

A New Approach to Conservation

Aitken G (2004). *Ashgate Studies in Environmental Policy and Practice* (Series Editor: McDonald A), Ashgate Publishing Limited, Gower House, Croft Road, Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 3HR, UK. 218 pp. Hardback (ISBN 0 7546 3283 0). Price £50.00.

There have been many books published recently that have discussed the principles and practice of wildlife conservation. These have all tended to start with an acceptance of some widely held assumptions — that nature is best protected through the preservation of biological diversity and that this entails the conservation of rare and native species. This book, according to its author Gill Aitken, sets out to examine and challenge the validity of these assumptions and, in so doing, as its title says, develop “A New Approach to Conservation”.

It achieves this in two ways. Firstly, the author provides a detailed examination of a number of conservation principles, particularly extinction, rarity and nativity, and secondly, she analyses the practice of wildlife rehabilitation and its relationship with these more traditional concepts of conservation. This feature of the book is perhaps a little surprising, considering that wildlife rehabilitation is viewed by many to have little or no real conservation value. It is a practice that usually involves the care of individual animals rather than populations, and of common rather than endangered species. However, the author explains that while the basic values underlying wildlife rehabilitation are very different from those underlying conservation, they serve as a useful way of questioning the traditional conservation rationale.

Thus, this book is essentially a philosophical one. It seeks to criticise, evaluate and modify our current understanding of wildlife conservation, and in so doing, to develop a wider and more inclusive concept of the practice.

It is divided into four parts. In the first, the author begins with an implicit acknowledgement of the value of biological diversity, but also includes an examination of the principles of rarity and nativity to determine their place in the conservation rationale. She concludes that ‘rarity’ does not deserve the attention it currently enjoys, and that the ‘common’ should be valued more highly than is presently the case.

Part Two then moves on to explore the role and primary goal of the conservationist, and in particular to identify the relationship between humans and nature. The author concludes that human intervention is the only coherent conservation position and that the key factor is “wildness”. She maintains that by safeguarding wildness, we can best safeguard the nature we currently cherish.

Part Three returns to the critique of the conservation rationale, and argues that it is in the interests of conservationists to value individuals a great deal more than they do. This theme is then extended to the practice of wildlife rehabilitation — a practice that deals with wild animals as individuals, not as populations or species — as the author shows how the principle of individual care is far more

compatible with traditional conservation objectives than previously believed.

In Part Four, all of these threads are pulled together as the author presents a “coherent conservation strategy for the future”. This is a strategy that no longer focuses just upon ‘species’, the ‘native’ or the ‘rare’, but gives far greater value to the individual, the ‘common’ and the ‘introduced’ as contributing to the underlying conservation value of biological diversity.

As such, this book will no doubt be somewhat controversial, and many may regard its “new conservation” as being not only flawed but also a threat to traditional conservation beliefs, objectives and practices. Nevertheless, the author presents her case persuasively and clearly, while at the same time confronting the arguments and worries of those who would take a dissenting position. Her conclusions may not be accepted by all, but this is still a book that should be read by anyone working in wildlife conservation and who strives to find new and more effective actions and strategies.

Of particular interest is the discussion of the role of wildlife rehabilitation — a practice that despite its popularity in society today has been largely dismissed and therefore ignored as having any real conservation value. However, as this book explains, wildlife rehabilitation is important for two reasons. Firstly, it has conservation value by providing an essential link between our innate sense of caring and the natural world. Conservation, as the author points out, depends for its wider human involvement on the notion of care, and thus maintaining this link is vital. Secondly, wildlife rehabilitation has conservation value in a more practical sense in that it helps conservation to fulfil its goals. Successful wildlife rehabilitation increases the chances of a debilitated animal’s wild survival, and this complements conservation’s ultimate aim of safeguarding nature through the preservation of wildness.

Similarly, while this book is not primarily concerned with the welfare of wildlife, its conclusions may well have indirect welfare implications. If the profile of wildlife rehabilitation can be lifted through an acceptance of its contribution to conservation, it may be that the practice will be improved through the development and adoption of more appropriate and hence successful animal rescue, care and release procedures. As we recognise the importance of individual animals rather than just populations, and of the need to care for and preserve even members of common species, then it is likely that we will also strive to improve the level of welfare considered appropriate for these animals. As the author herself concludes in the final paragraph of the book: “Wildlife rehabilitation and conservation are a great deal more closely allied than has, until now, been supposed. My hope is that the two practices work ever more closely together sharing not only their experience and expertise, but many of their values too.”

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