

Ants, Sharks and Chimps: Did you say "wild"?

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Introduction

Many conservation plans and actions as well as international conventions related to the trade and uses of nonhumans are conceived following the wild/domestic divide. Yet, this border is non-existent or very limited in scope in a wide variety of societies, implying that "wild" animals do not fit easily into the utilitarian

framework of policies and regulations. Here, we look at three groups of species and their polysemy in South America and West Africa in relation to cultural diversity or globalization patterns of trade in nonhumans. How do they prompt us to examine the non-use values of nonhumans?



1: Leafcutter worker ants (© Esther Katz)



2: Ant collecting in the Santander region of Colombia (© Orlando Aguilera)

Food or Pests?

User conflicts over leaf-cutter ants (*Atta laevigata*) in Colombia

In Colombia, the winged reproductive females of the leaf-cutting ants *Atta laevigata*, consumed in Santander since pre-Hispanic times, are considered a regional food heritage (photo 1 and 2). Following *Santandereanos'* migration, the ant trade, once restricted to local towns, has spread countrywide. This insect is now served in restaurants and sold to tourists, as snacks or plastic souvenirs (photo 3)!



Ant gathering used to be sustainable when combined with extensive cattle breeding, but in recent decades, intensive agriculture has expanded. Farmers see the leafcutter ant as a pest, so they poison the nests. The ant population has declined, reducing the collectors' income and access to a nutritive food. Integrative management methods combining both interests, such as feeding the ants with citrus peels, should be applied.

3: Street vendor's stand in Bucaramanga, capital city of Santander: grilled ants and plastic mascots (© Esther Katz)

The changing status of shark in the face of globalization: from partner to commodity

Shark has long been either an iconic and totemic animal found in the origin myths of some fisherfolk (photo 4), an avenger whose conciliation must be sought through specific rituals, or game meat. However, in the context of globalization, the shark is increasingly targeted for its fins, the basis of a very popular soup in South-East Asia (photo 5). The changing status of a keystone species such as the shark, as well as the emergence of new actors (photo 6), is leading to a collapse of the trophic chain, a reconfiguration of customary use and access rights, and questions about the drivers of unsustainable practices (photo 7). While some aim to safeguard marine resources by creating islands of wilderness through protected areas, other IPLCs are demanding recognition of their practices and knowledge as an integral part of their heritage and identity.



4: Shark painted on a house, Bijago Islands, Guinea-Bissau (© Marie-Christine Cormier-Salem)



5: Fining, an opportunistic fishing practice for targeting the fins of the shark – sharks with their fins cut off, Senegal (© Marie-Christine Cormier-Salem)



6: New actors involved in finning, Senegal (© Marie-Christine Cormier-Salem)



7: Towards reconciliation between conservation of wild species (here: *Pristis pristis*) and local livelihoods (here, small-scale fisherfolk)? : logo of a regional coalition for West African coast conservation (© PRCM)

What kind of (near-)humans are chimpanzees?

The attribution of cultural qualities to the behavior of "wild" chimpanzees, such as in tool-making (photo 8), is often used as an argument in biology to justify their protection: great apes are threatened as generators of traditions, conceived as an endangered cultural heritage. In other words, their rights are now defended in the same way as those of Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities! However, this conception of the human-ape boundary contrasts sharply with that of West Africans', as seen through their cosmogonies: for Westerners, the chimpanzee is a close (biological) relative of humans, even a "cousin", entailing a positive identification with this species, while locally it is conceived as a fallen man, chased away from civilization to the bush for braving a religious prohibition (photo 9). How can conservation initiatives incorporate this alternative conception of near-humanity into their policies?



8: Chimpanzee anvil and hammer to open oil palm nuts, Nimba reserve, Ivory Coast (© Vincent Leblan)



9: Chimpanzees as bad boys: poster hung on the front porch of a house, Guinea (© Vincent Leblan)

Conclusion

These animal species easily escape from any "wilderness" compartment. In fact, this notion excludes a great diversity of situations and cosmogonies resulting from pacts between humans and animal or from people themselves moving back and forth across the human/animal divide. These systems of thought and practices compel us to move beyond the notion of rational and sustainable use of wild species and a simple resource-based approach to human-animal coexistence: it is much more a matter of agreeing on a common socioecological project, taking into account the multiplicity of actors and the diversity of their interests, perceptions and affects.

References

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