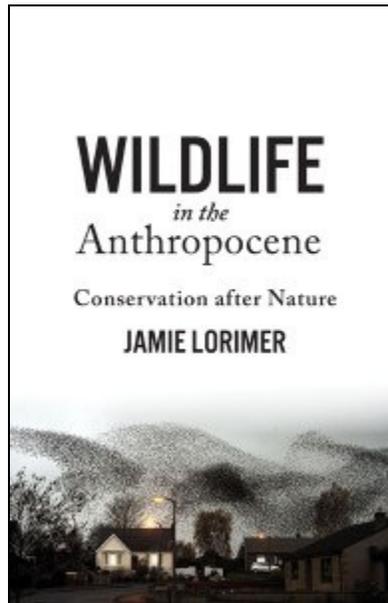


## Reviews

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### “Rambunctious Gardening”: Conservation in the Anthropocene

Jamie Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$87.50 (hb); \$25.00 (pb).



At once an empirically verifiable (if not yet conclusively verified) geological term and an imprecise shorthand for the contemporary human condition, the Anthropocene invites interdisciplinary conversation. It reminds us of the permeable boundary between the practical and the theoretical, the tangible impact of the cultural imaginary, and the environmental devastation which our skewed self-perception has ultimately licensed. Accordingly, the Anthropocene has inspired discursive interventions from geography to law, literary studies to history, and philosophy to geology. Yet these rarely transcend academic boundaries: astute and ostensibly political responses from the humanities, for example, tend to get stuck or stop short, preoccupied by the future of “Anthropocene humanities” or too timid to explicitly engage with scientific data. Such partial, incomplete responses leave the reader frustrated and powerless. One frustrated reader intent on composing a different kind of response is human geographer Jamie Lorimer, whose book *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conversation after Nature* promises to be “part critique, part manifesto” (6).

Lorimer's aim to engage the theoretical with the practical is an admirable and ambitious response to the Anthropocene challenge. The data upon which he draws is rich and varied; it includes conservation case studies, NGO campaigns, and wildlife films, which he uses to explore the complex relations between cultural representation and conservation practice. Conservation models are assessed along dual lines, both for their practical effectiveness and the plausibility of their theoretical grounding. Corncrake conservation in the Hebrides is discussed as an example of the traditional model, which aims to limit ecological damage and preserve what remains of pre-existing ecosystems. This, for Lorimer, "a mournful, nostalgic model for conservation" (96), is compared critically with more ambitious, open-ended projects, notably the Oostvaardersplassen, a portion of land near Amsterdam reclaimed from the sea and set aside for rewilding. Whilst deviating from the bucolic idyll we have come to associate with "green" ecologies, Lorimer argues that the latter courageously moves away from a regressive conservation grounded in a fixed notion of "nature" and reinforced by narcissistic logics, to an unknown future characterized by "emergent and unanticipated ecological properties" (108). It requires that we broaden our notion of conservation and resist the process of "greenwashing" (167) in which ecological value is deemed secondary to, or conflated with, aesthetic value. Refreshingly, Lorimer is attentive to the roles that affect and what he deems "nonhuman charisma" (35) play in conservational practice.

Lorimer's endorsement of the OVP project over traditional models of conservation is underpinned by his argument that the latter remain rooted in a concept of nature whose conservational value is spent. "There has never been a singular Nature to which we can return or against which we can dispute the authenticity of a purported reconstruction" (106), he contends, identifying the political dangers of such a concept, and turning instead to the "multinatural" (181). Lorimer's suspicion of "nature" echoes Timothy Morton's uncompromising deflation of that "arbitrary rhetorical construct" (21-2) in his seminal book *Ecology Without Nature*. Whilst Morton's position is more theoretically assured, it lacks the practical supplement which Lorimer's account offers; we might, therefore, fruitfully consider the two as complementary. According to this reading, the OVP might be framed as a living fulfilment of Morton's vision of an "[e]cological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object [which] would thus be 'without nature'" (24).

Moving from critique to manifesto, Lorimer pragmatically acknowledges the need for an alternative conservational principle to supplant "nature." This he finds in "wildlife," framed as flexible, plural, and progressive. He contends: "Wildlife is thus multinatural. It is immanent. It is difference — where difference is intensive, concerned less with the

diversity of current forms and more with the unruly potential to become otherwise. This difference matters. Without it ecologies would cease to function” (181). Here — in a confluence between contemporary philosophies of difference and an ecological practice underpinned by belief in the value of species diversity — Lorimer grounds his Anthropocene thinking. The shift in focus from nature to the multinatural coincides with related shifts in emphasis: from singular to plural, sameness to difference, purity to hybridity, and stasis to process.

A familiar feature of twentieth and twenty-first century “continental philosophy,” in Lorimer’s hands “the flourishing of difference” (6) becomes the cornerstone of Anthropocene thinking and practice. Here, “difference” is conceived as unruly and unmanageable, defying human prescription. Whilst an unaffected celebration of difference, such as Lorimer’s, is by now commonplace, largely divested of its philosophical history, as we find it here, the value ascribed to “difference” feels underspecified. Is it ethical? Philosophical? Political? Are the qualities that Lorimer glorifies — hybridity, immanence, and the multinatural — advanced as *good in themselves*, or pragmatically, as better conceptual tools to achieve practical ends? By focusing primarily on the applied value of the Anthropocene as a “necessary shock to environmental thought” (3) with the potential to raise awareness of inter-species entanglements, Lorimer’s “part critique, part manifesto” approach permits little time for philosophical untangling. Instead, Lorimer aims at a practical intervention, endeavouring to track the Anthropocene’s “emergence and leverage its conceptual and political potential to summon new modes of environmentalism” (179). For this to be entirely convincing, Lorimer would need to strengthen the links between his practical proposals and the theoretical terminology which he harvests from Latour, Bennett, Stengers, and others, which at times feels obstructive and disconnected. What does it mean, for example, to “figure this cosmopolitics as biopolitics” (183)? Or for conservation to become an “indeterminate, performative simulation” (183)?

Lorimer’s impatient desire to engage immediately with the practicalities of Anthropocene living is understandable, and much of what he suggests is convincing: his insistence on the value of affect in determining conservational practice; his attentiveness to context and geographical specificity in order to inaugurate a process of cross-species attunement; and perhaps most persuasively, his vision of a shift from the micromanagement of stewardship to a less prescriptive sense of difference in the form of “the cosmopolitics of rambunctious gardening” (184). Ultimately, however, Lorimer’s book induced in me a nagging concern that the philosophical shortcuts which it takes evade the alarming reality of the Anthropocene. Rather than compelling us to proceed along familiar theoretical trajectories more staunchly, or to cast off the theoretical

altogether, the Anthropocene short-circuits our conceptual and ethical frameworks. It “blurs and even scrambles [...] crucial categories,” Timothy Clark writes, and “manifests itself in innumerable possible hairline cracks in the familiar life-world, at the local and personal scale of each individual life” (9). As Lorimer’s advocacy of alternative conservational practices attests, the challenge for both Anthropocene scholarship and action is to acknowledge and explore these cracks, to brave an unknown future without retreating into the deceptive consolations of a conservational or theoretical past.

### Works Cited

Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury: London, 2015.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007.