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BOOK REVIEW

The beast in the garden: a modern parable of man and nature

By: David Baron
Publisher: W.W. Norton & Company, USA, 2004, 277 pp.
ISBN: 0-393-05807-7.

This book can be summed up in one word; 'sobering', like a cold shower on a Monday morning. The action is set along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado during the late 1980s and early 1990s, centered mainly in the city of Boulder. This was a period of rapid human colonisation, with tens of thousands of people fleeing America's cities, looking for a better life, closer to nature and with a view of the mountains.

At the same time many large mammal species, both ungulates and carnivore, began expanding their distribution thanks to improved management legislation.

This is the story of the collision between these two worlds. First came the deer. People thought it was great to have the cute little guys in their suburban gardens. The local attitude was so nature friendly that any form of hunting was prohibited. Next came the mountain lions! Many people welcomed them at first, and in the absence of hunting or any other form of harassment the lions soon began to habituate to people, hunting deer right among the houses and gardens.

However, a few mountain lions began to prey on pets, taking dogs from their yards at night, and some began to lose all fear (and respect) for humans. This was at a time when mountain lions had not killed anybody in North America for many decades and the official attitude was that 'they just are not dangerous for people'!

Despite warning signs, neither the responsible agencies nor local people wanted any action taken. Then in June 1990, a line was crossed and two mountain lions chased a female jogger up a tree, scratching her in the process. Finally, in January 1991 an 18-year old jogger was killed and partially eaten by a healthy male mountain lion. By this stage similar attacks had also occurred in Montana and California. It was time to rapidly rethink the whole relationship between man and mountain lion.

The book calls itself a parable, and there are certainly many messages here. The first, optimistic message is that mountain lion populations are recovering rapidly, and that they are able to adapt to the modern, human-altered landscape of the American West. The second message is that the modern American love affair with wilderness is based on a total delusion. Even though the Rocky Mountains are as pretty as they have always been, humans have completely altered the ecology of the ecosystem. The author concludes that because it is so altered, people should not expect it to just run itself with a hands-off approach. He argues that because the system is altered, and people are increasingly moving into the habitat, it will not be possible to re-establish a 'balance' without constant human intervention, including the harassment and killing of occa-

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sional mountain lions that begin to adopt undesirable and dangerous behaviour.

A third message resulting from this is that there are a lot of naïve people out there, among managers, conservationists and the public. These people do not want to accept that these beautiful predators will not just leave us alone out of mutual respect if we just leave them alone. The truth is that we can only live with predators as long as they do not realise that we are potential prey, and this requires constant reinforcement.

A fourth message is that America appears to have a major land-use problem with their inability, or lack of interest, in preventing the sprawl of suburbia and ranchettes into good quality wildlife habitat. If this sprawl goes on, conflicts are going to keep on increasing.

The final message for those of us working for the conservation of these large predators is that there is a heavy responsibility associated with their return. All large predators are potentially dangerous to humans, and while the risk is very low, it is still present and we should never forget this when dealing with the public and developing conservation plans.

The book is very well written. David Baron has dug deep into the material, and presents a very real picture of how local people experienced the building tension as the mountain lions came to town. He builds an atmosphere of impending dread that would be worthy of a great horror movie. We are spared no details, either physical or emotional. It is the view of the local people that makes the book especially sobering. These are the lives (some of which end tragically and prematurely) with their individual hopes and dreams which are so easy to forget when researching or conserving large predators over the large scales that their ecology demands.

The take-home message is that large predators can be conserved in human-altered and human-dominated landscapes, but they will often require some form of active management to ensure that they maintain behaviours that are acceptable to us humans. While this arrogance may offend many conservationists, we must accept that it is not possible to adopt a totally hands-off strategy outside of wilderness settings. Failure to realise this can, as we see in the book, have tragic consequences. All in all this book is a highly recommended read that serves as a vital reality check.

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