



Dispatches From The Wild, Weird World Of Humanity And Its Biosphere

May 5, 2021

## Netherlands: Bee Havens

In April, the Netherlands held its fourth national bee census, with 11,000 volunteers recording all bees they saw in a 30-minute period in their gardens. The results [indicated that the country's bee population was holding steady](#), with a total of 200,000 observed and an average of 18 to 20 per garden-very similar to previous years. This is likely due to the Netherlands' impressive level of support for bees: a national pollinator strategy was launched in 2018, manifesting itself in initiatives ranging from "bee hotels" being put up in Amsterdam, 316 "bee stops" (bus stops covered in flowering plants, pictured) [built in Utrecht](#), and a new Honey Highway initiative planting wildflowers along road and rail margins.



## South Africa: Dehorning Rhinos



In late April 2021, the South African government and a conservation group used chainsaws, sedatives, and skill to [dehorn the entire white rhino \(\*Ceratotherium simum\*\) population](#) of Spioenkop Nature Reserve, thus eliminating the incentive for poachers to target the animals. It is essential to dehorn the entire population in an area, both so that poachers have absolutely no incentive to visit and so that no rhinos have an unfair competitive advantage. The resulting severed horns are locked in a vault or destroyed.

“It is a traumatic experience for us — not for the rhino,” said Mark Gerrard, managing director of Wildlife ACT, the conservation NGO working on this project. “It has a face mask put on it to cover its vision, it has earplugs put into its ears ... so that reduces trauma to the animal. We’ve got to remind ourselves that this [a rhino’s horn] is just keratin — this is really just fingernails.” (Pictured: a just-dehorned rhino with the team)

They can't reveal the exact number of rhinos in the local population due to security reasons, but it's said to be "significant." For context, thanks to successful conservation efforts South Africa as a whole now has an estimated 15,600 white rhinos. The team plans to do this all over again in two years, the point at which the horns will likely have regrown.

This is a fascinating example of Anthropocene conservation, where in a human-dominated world there is a new willingness to take preemptive action to aid and protect animals, not just be constantly on the defensive. Awesome news!



## America's Desert Southwest: Equids' Wells

The feral horses and donkeys in America's desert Southwest are a controversial issue. They are

descendants of escapees from colonial Spanish settlements, and so some regard them as an invasive species: the US Bureau of Land Management removes thousands from public lands every year, and is currently keeping about 52,000 in corrals. However, these equids have also been here for hundreds of years, and as "mustangs" are a key facet of the culture of the American West.



Furthermore, horses actually

evolved in North America to start with, eventually dispersing to other parts of the world, and the last "original" North American wild horses were only extirpated at the end of the last Ice Age, a little over 10,000 years ago. That's a mere eyeblink in evolutionary time.

Now, [a new study](#) has found that these horses and donkeys ("wild" is a loaded and complex term, but we'll call them wild) of the American West are actually key ecosystem engineers, supporting a multitude of other species. Camera traps in four locations across the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts of California and Arizona revealed that the wild equids routinely dig wells with their snouts and hooves in areas where there is no nearby water source, sometimes going six feet (2 meters) deep to reach the water table! (Pictured above: a wild horse digging a well in the Sonoran Desert). This reduces the distance between water sources greatly, aiding the whole ecosystem by increasing the amount of water available. The camera traps directly observed these equid-dug wells being drunk from by no less than 57 local vertebrate species, including black bears, mule deer, javelinas, bobcats, American badgers, scrub jays, toads, and the rare and unique elf owl, the smallest owl in the world. Eventually, abandoned equid wells become nurseries for young cottonwood trees. These aren't a sideshow either: equid wells increased water density relative to "background" water by an average of 332%, and at one site, when a stream dried up, were providing *all* available surface water to the local wildlife. Equid wells' ability to buffer the local availability of water will likely be key in helping these dryland ecosystems adapt to climate change.

This is another spectacular example of "out-of-place" species, that don't fit the idea of what is "natural" to a region, turning out to be a critical benefit to the local ecosystem! Great news.

## The Weekly Anthropocene Book Review: "Wild Souls" by Emma Marris

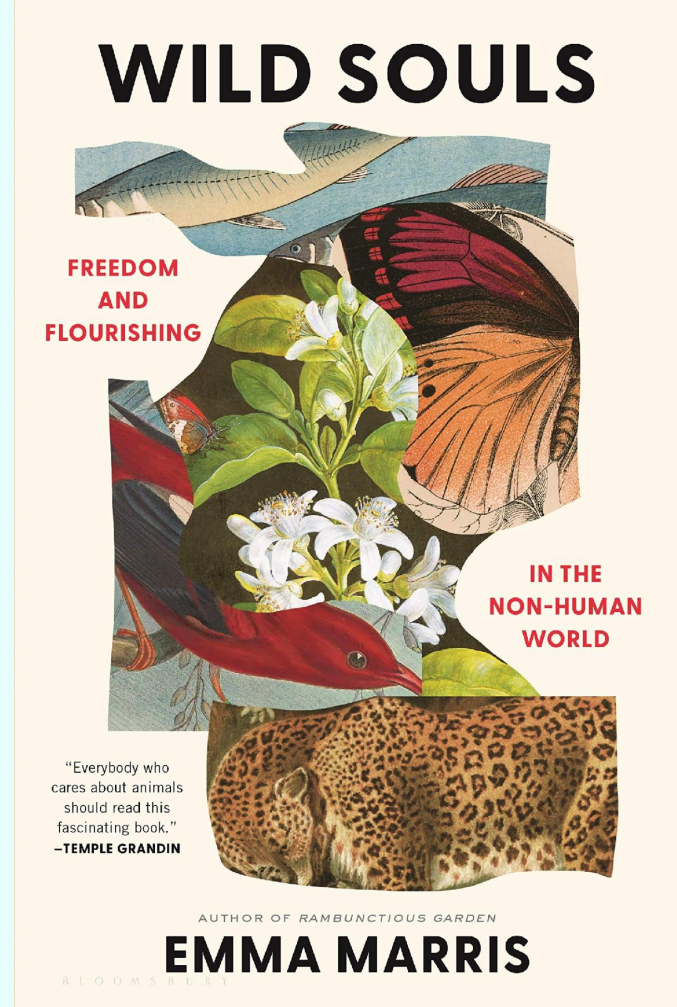
In her latest book, "Wild Souls," renowned environment, wildlife, and culture writer [Emma Marris](#) takes on

some big questions, from animal rights to the meaning of the Anthropocene to the powers and responsibilities-perhaps even duties-of humanity as a whole.

Near the beginning, Ms Marris makes a radical-even shocking-statement which informs the inquiries of the rest of the book. "After many years, I have come to see the concepts of wilderness and nature as not just unscientific but damaging. Firstly, all organisms alive today are influenced by humans. Second, we humans are deeply influenced by the plants and animals we evolved with; we are part of "nature," too. Thirdly, "wilderness" rhetoric has long been used to justify denying land rights to Indigenous peoples and to erase their long histories. And finally, **thinking of nature and humans as incompatible makes it impossible to discover or invent new ways of working with and within nature for the common good.**"

This is a new and potentially much-needed way of thinking about the Anthropocene Earth we live in. It can sound like a potentially damaging ideology-this writer's first thought was that it could easily be used as a justification for anything humans feel like doing, no matter the cost to ecosystems and wildlife. But Ms. Marris walks the walk on her bold hypothesis, grappling with issues of animal rights, sovereignty, and what we truly value and want to protect.

For example, conservation is already pretty on board with greatly decreasing a species' autonomy and "wildness" in order to save it: the last 27 California condors were captured from the wild for a captive breeding program in the 1980s, and most condors now, even those living in the "wild" outdoors, have radio tracking collars, numeric codes on their wings for easy identification from below, and receive on-site veterinary care. This is generally considered to be a good decision, as it saved the species, and would seem to indicate a moral principle that highly values preserving the lineage of a species. But the [California condor louse](#) was driven to extinction by this same program, when those first 27 condors were deloused for their own health, and no one really cares-not even this writer, really-because it's a species of louse. This raises the question: do we only save species when we, as humans, personally like them and want them around? And is that a bad thing? Yet even while considering such "heretical" sentiments, the California condor



program can scarcely be recognized as anything other than a success: because of it, an ancient American bird still soars above the Sierra Nevada and the Grand Canyon. This author is reminded of the case of the greater bamboo lemurs in Kianjavato, Madagascar. They were far from wild, radio-collared, constantly monitored, and buried by humans when dead (to prevent anyone developing a taste for their meat), yet without these connections to the community, they would certainly not be able to coexist and even thrive alongside humanity as they do.

Ms. Marris travels the globe in her quest through these complex moral philosophies. One stop is a national park in Peru where the Matsigenka indigenous people live in villages within the forest—a practice far removed from traditional Western notions of a park as an inviolate, separate dominion. The Matsigenka hunt spider and woolly monkeys within the park, as they have always done—but they voluntarily refrain from using guns, to avoid decreasing the population, and from their own self-interest serve as a 24/7 guardian force to ward off illegal loggers and miners. In the wilds of Australia, where vast efforts are spent killing some of the millions of feral cats, foxes, and other small-marsupial-eating predators (with little to no discernable impact), a new guard of "compassionate conservationists" is instead trying to selectively breed a [tougher and more cat-savvy bilby](#) (an adorable big-eared, hopping little marsupial that currently is easy meat for predators from other continents).

She also cites examples of pointless and counterproductive actions mandated by the existing legal structure that views "wild" and "species" as carved-in-stone, immutable categories. A dog that ran away to join a wolf pack in Washington State was hunted down for recapture at great expense, and a female wolf he bred with was sterilized to prevent dog genes from entering the wolf population, as that could lead to legal liability questions—despite the fact that canids in the wild interbreed all the time. Even more shockingly, the US Fish and Wildlife Service kills barred owls and spotted/barrred owl hybrids in the Pacific Northwest in order to maintain the "purity" of the spotted owl genome—despite the fact that there is no objective value of "genetic purity," and these hybrid owls may actually be better adapted to survive under climate change.

The book fundamentally acknowledges the complexities of these issues, and eschews easy "new rules" in favor of key principles to keep in mind when making decisions. It's a fascinating read, and should be available in the US from Bloomsbury USA later in 2021! Check it out—it's worth your time.

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**The Weekly Anthropocene**

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