

Jim Moore

A. Fuentes, L.D. Wolfe: Primates face to face: the conservation implications of human-nonhuman primate interconnections. Cambridge studies in biological and evolutionary anthropology 29 Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002

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“What can anthropology contribute to primatology?” asks Karen Strier in the Foreword to this unusual book. This is of course the flip side of the question primatologists often face, “what are *you* doing here?”, and the editors’ goal is to contribute to both questions, bringing the two (sub)groups “face to face”. Anthropologists working in societies exposed to nonhuman primates will find this a useful collection of examples of how their understanding of people can be enriched by looking at “their people’s” primate neighbors. Primatologists ignore the book’s messages at their peril.

The book is organized into four sections, each with a brief conceptual introduction by the editors. The first, “Science and nonhuman primates”, examines the place of primatology in anthropology (Dolhinow, Pavelka) and the special ethical problems associated with the use of primates in invasive research (Fouts et al.). Dolhinow writes as a primatologist explaining the field to an outsider. Her skepticism toward adaptationism is important and many of her points are good; nevertheless, her hypercritical position implies that anthropological primatology is only an historical accident. For example, she trashes Wrangham and Peterson (1996) for linking human and chimpanzee aggression “via a purported continuous chain of DNA...” Nobody doubts that human males are sometimes nasty, and nobody objects to Chapter 17 (“Territoriality”) of Goodall (1986) in which she describes similarly nasty ape behaviors. To object in principle to the suggestion that similar behaviors, in closely related species, might be homologous is effectively to deny the rationale for anthropological primatology. In her exploration of why some anthropologists would prefer to redress that accident and dispose of primatology, Pavelka nicely shows how the comparative method can benefit anthropology. She also manages to see merit in both sociobiology and postmodernism, no

mean feat. Fouts et al. argue that HIV-related biomedical research on chimpanzees is hopelessly confounded by psychoneuroendocrinological factors and thus conclusions cannot be generalized; given obvious ethical questions, such research therefore should not be conducted. Their strong advocacy may put off the biomedical researchers for whom the chapter is most relevant. For reasons I do not understand, they consider HIV screening of wild chimpanzee populations to be “ethically reprehensible and scientifically invalid”. As long as such screening is done noninvasively using fecal samples (e.g., Santiago et al. 2003) I don’t see a direct problem. It is possible the authors were unaware of the development of such methods, and assumed darting or capture would be necessary. If so, it is a pity that they didn’t contact the HIV researchers to ask, rather than assume the worst, before publishing such a strong condemnation.

The second section looks at “Cultural views of non-human primates”, with three human ecology chapters on the (mainly dietary) relationships between indigenous Amazonians and monkeys, one on the historical literature of Monkey King in China, and a discussion of Rwandans’ views of nature and gorillas. This assortment is highly nonrandom with respect to the interaction of geography and focus, and inclusion of some Old World hunter-gatherer work might have given it more conceptual unity. For a recent example, see Fortier (2000).

Of the three Amazonian chapters, Cormier’s discussion of Guajá symbolic cannibalism was closest to my conception of a face-to-face exchange between human and nonhuman primates. She addresses the economic, social, and cultural roles of monkeys in this Brazilian group; one could wish for more data, but the discussion is intriguing. The fact that monkeys are symbolic kin and kept as pets, but are nevertheless dietary staples, should be kept in mind when conservationists promote education about nonhuman primates because “to know them is to love them”. Yes, with red wine... Lizzarralde describes the Venezuelan Barí, for whom monkeys have less symbolic significance. Importantly, he notes that the

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Bari have acquired Western tastes, they are not ‘noble savages’ who will conserve the ecosystem if only the modern world gets out of the way. It is up to the modern world to work with them to find ways to make it worth their whiles to preserve forests and wildlife. Finally, Shepard describes the Matsigenka of Peru’s Manu Biosphere Reserve (at 36 pages, three times the length of some other chapters). Like Cormier, he addresses the monkey-human relationship from multiple perspectives, including an interesting account of ethnobotany and hunting magic. He then confronts head on the question: “indigenous people and conservation: boon or bane?”, concluding that for practical purposes it is a sterile debate. They are usually better conservationists than the loggers, farmers and ranchers who represent the alternatives. Like Lizzarralde, he argues that the real issue is how to design conservation policy so as to create benefits for the indigenous people as part of the intact ecosystem.

Shifting gears, Burton suggests that folktales provide a basis for conservation that has greater resonance than appeals to ecological principles or religious tenets (noting, correctly, the common gap between revering a doctrine and behaving according to it). He then presents an authoritative history of Sun WuKong (Monkey King) in Chinese culture, covering everything from Sun WuKong’s role as a mirror for human nature to academic debates about the authorship of *Journey to the West* in the 15th century. No actual suggestions for how to connect Sun WuKong to conservation are forthcoming. Given China’s environmental record, Sun WuKong clearly needs creative help before he becomes as important there as Bambi has been in the United States for establishing a conservation ethic.

Sicotte and Uwengeli focus more on the place of forests and conservation in Rwanda than on gorillas themselves, perhaps because—surprisingly—gorillas play little role in traditional stories and beliefs. Some informants thought this might be because gorillas are so quiet and inoffensive; keeping to themselves, there’s not much to say about them. Of course, ecotourism has created widespread awareness of these animals. Paradoxically, the authors suggest, this might work against conservation by symbolically transforming gorillas from “of nature” to “of culture”, and as such able to survive without their natural habitat. The evidence presented is thin, but the idea brings us face to face (sorry) with a common concern among conservationists regarding the role of zoos (traditional and frozen): if it’s about saving animals, and we can do so culturally, then who needs forests. Such an attitude is low on the list of concerns in developed nations, where such a belief “merely” diverts donations from in situ to ex situ conservation; it could be disastrous in a place with primate habitat to lose.

Part 3, “Conservation of nonhuman primates”, seemingly redresses the geographical skew of part 2 by presenting three chapters from the Pacific Rim (Fuentes, Wheatley et al., and Sprague) and one from Africa (Rose). As expected for one of the editors, Fuentes has

“the vision thing” and his chapter explicitly attempts to connect human and nonhuman primates’ fate as globalization arrives in the Mentawai Islands. While the primates’ fates may be intertwined, they are not the same. Logging quotas assigned by the Indonesian government are routinely circumvented by purchasing village lands with televisions, generators etc., thus incorporating indigenous people into a cash-based cycle of supplies and repairs, financed by further sales to logging concessions. The people will lose their lifestyles (perhaps to their eventual regret, perhaps not); the nonhumans, their lives. Fuentes emphasizes the complexity of the situation, proposing “the concept of an ethnoprimateology ... [as] a partial solution.” I have to quibble; ethnoprimateology may be the path, but concepts are not solutions (as we in academia need to remember). Turning to Palau, Wheatley et al. describe the problematic status of introduced macaques on the island of Ngeaur. This is an extraordinary chapter, and I do not mean that as a complement; the less said, the better. Continuing northward, Sprague describes the changing status of macaques in Japan, elegantly showing the utility of a geographic perspective for understanding this human-monkey relationship. He shows how macaques can be both increasingly endangered, and increasingly problematic as crop-raiders and pests. The answer to this seeming paradox is intriguing and well worth reading.

Rose discusses the bushmeat crisis in Africa. There is no doubt that direct consumption threatens many species with extinction, primate and nonprimate alike (if you think African primates are in trouble, read up on marine fisheries). It is likely that more gorillas are eaten every year than have ever lived in all the world’s zoos, combined. So the problem is real, and terribly, terribly important; and Rose has been instrumental in bringing it to the world’s attention. But I have to part company with his proposed solution, which is no less than establishment of a global religion that preaches non-consumption and urges indigenous peoples to reject globalization, cash economies, and modern technology. Rose asks (only partway through his agenda), “Will we achieve this ideal for all interactive elements? Perhaps not, but we must strive for it...” This is a Grail Quest, not a realistic action plan for conservation in the coming decades, but perhaps we should not dismiss the power of the Grail to inspire.

The last section is “Government actions, local economies and nonhuman primates.” Ardith Eudey writes from the simultaneous perspective of an anthropologist and a primatologist, seeing herself as an advocate for minorities in Southeast Asia—some furred, some not. The depth of her concern for both sorts of primates comes through clearly in this autobiographical account of conservation policy in Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar. With respect to the latter, she confronts the difficult moral dilemma of the role conservation NGOs should take with respect to local abuse of human rights, since their presence requires working with, and hence

implicitly supporting, responsible regimes. Still in Thailand, Sponsel et al. describe the unique economic relationship between coconut growers and macaque crop pickers (as well as giving a valuable review of the literature on systematic human-nonhuman primate interactions). Concluding the volume, Wolfe describes her work with commensal rhesus macaques in Jaipur, India and Silver Springs, USA. At both localities the monkeys are enjoyed by some people, feared by others, and undoubtedly a nuisance if given half a chance. The difference is that in Florida, the local authorities moved to remove them as threats to human life (citing long canines and supposed tendency to bite the jugular veins of their victims, as well as herpes B status). When such specious arguments are adduced, one suspects some deeper concern. Unfortunately, Wolfe was unable to discover what this was, and leaves her account at that. This is exactly the sort of human-monkey face-off that conservationists need to understand. Hopefully some reader of this book will be inspired to do an ethnographic study of Florida wildlife officials' views on nonhuman primates.

This is an uneven book, perhaps reflecting the attempt to synthesize many viewpoints. General themes can be found. Humans and nonhuman primates are interconnected, but often as food and neither symbolic elaboration, "local stewardship", technological simplicity, nor religion guarantees conservation. The good news is that each *can* work, under the right circumstances. Another (implicit) theme is that we should abandon the notion of the "pristine primate" as the only valid subject for study, and instead see them as adapting (or not) to a range of conditions, including human contact; the resulting variation reveals how adaptation *works*, and what constitutes "monkey nature". For example, compare the similarities between rhesus in India and Florida, and the differences

between provisioned and unprovisioned Japanese macaques (Hill 1999). Different sites are not "better" or "worse" by virtue of human influence, they are merely appropriate for different sets of questions. Making this conceptual shift away from the "normal monkeys" debate has the side-benefit of justifying funding research in zones of contact, where the presence of researchers illustrates with our own time and presence the value of conservation (Fuentes).

Much energy has gone into understanding the biology of conservation; terms like PVA, Ne, and extinction vortex fill reports. These are valuable tools and are needed, but minds are not enough. To win hearts, we need to look at the social sciences and understand how two people, face to face with the same gorilla, might feel emotions as different as awe and hunger. Despite a few stumbles, this volume is heading in the right direction.

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