

[Review] Dara M. Wald and Anna L. Peterson.

*Cats and Conservationists: The Debate over Who Owns the Outdoors.*

West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2020. 153 pp.

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I began the book primed for ‘cat wars’ and confrontation, but Dara M. Wald and Anna L. Peterson defuse the splits between apparently entrenched, opposing camps – bird lovers versus cat-lovers. Wald and Peterson’s book could be used as a primer for healing differences between those who favour the rights of outdoor cats and those who feel strongly about nurturing bird life. *Cats and Conservationists* provides detailed background to the issues connected with the presence of outdoor cats while deconstructing seemingly entrenched divisive approaches in relation science and framing, ethical values and the social.

Wald and Peterson ask whether in-between animals on the edges of human habitation will ever be accepted (39). Once domestic animals live beyond human jurisdiction, they may become marginalised, regarded as vermin. They prefer the term ‘outdoor cats’ to ‘feral cats’. While it is a more innocuous term, it does occlude the difference between my neighbours’ cats who have free reign in adjacent gardens to hunt birds versus those cats living outdoors without human support.

As Wald and Peterson point out, the presence of cats living outside of domestication raises a ‘profound philosophical question’ about humans and nature. This has been illustrated in greater Cape Town where free-roaming caracals may have been preying on domestic cats where suburbia encroaches on their wild spaces. Who is the victim here in the interstices of human settlements? The media thrive on oppositional representations as does *Cat Wars: The Devastating*

*Consequences of a Cuddly Killer* by P.P. Marra and C. Santella (Princeton University Press, 2015) as Wald and Peterson show. Cats are vilified, birds celebrated – an exemplification of rigidly marshalled arguments and the deployment of science for particular ends.

*Cats and Conservationists*, however, argues for crossovers and solutions, constantly mapping out middle ground as it carefully ushers the reader into debates. Disinterested in the passionate conflict normally informing such debates, their aim is not resolution but ‘support[ing] informed, sensitive and productive conversations about outdoor cats’ (12). *Cats and Conservationists* takes issue with the ‘polarised framing’ promoted by the media. The book considers the inherent slipperiness of scientific research and data and suggests the feasibility of an ethical common ground between bird lovers and cat lovers in their love for animals. On the other hand, opposing views of nature manifest: those who favour ecological wholes and ecosystems rather than the lives of individual animals whether domestic or feral.

A question that recurred for me was precisely how to persuade people out of their apparently opposing camps. This very oppositionality is questionable though, it seems. At the core is language, how the arguments are ‘framed’, as well as the need to engage the public in relation to key values and the practical problem of reducing the number of cats living outdoors. Conservationists and TNR proponents both share this aim. Managing outdoor cat colonies relies on TNR – trap-neuter-return. Interestingly PETA does not support this option, preferring humane euthanasia in certain circumstances because they consider that domestic cats living ferally suffer excessively.

Wald and Peterson never take sides in any sustained way. They point out the pervasive unwillingness of either side to recognize facts. If scientific evidence comes from someone outside a group it is unlikely to be believed (a response evident in relation to Covid-19 research). Thus advocacy organisations almost totally ignore the health risk that outdoor cats may pose to humans. (It would be interesting to assess to what extent attitudes to free-ranging animals and their potential to carry zoonotic diseases has shifted since the advent of Covid-19.) On the other hand, conservationists may be slow to acknowledge the ‘uncertainty’ around drops

in bird numbers which cannot all be blamed on cats: raptors or anthropogenic factors are also to blame. A solution is surely co-operation between animal advocates and ecologists.

Common ground between apparently inimical views can be found in love for animals as well as belief in science (though, ironically, objectivity in interpreting data may be impossible). Wald and Peterson's strategy throughout is to provide details of the oppositional stance on both sides while they maintain with 'cautious optimism' (46) that a middle ground exists. In Chapter Three on 'The Science Problem and Framing' their suggestions are both practical and creative: bringing in the public, fostering collaboration between cat caretakers and scientists, developing projects around homeless pets, 'encourage[ing] story-telling, perspective taking, and the co-creation of knowledge' (67). I missed such storytelling, some case studies of outdoor cat colonies and wished for a sense of connection with embodied cats. Particular narratives (either positive or negative) about the management of outdoor cats could have enlivened this volume. Still, Wald's research in Florida incorporates responses to surveys which demonstrate the fluidity and oneness of public opinion as well as areas of agreement.

This volume, admirably, has an activist agenda, proposing ways through possible impasses. The difficulty is how to change people's minds, of course. Pragmatist philosophy is useful – the need to recognise the value of wild nature as well as the value of outdoor cats with the central point of shared values leading to a common language. Another central point, the importance of context and setting, is stressed. In the penultimate chapter practical suggestions are offered on how a meeting between cat lovers and birders can be managed. Some repetition in relation to the sharing of values recurs perhaps inevitably throughout the volume. At the same time, such re-iteration is persuasive.

*Cats and Conservationists* takes one beyond adversarial views, convinces the reader of the possibility of a middle ground. Both cat supporters and ecologists, Wald and Peterson point out, want to manage the cat population, prefer TNR, are critical of irresponsible owners, and care about non-human nature. Perhaps the authors of this convincing, cogently presented volume could visit Cape Town and facilitate some workshops to find common ground between those who favour free-roaming caracals and those who demand safety for their domestic cats.