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Waiting for Wolves in Japan: An Anthropological Study of People-Wildlife Relations

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BOOK REVIEWS

Waiting for Wolves in Japan: An Anthropological Study of People-Wildlife Relations

JOHN KNIGHT

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS,
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REVIEWED BY JOHN M. MARZLUFF

The Japanese people have shared their land with a diverse community of wildlife for millennia. They have revered, battled, hunted, and celebrated wildlife as a people with deep and close ties to nature. Some species, like the wolf, have been exterminated. Such loss brings relief to some, but challenges others to restore what has been lost. John Knight explores such complex and often opposed relationships between Japanese and wildlife in *Waiting for Wolves in Japan*. He sets out to explore wolf reintroduction and its possible role as a force to unify rural and urban Japan. Along his journey, he tells us about more than just wolves. We learn about the language and culture of rural Japan, notably those people who live in the mountain villages of the Kii Peninsula, and about a host of iconic wildlife with whom they share life.

Knight opens his book with a discussion of human and wildlife interactions, then takes a detailed look at the Japanese actors so that we quickly understand the current and historical perspectives of farmers, foresters and hunters, and come to know the animals they live among. The bulk of the book is a systematic, chapter-by-chapter discussion of human interactions with six wildlife species (wild boar, Japanese macaque, deer, serow, bear and wolf). Each species is introduced biologically first, with appropriate detail on taxonomy, ecology, behavior and references to the primary literature. Then the role of the species in human culture is described and discussed. We learn

how the animal has influenced human iconic imagery, pets, recreation, mythology and the like. Finally, the current interaction of the species with groups of people (farmers, foresters, hunters, village residents) is discussed, often in their own words, so that the reader comes to know each species from a variety of perspectives. The book concludes with a synthetic treatment of wildlife-human interactions focused on the wolf's role in reweaving the rural Japanese social and ecological fabric.

I am an ecologist with a keen interest in the cultural connections between humans and wildlife. As such, I read *Waiting for Wolves* through only one of the lenses relied upon by Knight. Knight's primary view of the human-wildlife connection is anthropological. But the presentation of wildlife ecology by Knight, although brief, was excellent and replete with ample citations of current literature. The social perspectives introduced throughout the book were also excellent in their presentation of historical and modern views. Through the encounters between people and animals in Japan, we learn about opposing views of wildlife from actual accounts. For example, the dual nature of interactions with bears is seen by contrasting the stories of human mothers nursing orphaned bears in villages to reports of fear-stricken bus riders taunting their driver to run over a bear crossing the road. Likewise, the wolf is both a benign protector—limiting harmful agricultural pests like deer and boar—and a threatening predator. The ebb and flow of human values given to wildlife are evident in these and other stories. Increasingly, humans in Japan (and elsewhere) see wildlife as pests that threaten their agricultural livelihood or even their physical life. In the recent past, losses to wildlife were less dramatic and relationships with animals more positive. Both sorts of relationships have affected human culture, as Knight amply demonstrates. They also affect animal ecology, evolution and culture (Marzluff and Angell 2005a), a side of the relationship that is not developed by Knight.

In exploring the generality of his findings, Knight touches on several important concepts shared by the natural and social sciences. The influence of place on human valuation of wildlife is illustrated in comparisons of rural and urban perception of

wildlife pestilence. The issue of animal-human dualism is discussed in depth and its complexity fully revealed. Knight's detailed account of the positive and negative interactions among a variety of animals and people suggest that the Japanese people and their wild animals, while opposed in many interests, are in fact similar in kind. In Knight's words, the "human-animal continuity may well take the form of a human recognition of animals as equivalents or rivals with opposed interests."

The real utility of Knight's efforts will be their ability to stimulate further and more comparative investigations. How unique is the rural Japanese peoples' connection to these species, or nature in general? How does human valuation of nature change as the role of the animal changes? It often seems that wildlife-human relationships are mutually reinforcing until the wildlife populations build up to a point where they become an aesthetic or economic nuisance. Knight documents exactly this, but is this simply part of the natural cycle between humans and other animals? Does the cycle eventually return to one of positive association when pests are reduced to rarity? This appears to be the case for interactions between humans and crows (Marzluff and Angell 2005b). It may now be happening with wolves in Japan. It would seem to me to be a general phenomenon that could be formalized and tested with additional case studies.

While I appreciated the depth of anthropological and ecological information presented in *Waiting for Wolves*, I had a few issues with its presentation. There is too little reliance on graphical or tabular presentation of data for my taste (two tables, no maps, no graphs). Certainly, the readability of the text would be improved by moving many of the statistics on costs, stakeholder demographics, and animal encounters into tables and charts. Knight is very loyal to the Japanese perspective throughout the book, which adds authenticity and important insights into the cultural topics he presents. An important element in this loyalty is the use of Japanese words in recounting the opinions and values of local people. The accuracy of interpretation is served by the use of Japanese language, but the readability of the work suffers as one must constantly pause in

thought over each word, read Knight's definition of the words, and then continue with the main thought. I would welcome some of the original language in the text, but would have been satisfied with most Japanese words simply placed in a scholarly glossary referenced from the text.

Knight's primary goal was to explore wolf re-introduction as a force that unifies rural and urban Japan. This exploration is thorough, although the impact of wolves in uniting the Japanese people cannot yet be ascertained. Wolves have not been reintroduced, so one can only speculate on their role in controlling other wildlife that challenge Japanese agriculture and perhaps the sustainability of a rural Japanese lifestyle. If wolves can return a more tenable agricultural lifestyle to rural Japan, they will certainly be appreciated by those people who will live among them; such a view may never be granted fully to American or European wolves because people in these areas 'control' agricultural pests more directly without the reverence for other life that is evident in the Japanese views described by Knight. I ended the book with hope for wolves in Japan and with appreciation for the human culture that will determine their continued evolution. For those interested in human-wildlife interactions and conflicts, Japanese culture and the tensions between rural and urban people, this book has a wealth of information. The wading is often slow, but the rewards quickly repay the effort.

Waiting for Wolves is a solid reference that should be in large academic collections and on the desks of ecologists, anthropologists and sociologists investigating the connections between people and wildlife. This is not a book for the researcher or student with a casual interest in human-wildlife interactions, but it has utility as a stimulus for those with casual interests. As such, it would make a good base for a graduate seminar on human-wildlife interactions, and sections of it would broaden undergraduate offerings.

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