups, ignoring nonhuman indigenes. (3) Most lifestyles have been globalized under consumer-economic and anthropocentric worldviews. (4) The fact that people (including mahouts) are part of nature does not mean they are benevolent, any more than cities, monocultures, or roads are.

Keywords: animal rights, animal welfare, deep ecology, ecocentrism

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1. The traditional expertise of a mahout culture. Baker & Winkler (2020) (B&W) write of the “traditional expertise of a mahout culture that has been elephant-keeping for centuries”. Yet, elephants have a multi-millennial culture of being free to live their lives (Kopnina 2017). Mahouts have historically been complacent in depriving elephants of their freedom to use them for heavy work, and more recently in their (ab)use in the [elephant tourism industry](#).

B&W write: “To avoid potential misconstrual of this target article’s thesis as a cultural defense of exploitative practices, we wish to make it clear that we are in no way suggesting that practices that permit and perpetuate violence and exploitation of nonhuman and human individuals should be defended on the grounds of tradition.” They then suggest that a way forward is to “understand the diversity of ways human communities relate to elephants.” Yet nowhere in their article do they suggest that this understanding counters the root cause of elephant oppression – anthropocentrism. Nor does their examination suggest that the mahouts believe elephants should just be free to live their lives free of oppression. Instead, they speak of “traditional mahout knowledge of elephant husbandry, developed over many generations of working alongside elephants”. Nobody asks elephants what they think of such “husbandry” or about working alongside humans for human profit. Coulter (2016) likened domestic/unpaid labor, “women’s work”, and slave exploitation to animal labor.

There have been many “traditions” — head-hunting, a ritual sacrifice of babies, children or adults (virgins, widows), mutilation — that are now prohibited because of enlightened humanitarianism. Unless it can be shown that indigenous mahouts are perfect “guardians” of the

elephants without depriving them of freedom of movement and reproduction or exploiting them for farm or building work or entertainment, historically or today, their elephant-keeping traditions might not be as benign as B&W present them.

2. The problem with the concept of “indigenous.” B&W cite “[t]he notion of land belonging to no one — *terra nullius* — which has been invoked for centuries as legal justification for occupying the land of others, marginalizing indigenous communities”. The very term “indigenous” seems problematic. Historically, human groups have moved a lot — so what makes one group “indigenous” or another “just” local (and these days, immigrant or cosmopolitan?). Can we still refer to people who moved to cities, voluntarily or not, or intermarried with the “non-indigenous” as indigenous? Can “the Dutch” not be seen as indigenous too, because they come from some ancient local origins? The very term “indigenous” has colonial connotations as it implies that these people are pre-modern “noble savages”.

Today’s forest-dependent people have been seen as keepers of traditional ecologically wise knowledge of their ancestors. Yet, there is archeological evidence that even in pre-industrial times, humans already played an important role in shaping ecosystems and causing extinctions (Barnosky et al. 2004). Currently, [indigenous populations are growing while indigenous populations of nonhumans are declining](#).

The perspectives of animal rights, or ecocentrism, or deep ecology, however, which are derived from some of these indigenous traditions (Piccolo et al. 2018; Washington et al. 2018), do deserve more attention.

3. Globalized lifestyle. The expansion of the human population and our extractive activities (Holt et al. 2004) and modern hunting weapons (Nunez-Iturri et al. 2008) have radically altered our relationship with the environment (Washington et al. 2018). One can’t assume human groups who were formerly discriminated against will somehow treat nonhumans in a more humane way. Strang (2016) discusses some of the more complicated ethical issues in the treatment of nonhumans by aboriginals:

“Colin Lawrence referred to the history of settlement in the area. In the early 1900s, a European grazier had shot a number of Aboriginal people until being speared by one of their leaders, now regarded as a local hero. The grazier had shot Aboriginal people ‘like dogs’, said Lawrence pointedly, ‘and now you want to tell us we can’t even shoot a wallaby!’ (Strang, field notes, 1991). Yet the number of wallabies has fallen dramatically, not just because the possession of cars and rifles has enabled new forms of hunting, but also because of ... intensifying cattle farming. At some point, the population may drop to unviable levels...”

Considering this, in today’s monetized, industrialized world, human (indigenous) rights discourse often masks Western economy-centered bias, scapegoating nonhumans. To quote Crist (2015): “wild nature, once again, is targeted to take the fall for the purported betterment of people, while domination and exploitation of nature remain unchallenged” (p. 93).

4. Rewilding and dichotomies. Rewilding is a widely contested area. While some people have indeed recognized “humans as part of nature” (e.g., Torres et al. 2018, cited by B&W), this does not mean that everything humans do – pave roads, hunt to extinction, transform wild landscapes into cityscapes or agricultural monocultures – can be “excused” by simply erasing the dichotomy (Kopnina 2016a, 2016b). In the same way, one can reason that deadly viruses are part of nature – so, what does it mean in moral terms when applied to rewilding? There are some examples of how captive elephants have been bought from mahouts and released into the protected areas elsewhere in Cambodia, with indigenous mahouts and local people serving as eco-tourist guides and protecting the territory against poachers – without ever having to deprive an elephant of freedom or to force them into any kind of labor (Kopnina & Baker, forthcoming). As this type of activity protects the habitats, attracts enough tourists to provide local livelihoods, and secures basic elephant freedom, this might be a better example of rewilding and erasing the dichotomy between the importance of human versus nonhuman animal welfare.

5. Summary. Given that elephant-human “interaction” is still based on interspecies colonialism, I must disagree with B&W’s conclusion that “mahouts should hence be offered leadership roles in local conservation projects” unless it can be shown that they treat elephants without depriving them of freedom to be wild and to be themselves, without causing them pain, without forcing them to work. Without such evidence, the only one who would deserve such a leadership role would be someone who is in the position to allocate large pieces of land that will allow elephants to live and flourish in the wild.

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