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WOLF ECOTOURISM

A posthumanist approach to wildlife ecotourism

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Introduction

Humans frequently exercise unilateral power over nonhuman animals at wildlife tourist attractions (WTAs) in a myriad of ways. We dictate nearly every aspect of nonhumans’ quotidian life and milieu: when and what to eat, when to perform or socialise, and where to bed down or play—the list goes on. Our fascination and interest in nonhumans are perhaps fundamental to our identity and understanding of the world (Clayton, 2003; van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2013), evidenced by more than 100,000,000 nonhumans working in entertainment annually (Fennell, 2013a). Some scholars estimate that 20–40% of all tourist attractions involve animals in some capacity (Moorhouse, D’Cruze, & Macdonald, 2017), and for many humans, WTAs may be one of the few opportunities to encounter other species as the current ecological crisis has devastated wildlife populations, and billions of ‘wildlife’ now live in captivity (Mason, 2010; Baker & Winkler, 2020). More than 60% of the world’s wildlife has died off in the past 50 years (Grooten & Almond, 2018), urban sprawl and habitat destruction show no signs of slowing (Matović, 2020), and the human–caused ecological crisis has led to Earth’s sixth mass-extinction event (Steffen et al., 2011). These conditions demand that we, as global citizens, problematise our relationship with ‘other’ species at the abstract and individual levels to question: how can we, as humans, equitably speak for nonhumans and foreground their agency, welfare, rights, and interests in any decision that affects them? This question engenders arduous ethical and ontological issues as it is inherently an exercise of humans speaking for and about nonhumans without their consent.

Nonetheless, wildlife ecotourism provides an optimal lens to explore this ethical question for its focus on human–nonhuman encounters, and its ubiquitous spectrum of wildlife welfare and justice across different types of WTAs (Fennell & Sheppard, 2021). In this chapter, I draw on a multispecies, multi-sited ethnographic study that investigated wolf-human conflict and coexistence in the western United States during the Trump administration. The gray wolf (Canis lupus) was chosen for its exceptional ability to provoke human-human and wildlife-human conflict as a symbol for other sociocultural and socio-environmental issues entrenched in Euro-American culture, politics, and history (Jürgens & Hackett, 2017; Lappalainen, 2019). During the study, the only opportunity to directly interact with wolves at the individual level occurred at five WTAs. Four of the WTAs could be described as ‘wolf sanctuaries’ that promoted tourists...
to interact with wolves at different levels ranging from petting wolves and taking ‘selfies’, to ‘hands-off’ observations through chain-link fences. The fifth was Yellowstone National Park (YNP), which is a protected area where park rangers strictly enforce laws aimed to safeguard wolves. Preconceived notions of what ethical wildlife ecotourism should look like may propagate initial conceptions as to which of these models optimally foregrounds wolf’s interests. However, through a posthumanist analysis I unpack the ethical entanglements of each WTA model to proffer an alternative perspective that considers the complexity and context in which they operate. I will first present a brief history of wolf’s plight in the United States, and then engage relevant theoretical perspectives before analysing each of the WTAs’ models.

**Short history of the wolf in the United States**

Except for a small population in Minnesota that historically persisted, U.S. and state-level governments sanctioned bounty programs to systematically extirpate wolf throughout the lower-48 states from the 1860s to 1940s (Mech, 2012). Following World War II, attitudes towards wolf, and wildlife in general, positively shifted, culminating in the passing of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973 and the wolf’s listing on it in 1978 (Ripple et al., 2014; Carroll, Rohlf, vonHoldt, Treves, & Hendricks, 2021). Sixty-six gray wolves were re-introduced to YNP and central Idaho in 1995–1996 (Wilson, 1997; Foreyt, Drew, Atkinson, & McCauley, 2009), and the species has since dispersed to surrounding states. Wolf was delisted in the western United States of Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, and the eastern third of Washington and Oregon in 2011, even though the wolf has only recovered to an estimated 6000 individuals nationwide (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, 2019).

In October 2020, the Trump administration announced the wolf’s delisting from the ESA, set to come into effect 4 January 2021, pending legal challenges (Rott, 2020). The decision was highly controversial, as critics charge that the decision was socio-politically motivated and not driven by science. If the delisting survives the lawsuits, wolf ‘management’ would be turned over to individual states, where anti-wolf sentiments proliferated in rural, conservative-leaning areas in the western United States. For example, in 2019 the Idaho Fish and Game Commission awarded a $23,065 grant to a northern Idaho nonprofit, Foundation for Wildlife Management, to compensate hunters and trappers up to $1,000 per wolf ‘harvested’ (Peacher, 2019). Between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020, a record 570 wolves were killed in Idaho, mostly by hunters and trappers, up from an average of 400 annual deaths (Plank, 2020). In this study, wildlife sanctuary operators universally condemned these practices and cited these data as evidence to support their missions of educating humans about wolves.

**Nonhuman animal ethics in wildlife ecotourism**

The emergence of animal ethics in the tourism literature (see Fennell, 2008; Shani & Pizam, 2008) offers insight into how humans can exercise their power to promote equality with subaltern nonhumans inside and out of WTAs. Subaltern studies developed out of postcolonial theory to signify how indigenous, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and nonhuman groups, among others, have been marginalised and made subordinate to more dominant patriarchal interests on the basis of power (Spivak, 1988; Mitchell, 2002; Thomsen et al., 2021a). Subaltern studies, coupled with posthumanism, provide a complementary lens to reflexively analyse our power over nonhumans and to deconstruct human exceptionalism in our collective treatment of ‘other’ species. Posthumanism is a postmodern philosophical line of research “rooted in late twentieth-century feminist and anti-racist critiques of modern Western social and political
institutions … [that] seeks to erase the human–animal divide, thereby rejecting the basic premise of human exceptionalism” (Cohen & Fennell, 2019, p. 416). Cohen recognises the inherent paradoxes of posthumanism where humanists criticise posthumanists’ reliance on human exceptionalism to develop their scholarly arguments (Chagani, 2014). He cites Soper’s (2012) defense of human exceptionalism in that “we need […] to defend human exceptionalism, and resist blurring the human-animal divide”, as exceptionalism provides the needed ‘footing’ for binding moral obligations (p. 423). Cohen declares:

Posthumanist thinkers thus failed to recognize sufficiently the importance of a critical point: that there is no reciprocity from animals in the sphere of morals; they do not share our ethical precepts nor respond to them. Posthumanist ethics cannot serve as the basis of a covenant between humans and animals. (p. 423)

However, posthumanists would counter to argue that humanists’ insistence on contouring arbitrary boundaries between species is counterproductive in this ecological crisis, especially when their core argument is rooted in a ‘we were here first’ mentality (Badley, 2017). Posthumanists would also refute Cohen’s assertion for being anthropocentric and falling into the same logical ‘trap’ lodged by humanists, by stating that animals ‘do not share our ethical precepts nor respond to them’. Under humanistic logic, how can he know this?

Cohen does acknowledge that animal ethology may help us to untangle our human limitations and (mis)understandings of interspecies communication, intelligence, and emotion (De Waal, 2016; Turnbull & Bär, 2020). Cohen has advocated for nonhuman welfare and justice on multiple occasions and his critique of posthumanism is a scholarly exercise rather than a criticism of nonhuman-welfare (Cohen, 2009; Cohen, 2019b; Cohen & Fennell, 2019). He states that posthumanism is essentially absent from tourism scholarship, and suggests how it could contribute to deconstructing the human-nonhuman divide:

Insistence on animal personhood and critique of anthropocentrism, could reinforce contemporary efforts to reduce animal abuse in tourism, and help to balance the presently often one-sided approach in contemporary tourism studies to the relationship between tourists and animals. Posthumanist attitudes could certainly sensitise tourist practitioners and researchers to issues overlooked in current touristic practices, especially in the field of embodied human-animal interaction. (p. 424)

The following analysis considers how posthumanism applies in wildlife ecotourism, in an effort to respond to Cohen’s call to balance nonhumans’ welfare in theory and practice. It also cogitates about the inherent paradoxes and complexities in determining whether a specific WTA is truly ecotourism and, if so, to what degree.

**Applying posthumanism to WTAs**

At their best, WTAs provide the potential to observe nonhumans exercising their own agency under “natural conditions that are completely unframed, according to Cohen (2009)” (Fennell & Sheppard, 2021, p. 330). At their worst, WTAs perpetuate the depravity of humanity, condemning nonhumans to slavery, torture, mental and physical abuse, and even death (Idfwru, Wkh, Wdeo, & Xqlej, 2013; Moorhouse, Dahlsjö, Baker, D’Cruze, & Macdonald, 2015; D’Cruze et al., 2017; Fennell & Sheppard, 2021). Most WTAs operate somewhere between these extremes, and research on nonhuman welfare and rights in (eco)
tourism has materialised over the past two decades (see Cohen, 2009; Hayward et al., 2012; Fennell, 2013b; Cohen & Fennell, 2019; von Essen, Lindsjö, & Berg, 2020; Thomsen & Thomsen, 2020). Wildlife ecotourism transcends wildlife tourism by embracing non-consumptive activities such as wildlife sightseeing, compared to consumptive practices such as hunting or fishing (Burns, 2017), to equally stress ecological sustainability and human (economic) livelihoods (Duffy & Moore, 2010; Karanth, DeFries, Srivathsa, & Sankaraman, 2012; Sheppard & Fennell, 2019; Thomsen, Thomsen, Cipollone, & Coose, 2021b).

Moorhouse et al. (2015) suggest that tourists are not typically educated on how to identify poor animal-welfare conditions that may reinforce horrific practices such as inadvertently funding the illegal wildlife trade. Newsome (2017) contends that in addition to demographics such as age, and sex, culture was a key influence concerning who engages in wildlife-based tourism and how animals are treated. Accordingly, von Essen et al. (2020) caution against a cultural relativism approach for its anthropocentricty, as it can normalise and reinforce utilitarian views of human dominance over nature (Peterson & Nelson, 2017). von Essen et al. cite Juvan and Dolnicar’s (2014) attitude-behaviour gap, as well as Kline (2018) to argue that it is common for some people to leave their pro-environmental values ‘at home’ when travelling and engage in WTA activities that may perpetuate negative animal welfare.

Fennell and Sheppard (2021) coalesce two common animal ethics approaches in the tourism literature, normative ethics (i.e., what we are told to do or believe based on rights, welfare, utilitarianism, ecocentrism, and contractarianism perspectives) against virtue ethics, in conceptualising a ‘scales of justice’ approach to animal welfare in ecotourism. Utilitarianism, which is most applicable to the present study, is “informed by the doctrine of “the greatest good for the greatest number” (p. 318), whereas virtue ethics “is focused not on what we are told to do, but rather on ‘what sort of person I should be’. Virtues are positive traits of character such as altruism, compassion and loyalty, which if practiced regularly in the proper shaping of our desires through reason and will, allow individuals to flourish” (p. 320). Based on their framework, WTAs can be assessed for their ethical treatment of nonhumans, moving from ‘No Justice’ at the low-end, through ‘Shallow Justice’ and ‘Intermediate Justice’, towards ‘Deep Justice’ at the high end. The deeper the justice, the greater the emphasis for nonhuman animals in moving from welfare to rights in the recognition of animal agency.

Baker and Winkler (2020) argue that the ability for many species to exist outside of captivity is severely limited by human power dynamics, social carrying capacities, and habitat destruction. In the case of the wolf, natural habitat is ecologically abundant in the western United States as wolves are ‘habitat generalists’ able to exist in most landscapes, but are hindered by livestock ranching, natural resources extraction, and hunting activities (Bangs et al., 2005). Socio-political policy and discourse pose a ‘real’ threat of state-legitimised hunting, trapping, and culling programs, and illegal poaching endures with little or no negative consequences (Brasch, 2020). Coupled with the practical complexities of releasing captive, human-dependent wolves into ‘wilderness’, captive wolf ecotourism WTAs present a morally ambiguous case study. A posthumanist conceptual framework should not argue for maintaining the status quo in wildlife ecotourism (e.g., commodification), but rather aim to improve the quality of an animal’s life, and protect them from existential harm in our efforts to be ethical and just.

**Conceptualising a posthumanist approach to wolf ecotourism**

There are well-established animal welfare models that evaluate an individual’s welfare based on a combination of ‘physical or functional domains’, and ‘affective experience domains’ such as Mellor and Beausoleil’s (2015) ‘Five Domains model for animal welfare assessment’. Similarly,
Fraser’s ‘Practical Ethics for Animals’ (2012) examines four principle criteria of human-animal welfare relations: keeping animals, causing intentional harm to animals, affecting animals in direct but unintended ways, and affecting animals indirectly by distributing life-sustaining processes and balances of nature (Fraser & MacRae, 2011). However, a posthumanist perspective extends existing models by considering the opportunity cost of what an individual’s existence could be under specific temporal and spatial contexts. Wolf presents an even more nuanced analysis for the aforementioned sociocultural, socio-political, and socio-environmental conditions they face in the United States during the Trump administration. Like elephants (Loxodonta), the wolf is a charismatic species that polarises humans’ perceptions. Fennell’s (2013b) chapter, ‘Contesting the zoo as a setting for ecotourism, and the design of a first principle’, provides a convincing outlook as to “what might constitute the ethical use of animals in an ecotourism setting”. He departs from utilitarianism to present his ‘first principle of ecotourism’ that “corresponds to the deontological school of ethics, which reasons that what is morally right is that which abides by rules, guidelines, duties or principles independent of the consequences of actions or inactions” (p. 10). Fennell posits that we should:

Reject as ecotourism all practices that are based on or support animal capture and confinement, or other forms of animal use that cause suffering, for human pleasure and entertainment. Embrace as ecotourism interactions that place the interests of animals over the interests of humans. This would include encounters with free-living animals that would have the liberty to engage or terminate interactions independent of human influence. (p. 10)

On this account, Fennell declares that zoos are not ecotourism, because they severely limit the ability of animals to participate in normal behaviour, and in so doing, deny nonhuman animal rights and agency. Some of the enclosures for wolves in this study may appear similar to zoos in terms of size and setting, but small differences between the WTAs either reinforce or violate Fennell’s first principle of ecotourism. Four key criteria should be considered to develop a posthumanist conceptual framework for wildlife ecotourism (see Figure 9.1). These include: 1) Quality of life of the animal prior to living in the WTA; 2) animal welfare conditions at the WTA that includes the physical, mental, and emotional health and wellbeing; 3) agency of animal to determine what to do and when based on rights granted; and 4.) right to exist free of exogenous threats. These criteria are not presented in a linear progression, but rather as equally weighted elements that must be considered to evaluate the ethics of a specific WTA’s operations. This posthumanist conceptual approach departs from Fennell’s first principle of ecotourism to consider whether or not a WTA’s model is ecotourism by focusing not on what the species’ rights and welfare should be in a non-captive setting, but by comparing the quality of life that the individual animal experienced prior to, and at the WTA. Following the figure, I ethnographically describe each wolf WTA’s model and then assess it compared to the posthumanist conceptual framework.

| 1. Quality of life of the animal prior to living in the WTA | 2. Animal welfare conditions at the WTA that includes the physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being | 3. Agency of animal to determine what to do and when, based on rights granted | 4. Right to exist free of exogenous threats |

Figure 9.1 Posthumanist conceptual framework for wildlife ecotourism
Wolf ‘Sanctuary’ #1: No contact, wolves paired in separate enclosures

The rain finally broke as we pulled into the sanctuary’s parking lot. As my research assistant and partner, Jenn, and I stepped out of the truck, the hair on the back of my neck stood up and a grin spread across her face. About a half-a-kilometer away wolves were howling. It had been three years since we saw a wolf in person, and I was eager to observe wolves as part of an actual academic study. Five minutes later, the executive director (ED) was giving us a private tour through the sanctuary, providing a mix of standard tour rhetoric with her own insights as a biologist regarding the welfare of the wolves in her care, as well as the conflicts that plagued their ‘wild cousins’, as she phrased it. Tourists are not guaranteed a wolf sighting, humans do not interact with wolves, and even the sanctuary workers have extremely limited contact. About 50 individual wolves are in residence, and once an individual enters the sanctuary its physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing, such as ‘enrichment’ activities (mental and physical games and stimuli), are provided for the rest of their life. The sanctuary changed its original model from breeding gray wolves decades ago to only taking in ‘at risk’ individuals in need of care. The sanctuary is one of 170 sites nationwide that engages in captive-breeding programs of either red *(Canis rufus)* or Mexican wolves *(Canis lupus baileyi)* (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, 2020). These ‘species survival programs’ (SSP) are partnerships between the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), and various sanctuaries and zoos nationwide. In these SSPs, wolf pups are selected for cross-fostering reintroduction at the discretion of USFWS to ensure genetic variability. This is explained in great detail on tours at the sanctuary, as wolf education is emphasised, and visitors learn about current wolf affairs in the United States (Figure 9.2).

After the ED opened the gate, we approached the first enclosure cautiously as the 13-year-old male had recently lost his partner. The ED’s eyes teared-up as she described how he was still in mourning, and that he regularly ‘set off the choir’ by initiating constant howls of sorrow. As we slowly circled the sanctuary, we learned innate details about each wolf, their background, and why they were paired with each other. Every wolf or wolf-dog hybrid was born in captivity, and wolves were typically brought to the sanctuary once they reached full maturity, and when humans realised that ‘the cute pups aren’t domesticated dogs and demand different needs than a companion dog would’. In one instance, the wolf had lived for over a year-and-a-half in a two-bedroom apartment without even going outside—ever.

Enclosures, though modest compared to non-captive environments, range between 1/3 and 3 acres, and are a massive quality of life improvement for the wolves in their care. The ED stressed that if mature, adult wolves were released into the wild they would not survive long due to a lack of survival skills and dependence on humans. The ED described that with increased monetary or in-kind donations they could further improve the size and quality of the enclosures. The ED strongly objected to any type of wolf-human physical contact, and the focus of the sanctuary was to stay current on academic literature, avoid wolf-human contact, and use the best available science to foster wolf welfare. In this case, wolves’ rights, agency, and welfare were foregrounded, and since they are guaranteed lifetime care once they enter the sanctuary, their quality of life seemed to be drastically improved. Each individual always has the ability to ignore humans, and though conditions could always improve, most posthumanists might agree that these conditions were beyond adequate given the previous abuse these individual wolves endured. By applying the posthumanist conceptual framework to Fennell and...
Sheppard’s (2021) scales of justice framework, wolves at this WTA experience ‘deep justice’ for the degree to which their quality of life improved.

Wolf ‘Sanctuary’ #2: Wolves paired in separate enclosures, wolf-human contact encouraged

Nine months later, we headed to a Colorado-based sanctuary right before the Proposition #114 vote to learn how this ballot initiative to reintroduce the gray wolf to the state may influence discourse on-site (Blevins, 2020). Before Jenn and I conducted interviews with four volunteers and employees we paid to take the standard hour-long tour. Like the first sanctuary, none of the wolves were purposely born in the sanctuary except for the Mexican wolves as part of the SSP. What stood out in this regard was the extra level of security surrounding the Mexican wolves, as all wolves in the SSPs are ‘property’ of the USFWS. At wolf sanctuary #1, there were few obvious differences between the enclosures, whereas at wolf sanctuary #2 the Mexican wolves had extra fencing and were not allowed to engage with tourists. The first two models were similar in many regards, including the enhanced quality of life at the sanctuary compared to the individual’s previous captive conditions (Figure 9.3).

Wolves generally had the right to ignore tourists, as guides attempted to attract them with treats but quickly moved to the next enclosure if the wolf ignored them. However, this sanctuary diverted from the first for its overt commercialisation of wolves. The educational components of the tour were scientifically accurate, but were tempered with guides trying to
‘up-sell’ the ability to pet a wolf and take a selfie for a charge 10–20 times the price of admission, depending on the package purchased. In this way, wolves were commodified beyond their educational contribution (Burns, 2017; Belicia & Islam, 2018; Cohen & Fennell, 2019), redolent of any other zoo experience that violates Fennell’s ‘first principle of ecotourism’ (2013b). From a posthumanist lens, this sanctuary rates highly for wolf’s improved captivity conditions and guaranteed lifetime care. However, the treatment of wolves as capitalistic prop is counterproductive and problematises the idea of what a sanctuary should be. Wolf’s commodification was anthropocentric, and the economic focus promulgated sentiments of deception and increased opacity concerning the individual wolves’ rights, agency, and welfare. For these reasons, this sanctuary rates rather low at ‘shallow justice’.

**Wolf ‘Sanctuary’ #3: No wolf-human contact, wolves in packs**

Before embarking on the wolf tour, we gathered with other visitors in an educational room that was filled with posters, books, pictures, and skulls. As I watched the kids in the room, I felt a sense of nostalgia-like comradery with them, as if we had come here together on a primary school class field trip. The entire experience centred on education, and we spent 20 minutes learning about wolf as a species including their diet, mating, and behavioural norms. As we transitioned outside, six-metre-tall fences and an unkindness of ravens (*Corvus corax*) dominated the scenery. We learned that this was natural behaviour for ravens, as they not only tried to steal pieces of flesh from wolves’ meals at the sanctuary, but this behaviour was commonplace in
non-captive settings as well (Stahler, Heinrich, & Smith, 2002). Only four gray wolves resided here, and were rescued from other captive environments.

The primary focus of this organisation was the Mexican wolf and it was also a member of the SSP. There were two packs of Mexican wolves, and no human interaction was permitted except for occasional contact for staff veterinarians. The wolves were allowed to live together as they were members of a pack, though packs were split from each other. The tour guide informed us that aside from the wolf pups involved in the SSP’s cross-fostering program, no wolves would ever purposely be reintroduced to non-captive settings. They were strict in limiting human contact so that if something catastrophic occurred such as wildfire, which was a constant threat, then wolves would be better equipped to survive on their own. The sanctuary also had metal fire-proof boxes that would protect the wolves in case of wildfire, and on a couple of occasions, they had to place the wolves in them as wild fires came over the ridge before being fought off by local fire crews.

This sanctuary had a small gift shop and engaged in traditional nonprofit fundraising activities to support operational costs including fundraisers and sponsorships. However, unlike wolf sanctuary #2, they did not commodify the wolves for financial gain, and all calls for funding were aimed at humans. Though captive breeding occurs for the SSPs, the wolves were able to exercise some agency and live with family members. Those who came from previous captive situations had their quality of life improved, and wolves were guaranteed life-long care and protections from natural disasters such as wildfire to the best of the sanctuary’s ability. Short of a fully non-captive existence, this sanctuary WTA model ideally promotes a posthumanist wolf ecotourism paradigm and qualifies as ‘deep justice’.

**Wolf ‘Sanctuary’ #4: Wolf pack, wolf-human contact encouraged for education**

Out of the five wolf WTAs we visited, this organisation produced the most challenging ethical dilemma from a posthumanist perspective. The two breeding wolves were rescued from similar captive situations as the wolves in sanctuaries #1 and #2. However, the wolves were purposely bred to create a pack. Initial criticisms of captive breeding could be made, but counter-arguments of a nonhuman’s right to reproduce also muddy the context (Wickins-Dražilová, 2006). The wolves were empowered to fully practise their agency in the captive context. The co-founders of the sanctuary co-existed in a quasi-domesticated setting where the wolves lived like pets inside the home, and each wolf was provided its own physical space in the form of a custom-made den-like crate. The wolves were able to go outside into a 10-acre fully fenced area at any time, and regularly practised natural behaviours such as digging dens. This is possible because all of the wolves are from the same pack, and their welfare, rights, and agency were always foregrounded.

Both directors worked externally to offset the costs of the wolves’ care, and it would be difficult for anyone to question their dedication and compassion to the wolves. They were politically active fighting for the species’ rights and welfare in the United States, and regularly promoted wolf and wildlife education in local schools. The directors were hard-pressed to take even a week’s vacation a year, and spend nearly $20,000 per month for their food, medical, and insurance requirements. Jenn, a doctor of physical therapy and certified canine rehabilitation practitioner, performed physical exams on two of the wolves during our most recent visit. We visited this pack on multiple occasions before and during the study. As the directors give private educational seminars during the ‘wolf experience’, tourists could engage in wolf-selfies. The wolves can come and go as they please, but only inside the captive environment. Though wildlife-selfies are generally condemned for good reason (Moorhouse et al., 2017), and the
captive breeding of gray wolves is questionable and should not be encouraged, this organisation seems to be one of the rare exceptions where a posthumanist may condone these acts considering how well the wolves are treated ‘behind the scenes’. This ethical context was by far the most complex from a posthumanist perspective. It elucidated the challenges of trying to develop an overarching theory concerning wolves’ rights, agency, and welfare across WTAs, and further research into the ethical dilemmas of captive wildlife is needed from a posthumanist lens. The complexities of this specific case are rife in ambiguity, resulting in a rating of high ‘shallow justice’ to low ‘intermediate justice’.

**Wolf ‘Sanctuary’ #5: Wolves in protected areas (Yellowstone National Park)**

Yellowstone National Park (YNP) is arguably the most famous protected area for wolves in the world. It is the epicenter of wolf reintroduction in the western United States, and has contributed to billions in increased revenue over the past 25 years (Middleton et al., 2020). “Park visitors spent more per person to see wolves (around US$160 per day), compared to elk hunters who are a primary voice of opposition to the wolves’ reintroduction (at about $39 per day)” (Thomsen, Muurlink, & Best, 2018, p. 203). In December, we spent two 8-hour days with a private ecotourism operator as it is one of the best times of year to observe wildlife. We stayed on the Montana side of the North Park Entrance, and had to leave the hotel at 6:45 a.m. to be able to spend as much time in the park before sunrise when wolves are most active. Our guide had been operating his business for seven years and had developed strong connections with ‘regulars’ at the park that included the winter wolf research team and nearby locals who come to ‘glass’ wolves through telescopes as a hobby. Wolf sightings weren’t guaranteed, and it is extremely rare to see one with the ‘naked eye’, though other species such as bison (Bison bison) and elk (Cervus canadensis) are commonly found roadside. What transpired over the two days was awe-inspiring as we glassed wolves chasing herds of elk, bison, and big horned sheep (Ovis canadensis), bedding (lying) down and howling, yearlings playing, and consuming an elk carcass as ravens and magpies (Pica pica) competed for scraps (Figure 9.4).

The YNP experience was a microcosm of the omnipresent wildlife–human conflict and coexistence issues in the western United States. On the one hand, wolves were living a natural life free from captivity—in most regards. For scientific purposes, wolves are routinely tranquillised via helicopters where biologists take blood samples and collar wolves with bulky GPS monitors around their necks. From a posthumanist perspective, this is ethically ambiguous as scientific data is used to inform policy, but simultaneously infringes on an individual wolf’s agency and welfare. Wolves enjoy strong protections inside the park’s boundaries including laws that limit humans coming closer than 100 yards or engaging in any activity that may alter their natural behaviour, though this is arguably hypocritical given the air-induced tranquilisations that occur. This percolates questions concerning how environmental policy is socially constructed and special-interest human groups legitimise what is and isn’t acceptable human behaviour toward wildlife. We witnessed two park rangers investigate and then fine an amateur wildlife photographer who hiked up the side of the mountain to photograph wolves consuming the elk carcass, but was clearly visible through scopes to more than 20 people watching the activity.

Human–wolf conflict in the surrounding states of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho is prevalent. In Wyoming, humans can legally kill a wolf without a permit in 85% of the state as long as they report the ‘take’ within ten days. As these borders are socially constructed by humans and invisible to wolves, exogenous threats to wolf safety is a real threat and demands us to
question how ethical protected areas are if the surrounding areas are insecure with limited ecological corridors. Posthumanists would argue that protected area WTAs are just as ethically complex as captive WTAs due to the compounding threats and lack of wildlife laws and policies that equitably represent nonhumans’ welfare, rights, and agency outside of them, at least in the U.S. context. The coupling of helicopter-based tranquilising and exogenous threats reduce the ranking of this WTA from ‘deep justice’ down to ‘intermediate justice’ at best.

Pathways toward a posthumanist future in wildlife ecotourism

Cohen’s (2019) ‘Posthumanism in Tourism’ article was influential as it was one the first to apply posthumanism to the tourism literature. Though Cohen theoretically supported humanists’ objections to posthumanism as a valid theory divorced from humanism, he supported its application to tourism in practice. However, humanists’ can launch these claims because they represent utilitarian human-dominance perspectives who have maintained power since the Enlightenment. Posthumanism blurs these lines and in the context of subaltern wildlife, a posthumanist conceptual framework provides wildlife ecotourism theorists and practitioners an approach to shed binary humanist arguments and consider wildlife rights, agency, and welfare at the individual level. Chrulew (2021) argues that “wildlife conservation should […] be seen as an art and a science of ontological ethopolitics: an anthropogenic apparatus tasked with maintaining animals in their very being, a cosmo-political and -ecological experiment in coexistence”.

Figure 9.4 Glassing wolves at Yellowstone National Park
Photo Credit: Bastian Thomsen
This chapter responded to Fennell and Sheppard’s (2021) call for further research into the ethics of ‘animals-in-tourism research’, and Cohen’s (2019) call to balance nonhumans’ welfare in theory and practice, in an attempt to untangle complex ethical situations at five wolf WTAs in the United States. Since all captive wolves had never experienced a non-captive existence, a posthumanist approach demanded that the WTAs be evaluated for their treatment of wolves at the individual level, rather than what the species should experience in a non-captive environment. Fennell and Sheppard’s scales of justice framework provided an optimal model to compare the posthumanist conceptual framework for its focus on emphasising nonhuman welfare, rights, and agency. Due to the captive focus of the first four WTAs, and the omnipresent exogenous threats that linger outside of YNP, not a single model in this study could be championed as a ‘utopian model’ for wildlife ecotourism. However, all five WTAs could be considered ecotourism for at least providing shallow justice, as the YNP wolves experienced non-captive lives and the wolf sanctuaries improved the quality of life for individual captive wolves.

Captive wildlife sanctuaries should be considered a ‘stop-gap’ effort to remedy poor welfare conditions of individual nonhumans. The magnitude of the ecological crisis demands that we no longer tolerate the status quo of treating nonhumans as subaltern. Wildlife ecotourism researchers and practitioners should advocate for three key goals to promote equitable wildlife-human coexistence: 1) facilitate deep justice conditions for all nonhumans at all times; 2) promote non-captive conditions whenever possible for nonhumans where their welfare, rights, and agency are equitably considered in any decision that affects them; and 3) lobby for nonhumans to be granted personhood and even citizenship. Gombay (2015) describes the meaning of personhood where, “as a person, one is a holder of rights and responsibilities that form the basis of citizenship” (p. 13). Posthumanists must continue to deconstruct postcolonial power structures at WTAs and in wildlife policy to overcome the horrific practices that reinforce abhorrent welfare conditions of subaltern nonhumans, if they are to ever consistently experience deep justice, let alone personhood or citizenship.

References

Wolf Ecotourism


