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Reanimate: Political Ecologies of Animals in European Wildlife Conservation

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Abstract

This paper develops a political ecology of reanimation as a novel approach to generate a deeper understanding of new directions in wildlife conservation. It highlights the lives of individual nonhuman animals in reanimated forms of nature, not just as species to "save," but as essential actors in building healthy ecosystems. To do this, the paper integrates political ecology and animal studies. This offers a first step by sketching out how political ecologists can move beyond anthropocentrism to take animal lives seriously. The paper also invites animal studies scholars to engage more fully with the relations of capitalism in conservation which lead to social injustices and ultimately fail to stem rapid biodiversity loss. It focuses on rewilding in Europe to tease out how understanding the role of individual animals can help to uncover and analyze the much deeper dynamics of human-animal relations that drive and sustain continuing biodiversity losses.

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This paper brings together political ecology and animal studies to develop the idea of a political ecology of reanimation as a way of challenging and transforming existing understandings of human-nonhuman animal relations in biodiversity conservation. In short, the central idea developed in this paper describes the changes we are charting and provides an analytical framework for decentering the human and assessing the role of animal agency in conservation initiatives. It is a means of reimagining the world with the interests and worth of other creatures as central agents in creating that world (Fry, 2026; Meijer, 2019; Mitchell, 2020). There is a need to radically rethink the existing hierarchical relations of domination and exploitation both between humans, and between humans and animals, that lie at the heart of biodiversity losses (Mitchell, 2020). In this paper we address how centering individual animals and understanding what kinds of lives they have can assist in generating new directions for ecological restoration. Conservation is characterized by an ambitious new phase marked by a convergence of restoration and rewilding with new technological innovations. This convergence is creating new natures, reanimating the wild with new or long-lost species, where the behavior of individual animals is key to the success and consequences of conservation initiatives. We offer reanimation as a heuristic for parsing the complex configurations of agency, and centering the ethical lives of animals, in this speculative phase of conservation.

Overlapping planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pandemics demonstrate that the lives of humans and animals are closely intertwined, but often in problematic, hierarchical ways. The steep declines in biodiversity have produced initiatives to repair or restore species and ecosystems that have already been lost or damaged (Watson et al., 2018), and 2021–2030 is the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. In the face of unprecedented biodiversity losses there is a fresh zeal to expand areas under protection, including high profile campaigns for rewilding, such as Nature-Based Solutions, 30x30, Half Earth, and Nature Positive, which enjoy enthusiastic support from prominent conservationists (E.O. Wilson, David Attenborough, Jane Goodall), billionaire philanthropists (The Wyss Foundation) and global media (National Geographic). There is a growing interest in and use of novel approaches that require the wholesale redesign and replacement of nature,

rather than its conservation (Adams, 2020b; Jørgensen, 2015; Mitchell, 2020; Thiele, 2020). These go beyond restoration and rewilding and instead constitute a reanimation of nature. The lives of animals – as active agents in the redesign, building, and reanimation of novel forms of nature – are central to these new visions of nature.

In the first instance, the shift toward the reanimation of nature presents a complex knot of vital social, political, economic, and ecological questions, which are very clearly contained in addressing what kind of nature can and should be created (Adams, 2017a). The current emphasis on human priorities, born of human exceptionalism, has failed to create a future in which both animals and humans can flourish. This is reflected in ecosystem restoration, which is cast in terms of the multiple benefits it can provide for humans. Mitchell (2020) advances the idea of revenant ecologies to capture the need to move beyond simplistic forms of rewilding or restoration that seek a return to a particular point in time and instead calls for more focus on reclaiming alternative futures for people, animals, and ecosystems to address the current planetary crisis. However, while current forms of ecosystem restoration do not reclaim these alternative futures, they do go far beyond restoring lost or reduced wildlife populations (Young & Duchicela, 2021); ecosystem restoration already involves a myriad of means through which animals build, change, and engineer these environments. For example, beavers redesign river courses, animal migration routes shape vegetation patterns, and disturbances in vegetation created by wild boar, deer, and European bison create new habitats. But new forms of restoration also include reintroducing animals (via de-extinction and reintroduction programs), creating "new" animals (cross-breeding and gene-editing technology), using "old" animals for new ecological purposes (introducing domesticated animals to recreate ecosystem roles of lost wildlife and the rewilding of landscapes), and reconciling the design of human infrastructures with the activities and rhythms of nonhumans that inhabit them (Barua, 2021, 2022). At once oriented toward the agential capacities of animals, this phase of conservation also recenters human ecological agency in unexpected ways, with documents such as the *Ecomodernist Manifesto* (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015) arguing for the centrality of technological development and economic growth for the production of "a good, or even great, Anthropocene." The complex political ecologies of this new phase must be interrogated to ensure that the kinds of nature that are created constitute an effective means of tackling biodiversity loss and address the shared vulnerabilities of animals and humans.

In the second instance, in addition to describing a future-oriented and speculative trend in restoration, we present reanimation as an analytical framework for reassessing the complex configurations of agency invoked by this trend. As

products of technoscientific advancement, imperatives to "create" new kinds of nature can re-center human ecological agency as a corrective response to the changes of the Anthropocene. In this regard, species revival and by extension, rewilding, are projects of planetary terraforming in which the earth system is conceived as a technical object available to be reprogrammed (Woods, 2019). Yet the capacity for restorative ecological change via human intervention is complicated by two factors: foremost by the fact that the deep timescales and vast ecological complexity contained within the concept of the Anthropocene makes the geophysical impact of the human unthinkable as a conscious "force" that can be experienced and reproduced to affirmative ecological ends (Chakrabarty, 2018). Second, and following from this, is that the trends and imperatives that we analyze under the rubric of reanimation revolve around the operationalization of animals' own agency to produce ecological change. Drawing from expanded conceptions of agency theorized across the fields of posthumanism and new materialism, reanimation provides a lens for political ecologies of restoration to dethrone the human as prime force, agent, or steerer of reparative ecological change and instead develop analytic strategies that center the lives of nonhuman animals.

This paper focuses on reanimation in conservation in Europe. First, we set out the core ways in which political ecology and animal studies can be integrated, identifying the oversights that a synthesis of methods from both fields can help to remedy. Second, we draw upon the discourses of rewilding as a central example of restoration that evidences complex political ecologies of reanimation. While the insights discussed in our paper apply to a broader trend in which rewilding is but one part, we argue that rewilding's focus on animal agency makes it an apt example with which to frame our efforts to center both "the animal," and the specific lives of individual animals, in political ecology's necessary re-orientation toward the future of ecological restoration.

Political Ecologies of Animals in Conservation

This paper integrates political ecology and animal studies as a way of addressing the limitations of each field in understanding human-animal relations in conservation. Integrating political ecology and animal studies allows us to focus on how animal lives reanimate nature. Doing so requires paying attention to the perspectives, interests, and voices of hitherto marginalized and silenced animals and humans alike; decentering the human opens space to consider social and animal justice concerns in an integrated and holistic way. In this paper we provide several examples as key illustrations of the need to focus on animal

lives in order to understand reanimation as an analytical framework. We have deliberately focused on conservation initiatives in Europe because of the often overlooked, but much faster, rates of biodiversity loss in the global North. The failure to adequately address biodiversity loss in Europe sidesteps the complex challenges in places characterized by greater levels of urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural intensification. A European focus is also instructive because of the important – and sometimes unplanned – resurgences of specific wild populations (boars, bears, beavers, wolves, storks) in particular places which can also lead to conflicts with human communities (Lorimer, 2024; O'Mahony, 2020; Tănăsescu & Constantinescu, 2019).

The field of animal studies has paved the way for political ecologists to consider why nonhumans are subjects worthy of social inquiry. In turn, the ways that political ecology centers capitalist relations, race, class, gender, and sexuality can address some of the problematic omissions of animal studies, especially when unjust politics are enacted in the name of nonhuman life (Bersaglio & Margulies, 2021; Collard & Dempsey, 2017; Oomen et al., 2019; Sundberg, 2014; Whyte, 2018). Beginning with the premise that animals have lives of their own (Collard, 2020), we argue that political ecologies of conservation need to engage with the individuality of animals, which shapes human-animal interactions and animal-ecosystem interactions (Mathur, 2021; see also Barua, 2019; Collard, 2020; Margulies & Karanth, 2018; Prior & Ward, 2016; Srinivasan & Kasturirangan, 2016). Spaces are reshaped by both human and nonhuman practices, and as such co-dwelling is not static (Mathur, 2021; Mitchell, 2020; Sands, 2022). Furthermore, global debates about reanimating ecosystems play out in very material, uneven, and localized ways on the ground (Youatt, 2020).

In mainstream conservation and in ecological monitoring, successful restoration is deemed to be visible in the flourishing of viable wild animal populations in restored ecosystems, but the precise lives lived and roles played by animals are often rendered invisible in three ways: 1) by the use of global level Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and geospatial modeling; 2) by focusing on vegetation, rather than animal life, as a key indicator of overall ecosystem health and restoration; and 3) by defining animals at the species, rather than individual, level as the key unit of analysis for understanding ecosystems. Animals are important in reanimated forms of nature, not just as species to "save," but as essential actors in building healthy ecosystems. Yet the focus on nonhuman forms of agency and autonomy in practices such as rewilding often falls short of recognizing the ethical lives of animals and can itself function as a mode of biopolitical control (Thomas, 2022). Equally, existing theories and methods in conservation biology, zoology, and ethology offer important information and insights about animal behavior, population dynamics, movements,

and status, but do not focus on animals as subjective beings with lives in their own right. As Arregui (2023) shows (in the case of wild boar), animals do not conform to the roles and behaviors dictated by certain categories, but can be simultaneously wild and tame, rural and urban, pest and neighbor. Animals have interests, desires, thoughts, feelings, and points of view concerning what happens to them, and it is essential to account for their cognitive and moral lives (Freeman et al., 2011).

An extension of agency beyond the human has guided the development of several intertwined fields, including new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and actor-network theory. Though marked by specific nuances, the through-line here is a challenging of the idea that agency can be assigned exclusively to the rational, intentional, and political human subject; rather, the capacity for agency is attributed to the extra-human "actant" (Latour, 1996); to objects and "things" (Bennett, 2010); or to the relationships between subjects and forces, human and nonhuman, that "act upon and through each other" (Deer, 2021; Despret, 2013). This shift in thinking informs our assessment of the movement toward reanimation in ecological restoration, in which the management of uncertain futures rests upon unexpected and emerging forms of agency. Yet a focus on "things," networks, and actants also runs the risk of obscuring the particular forms of agency exhibited by animals, flattening the ontological division between complex and unpredictable biological systems with the Object more broadly. Reanimation underlines the necessity for understanding the particular agencies exhibited by individual animals in situated ecological assemblages, highlighting the "jagged ontologies" that denote a multiplication of difference rather than its flattening (Wolfe, 2020). Scholarship in animal studies, across and between the humanities and social sciences, offers strategies for approaching this specificity, including analysis of the impact of animals on human relations in the field of animal history (Fudge, 2022); acknowledgment of animals as "secret agents," whose cooperation with humans often remains invisible (Despret, 2013); and the capacity for animal agency to actively influence the goals of wildlife conservation and management (Edelblutte et al., 2021).

Introducing theories of animal agency into political ecologies of restoration is crucial in order to problematize visions of the human as a monolithic ecological agent in the Anthropocene. In contrast to ecomodernist models of planetary engineering, concepts such as "worlding" accommodate the more-than-human assemblages of agencies that make up the projected futures of restoration (Lorimer, 2024). Yet acknowledging the distribution of agency beyond the human alone does not constitute a recognition of nonhuman political subjectivity; indeed, acknowledging the "unruly" influence of ecosystem

engineers such as beavers has led to their relocation and culling (von Essen & Allen, 2016). As Lorimer (2024) and Thomas (2022) demonstrate, the rewilding of beavers acknowledges their agency insofar as it also biopolitically renders them as tools or machines for specific ecological ends, transforming the animals into both proxies for humans and expendable, instrumentalized forms of life. The acknowledgment of animal agency in rewilding contributes to its idealized vision of autonomous natural process while running the risk of excluding individual animals from ethical consideration.

Turning to political ecology, it remains highly anthropocentric (Büscher, 2022; de Silva & Srinivasan, 2019; Fry, 2026; Fry et al., 2022; Margulies & Bersaglio, 2018; Singh, 2018; Srinivasan, 2022; Srinivasan & Kasturirangan, 2016). Animals appear as "backgrounded, incidental, static or material things," and thereby the field does not offer adequate intellectual tools for this key moment of multispecies thinking (Buller, 2014, 2015, 2016; Celemajer et al., 2020; Collard, 2020; Margulies & Bersaglio, 2018; Philo & Wilbert, 2000). As Fry (2026) argues, there are emergent studies that develop how political ecologists can better understand animal lives, but these tend to be scattered across different debates and disciplines. For example, as de Silva and Srinivasan (2019) argue, political ecologists have tended to focus on highlighting the social impacts of protected areas without addressing the role of animals in creating social natures. The anthropocentrism of political ecology has moreover led to limited explanations for the drivers of conflict. Political ecologists have focused their attention on the social justice implications of protected areas, but by incorporating insights from animal studies, de Silva and Srinivasan (2019) are able to go deeper into an analysis of how they are underpinned by problematic hierarchical relations between humans and wildlife. Therefore, Silva and Srinivasan (2019) offer a much richer analysis that pushes forward the field of political ecology in ways that address the ways that social injustices can be intertwined with animal injustices – revealing how the very same dynamics of capitalism produce injustices for people, animals, and ecosystems.

In this paper we follow this approach and explore the ways that political ecology and animal studies can be brought into conversation with one another to develop political ecologies of reanimation. We argue that it is essential to recognize the lives of animals, their agency, emotions, motivations, and needs to create new opportunities for animals to inform and shape visions of conservation in the future. One way to address this is to draw on insights from animal geographies, which has a longer-standing engagement with human-animal relations than many other social science disciplines. Political ecology aligns well with the field of animal geographies given its theoretical commitment to post-positivist understandings of nature, methodological commitment to

mixed, place-based approaches, and political commitment to social justice and change (Hovorka, 2018; Sundberg 2011). This opens an opportunity to reimagine the world with the interests and worth of other creatures as central agents in creating that world. Placing the lives, interests, agency, and voices of animals at the center of our thinking is essential to move beyond the human exceptionalism that underpins global capitalism, and thereby perpetuates ecological degradation and severe forms of interspecies injustice (Celemajer et al., 2020; Cochrane, 2018; Cochrane & Srinivasan, 2021). This means that humans should not only listen more carefully to other animals, but also reconsider the position of the human as no longer at the center and instead entangled in a multitude of relations with other animals. Doing so can challenge political ecology as a field to be less speciesist and anthropocentric because it demands a complete change in the ways that we understand the world (Fry, 2026; Fry et al., 2022; Giraud, 2019; Meijer, 2019; Narayanan, 2023; Youatt, 2020).

Rewilding, Restoration, Reanimation

Rewilding is a recent and high-profile approach to tackling biodiversity losses. At first glance, rewilding may appear to be focused on animals, yet in many ways it remains highly anthropocentric, anchored in fantasies of wilderness that will ultimately produce ecological, cultural, and economic benefits for humans. Rewilding is often promoted as an innovative and state-of-the-art response to the need to restore nature. There is no single agreed-upon definition of rewilding, and it can encompass a range of different approaches which can also shape ways of understanding animals and animal lives. For example, rewilding can mean that fences are erected to control movements of grazers and predators to reduce potential for human-wildlife conflict; rewilding can be large, landscape-scale initiatives, but can also encompass the rewilding of small patches of land in urban areas. However, the key issue for the purposes of this paper is that rewilding differs from other mainstream approaches to conservation in two respects: It focuses on ecosystem function rather than ecosystem composition, and on open-ended and autonomous ecosystem management rather than human management of landscapes (Holmes et al., 2020; Lorimer et al., 2015; Tănăsescu, 2017; Vasile, 2018; Ward & Prior, 2020). Jørgensen (2015) suggests that rewilding is a strategically plastic term and that, even in the more urbanized and industrialized Europe, it still promotes problematic models of people-free wilderness (Auster et al., 2023; Jørgensen, 2019; Schepers & Jepson, 2016). DeSilvey and Bartolini (2019) contest this view and show that rewilding horses in Côa Valley in Portugal is actually founded on a recoupling of nature

and culture because the envisioned ecosystem is based on a cave painting of past coexistence between humans and animals (see also Holmes et al., 2020; Prior & Ward, 2016; Vasile, 2018).

Some critiques of rewilding also point out that rather than offering a radical departure from existing approaches in conservation, or in wider political, social, and economic dynamics, it in fact offers more of the same. Rewilding can be compatible with neoliberal forms of conservation because it is presented as a form of "economic rejuvenation" via a process of commercialization that will mean hitherto abandoned agricultural land will be repurposed for economically productive forms of wildlife conservation (Tănăsescu, 2017), including new market economies of nature-based tourism (Vasile, 2018; Wynne-Jones, 2020). Using a lens of reanimation can push this critique even further. A focus on animal lives reveals that they are themselves "lively capital" – a locus of accumulation, but able to shape those relations of capital by virtue of the fact that they are alive and engaged in dynamic interaction with the world around them (Barua, 2016, 2019; Collard, 2020). Furthermore, rewilding is promoted as a means of meeting broader environmental commitments by states, NGOs, private sector actors, and international institutions. In the EU this has produced an imagined European green periphery, which Iordăchescu (2021) calls the "New Wild East." Yet such wilderness visions do not address the changing underlying socioecological processes, and instead redefine accelerating rates of land abandonment and rural depopulation as reasons and opportunities for rewilding to meet the environmental commitments of national governments, NGOs, and the EU (Cloyd, 2016; Iordăchescu, 2021; Jørgensen, 2015; Kashwan et al., 2021; Tănăsescu, 2017).

A political ecology of reanimation is a means through which we can develop a much better understanding of initiatives to restore or rewild nature. In response to biodiversity loss, debates have already moved beyond preservation and conservation toward ecosystem restoration as a key approach. However, as stated earlier in this paper, we argue that to date, these have been deeply human and anthropocentric endeavors: Lost and damaged nature is defined, identified, and mapped, plans are drawn up, and initiatives are implemented. As with rewilding, ecosystem restoration is not a singular approach with an agreed-upon set of principles. Animal reintroductions, especially of charismatic mammals, are often a high-profile part of such schemes. However, the animals themselves are treated as just one element of a very human endeavor to restore nature; they are dealt with as mere building blocks in a wider scheme and their lives and interests are not closely considered. For example, Rewilding Europe supports the reintroduction and conservation of European Bison, which the organization describes as a "hairy beast that keeps landscapes open."

Bison are identified as ecosystem engineers, and their grazing and browsing keep lands open, creating a mosaic of vegetation which they fertilize with their dung; the bison then acts as a keystone species that benefits other species and the wider ecosystem (van de Vlasakker, 2014). Of course this statement is aimed at garnering support from a wider public audience, and not necessarily the vision of the whole organization; this example illustrates how animals can be presented as a mechanism to create the conditions for rewilding. As Vasile (2018) also shows in her analysis of rewilding and bison in Romania, the animals require care and feeding by humans; this is at odds with them learning the survival skills needed to live without human support and relies on human intentionality and enculturing nature. Indeed, even as the agency of animals is presented as central to rewilding projects, humans remain implicated in these processes of restoration in foundational ways. As Auster et al. (2023) demonstrate in debates about whether to name individual beavers in UK reintroduction projects, these decisions are fraught with ethical and practical challenges ranging from whether naming animals increases public support to questions about whether it anthropomorphizes them. The question of naming individuals gets at the heart of whether rewilding projects can or should understand animals as subjects with individual lives. Thinking about animals at the species level or as part of ecosystems, rather than as individuals, is often at odds with the ways that people who live with wildlife see animals – as the example of naming individuals indicates (Auster et al., 2023).

In order to understand the central role of individual animal lives in conservation efforts, it is important to examine the ways that animals have returned, reoccupied, or recolonized landscapes; they have done so either without visible and intentional human help or by unregulated releases by activists; this is sometimes referred to as weedy, auto, and unruly rewilding where animals arrive in spaces by themselves. Rewilding is not always planned, and there are forms of auto-rewilding, where animals arrive in and then occupy landscapes. Examples include the "spontaneous" arrival of animals such as boars (Arregui, 2023; O'Mahony, 2020; Ward & Prior, 2020), beavers (Root-Bernstein et al., 2018), cormorants (Clancy & Ward, 2020) and golden jackals (Tănăsescu & Constantinescu, 2019). These are excellent examples of animal agency, since the animals themselves determine where they go, and so they are "where they want to be." There are challenges around animal reintroductions spreading beyond the original area they were intended for; for example, local perceptions of wolves change dramatically when they occupy semi-natural, agricultural, or urban spaces in Germany and Romania (Arts et al., 2016). Such animals are sometimes referred to as feral especially where reintroductions are via "unsanctioned and unexpected events," including animals who escape during

storms or are set free by activists (O'Mahony, 2020; Ward & Prior, 2020). In the case of wild boars in England, their reintroduction via unsanctioned and unexpected events means they are regarded as a biosecurity threat and criticized for a range of disorderly traits; yet boar also have important roles as "ecological engineers," enhancing grassland and woodland biodiversity because they create disturbance (Arregui, 2023; Clancy & Ward, 2020; O'Mahony, 2020). In such "messy" cases, Tsing (2017) calls for an embrace of this "weedy" rewilding that happens at the margins. By bringing together political ecology and animal studies in a framework of political ecology of reanimation, we can explore possibilities of developing deeper and richer analyses of attempts to restore lost and damaged nature. A political ecology of reanimation allows us to go beyond anthropocentric understandings by integrating animal lives and perspectives.

Conclusion

This paper brings political ecology and animal studies together to develop a political ecology of reanimation as a lens through which to generate a deeper understanding of the changes in conservation. The idea of reanimation more fully captures the shifts in conservation wrought by the convergence of concerns about biodiversity loss, the promotion of restoration and rewilding as a solution, and the development of new technologies to bring back lost animals or create new ones. In developing better understanding of these shifts, it is essential that we decenter the human and focus much more fully on the individual lives of animals to generate richer analyses of how they shape the creation of new natures. In so doing, we advance intellectual debates in political ecology and animal studies in several respects. First, political ecology has, to date, focused on highlighting the social injustices that can be produced by conservation initiatives. This has been vitally important, but anchored in anthropocentrism, which means political ecologists have generally overlooked the role of animals themselves in shaping conservation. This is a key omission, but bringing political ecology into conversation with animal studies assists us in decentering the human and focus in on the individual lives of animals in conservation, rather than approaching animals at a species level (Arregui, 2023; Collard, 2020; Mathur, 2021).

Second, this paper addresses a key gap in animal studies, which is that a focus on animals, their needs, interests, and agencies is often not attendant to the ways that conservation outcomes can produce serious social injustices. These include dispossessions and exclusions in schemes that artificially separate out humans and animals to create space for wildlife, notably in the creation

or maintenance of protected areas and the expansion of rewilding schemes. It is important for animal studies to draw on political ecology to center capitalist relations, race, class, gender, and sexuality, especially when unjust politics are enacted in the name of nonhuman life. Therefore, building on important prior work by scholars such as de Silva and Srinivasan (2019) and Bersaglio and Margulies (2021), this paper brings the two fields together to address their gaps and omissions. The value of doing this is that we can uncover and analyze the much deeper dynamics of human-animal relations.

In bringing together political ecology and animal studies, this paper developed the idea of a political ecology of reanimation as a means of challenging and transforming existing understandings of human-animal relations in biodiversity conservation. The notion of reanimation describes the changes we chart in conservation and provides an analytical framework for decentering the human and assessing the role of animal agency in conservation initiatives. In sum, this paper offers an initial step in sketching out a way of encouraging political ecologists to take animal lives seriously and move beyond anthropocentrism.

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