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Challenging our conception of wildness

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

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Abstract: Baker & Winkler (2020) point out the entanglement among free-living elephants, captive elephants, and humans in the elephant tourism industry. Where all living beings – captive and free-living – are more or less affected by human presence or activity, the binary notion of wild and captive, and *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation, becomes inadequate. B&W challenge our concept of wildness – and hence of rewilding – and our level of intervention in this wildness of which we are a component.

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Baker & Winkler (2020) (B&W) make a good case for according equal attention to free and captive Asian elephants in addressing the problem of entanglement in the elephant tourism industry. Their concept of rewilding erases the borders between free-living elephants, captive elephants, and the humans that live with and among them. It also challenges our concept of wildness and the viability of conventional conservation and welfare. This commentary will address notions of wildness in various contexts and their implications for the notion of rewilding.

Human interventions and free-living wild animals

B&W highlight that even free-living elephant populations are affected by human presence and activity. Conflicts with humans alter the pattern and timing of the activities of free-living elephants and even the genetics of some populations (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Archie and Chiyo, 2012; Srinivasaiah et al., 2012).

To counteract this threat, conservationists focus their *in situ* conservation efforts on highly managed elephant populations living in protected areas. They act directly on these populations, monitoring their movement and behavior and restoring or even modifying their habitat, for example, by creating water sources to limit movement patterns that cause conflicts with villagers (Parr et al., 2008; van de Water and Matteson, 2018). Even well-intentioned conservation interventions can modify behavior. Managed populations nevertheless continue to be considered wild according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, because the purpose of such measures to sustain the population in the long term (Child et al., 2019).

As the remaining areas free of human intervention shrink, there is human impact on both threatened and protected free-living elephant populations. When their ecological and evolutionary functions continue, these populations are still considered part of wildness (Child et al., 2019; Snijders, 2020). Defining wildness on the basis of total absence of human

intervention, as some commentaries suggest (e.g., Kopnina, 2020; Blumstein and Lynch, 2020), no longer reflects the reality of the Anthropocene era.

Human interventions and captive wild animals

In captivity, wildness refers more to the genetic variability and sustainability of the population (Braverman, 2014). Zoo breeding programs are now considered *ex situ* conservation, creating a sustainable captive preserve for endangered or extinct species (Braverman, 2014). Moreover, studies on captive environments focus mostly on improving animal welfare. Their main aim is to bring the behavioral repertoire of the captive individuals more in line with the 'natural behavior' of their free-living counterparts.

Some conservationists emphasize the need to consider the entire species, under all management conditions, and argue for involving all the parties – conservationists, politicians, citizens – through the One Plan approach (Braverman, 2014). Both captive individuals in *ex situ* conservation programs and free-living individuals in *in situ* programs are considered important for the protection of the entire species. The distinction between *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation, and captive and wild populations, has thus become blurred. Should captive populations involved in the efforts to conserve the species be considered part of wildness? In assessing both individual welfare and species conservation, B&W's rewilding project would help erase the disparities between *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation, captive and free-living populations.

Human interventions and the rewilding process

The concept of rewilding is applicable at different scales – from individuals to territories – all intended to provide greater autonomy (Prior and Ward, 2016). At the individual level, autonomy can be defined as the freedom to act on the basis of needs or desires (Thomas, 2016). Individual rewilding, as B&W propose, aims to gradually enable individual elephants to act autonomously within the space we allot them (Prior and Ward, 2016). For example, World Animal Protection (WAP) helps develop tourism programs that allow no direct interaction with tourists. It reduces the elephant management needed to permit safe human proximity, allowing elephants greater personal choice.

For Cookson (2011), 'wildness depends on the quality of interaction from and among its components'. Rehabilitating individual elephants increases this interaction with the environment and social partners. In venues helped by WAP, elephants are free to explore their environment, forage in forest areas, and interact socially without human control. Contrary to the belief of Suter (2020), this rehabilitation goes much further than just welfare improvement measures.

Recent rewilding studies include human components (Prior and Ward, 2016). As Paukatet (2020) and Lainé (2020) point out, taking local culture into consideration is essential for effective and sustainable conservation (Lainé, 2018; DeSilvey and Bartolini, 2019). Kopnina (2020) suggests that the traditional mahout-elephant relationship, or the recognition of humans as part of nature, is not sufficient to warrant considering human interventions as beneficial to elephant rewilding. But a notion of rewilding dissociated from human influences seems disconnected from the reality of the Anthropocene era. It reflects a concept of wildness based on the Western cultural dichotomy between humans and wildness; in Karen culture, there is a close synergy with wildness (Cookson, 2011). Humans, like any other species, influence and interact with other species. This inter-species interaction should not be considered negative in and of itself.

Of the elephants living in human-dominated landscapes, in highly managed national parks, or alongside indigenous mahouts: which of them should be considered wild or captive? As the distinction between wild and captive, or *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation, turns out to be a matter of degree, the wildness of individuals depends on the nature of their interaction with the other components of wildness (Cookson, 2011). We humans need to recognize that we are components of wildness too.

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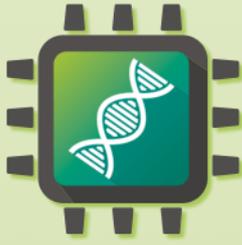
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