

BOOK REVIEWS/JAPAN

W. Puck Brecher. *Loving and Loathing Wildlife in Japan: Four Animal Conservation Paradigms*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2025. 362 pages, 20 illustrations. Hardcover, \$70.00.

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Brecher's book is a historical study combining histories of science with sociology and anthropology to uncover four patterns describing how Japanese viewed and treated animals over a period of four centuries, roughly from Tokugawa to contemporary times: compassionate control (before 1868), utility (1868–1945), conservation (1868–1980), and welfare (1902–1999).

W. Puck Brecher has published books on topics including Japan's histories of animal care, public and private selves from the Tokugawa Era to the present, Westerners in wartime Japan, and eccentricity in Edo artistic and literary circles, along with an edited volume on new approaches to the Asia-Pacific War. He brings these multifaceted intellectual interests to his latest historical study combining histories of science with sociology and anthropology to uncover four patterns describing how Japanese viewed and treated animals over a period of four centuries, roughly from Tokugawa to contemporary times: compassionate control (before 1868), utility (1868–1945), conservation (1868–1980), and welfare (1902–1999). Although "conservation" is used to describe one of these paradigms, this notion is relatively modern with early conceptions developing in the late Meiji era.

Brecher provocatively begins his book with an introduction titled "Japan's Biodiversity Boondoggle," where the archipelago is framed as a "biodiversity hotspot" but one where extinction threatens sizable portions of animal life far above global averages, including numerous endemic species (10). An appendix featuring "Japanese Wildlife Currently Listed as Extinct, Critically Endangered, or Endangered" helpfully appears after the book's conclusion (267–70). To unpack this paradox, he intends "to explain historical changes and continuities in how the country has managed and ascribed value to wild animals" where "Japan's approaches evolved along distinct lines" (22). Building upon his 2022 study, Brecher also evokes earlier histories of Japanese relationships to animals; clearly, tensions continue to exist between religious values stemming from Buddhism—like *ahimsā* (non-violence)—and practical concerns in a country often beset by resource shortages, natural disasters, and climate unpredictability. He emphasizes how wildlife preservation and attitudes toward animals varied widely in Japan, originally based on utilitarianism, and later, merging with civilizational discourses and national identities. Some animals, like birds, which enjoyed a privileged place in aristocratic imaginations, experienced more solicitous protections than others.

Economic uncertainty, natural disasters, and war also impacted how animals were treated depending on whether they were harvested for food, feathers, leather, or other resources.

In Japan, relatively clear demarcations continue to exist between wildlife, animals existing outside of the domestic sphere or inhabited areas, and those considered pets or local visitors. Anthropologists like Takie Sugiyama Lebra (2004) have examined how Japanese have historically constructed identities around notions of selfhood based on distinctions of *uchi* (interior) and *soto* (exterior). Brecher includes a chart on distinct categories of wildlife (14). Such social layers or “zones” arguably connect with how animals were treated in Japan, where those linked to the home became familiar beings associated with families while others served as seasonal harbingers, supplies of food, or even potential menaces. In chapter 3, Brecher examines the Matagi, traditional hunting clans in northern Japan; however, deeper discussions of ethnology and anthropology would have enhanced readers’ understandings of indigenous relationships to animals on the archipelago from premodern to contemporary times. An interesting counterpoint might be Ainu bear hunting rituals. Since premodern Japan and continuing into the twentieth century, animals were either anthropomorphized, where they were loved and worshiped, or alternatively, feared and objectified, where they were dealt with as nuisances, pests, or existential plagues. To examine such dichotomies, Brecher devotes chapter 6 to wolves, both revered as local gods and seen as threats later hunted to extinction.

In numerous chapters, and especially chapter 5, the author devotes considerable attention to hunting, and in chapter 7, explores connections between hunting in Japan and the protection of certain animals such as birds. Interestingly, the largely upper-class Wild Bird Society of Japan (WBSJ), founded in 1934 by the poet Nakanishi Gōdō (1895–1984), emphasized emotional attachments to birds while hosting sizable numbers of hunters but was “not matched by any robust cultural movement toward conservation” (166). Here, a discussion on social class and related connections to wildlife preservation (or extirpation) would be useful. For example, Dutch-inspired duck ponds—essentially aqueous reserves for ducks—were initially built in the eighteenth century and became popular with the nobility and ruling elites (including WBSJ members) who netted ducks in genteel hunting parties long into the early postwar period. Shoguns maintained *kamoba* (wild duck preserves), which still exist as the Hama Rikyū Gardens near Ginza. Since the Tokugawa era, Japan’s ruling classes privileged birds for preservation and recreation, which included the use of falcons to hunt for pheasants and other edible birds. These activities were off-limits to commoners, and Shogunal retainers understood that supplies of adequate prey were necessary for elite consumption and leisurely enjoyment.

In describing the Allied Occupation's impact on conservation in chapter 8, Brecher could have delved deeper into Japanese efforts to protect avian wildlife in the immediate postwar era. His narrative emphasizes contributions by Oliver L. Austin Jr., who headed the Natural Resource Section's Wildlife Bureau for the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) from late 1946 until early 1950. However, for Austin's mission to be successful in a newly democratizing Japan, he needed to cultivate allies and collaborative relationships with influential Japanese scientists in the House of Peers, many of whom were ornithologists like him, including Hachisuka Masauji (1903–1953) and Yamashina Yoshimaro (1900–1989). These men were critical to ensuring Austin's effectiveness as an Occupation official. Whereas SCAP's initial goal was to manage Japanese natural resources and ensure a steady (or growing) supply of protein for a war-depleted population, Austin's beneficial connections, cultivated through mutual interests in birds, translated into much greater gains for the fledgling democracy, as I reveal in *Japan's Empire of Birds: Aristocrats, Anglo-Americans, and Transwar Ornithology* (2022).

According to Brecher, where Western religions emphasized human stewardship over the environment, Japanese religions lacked this imperative and “disavowed moral accountability for animal well-being and discouraged public involvement with animal management” (224). Instead, Japanese cultivated attitudes of *aigo* (loving protection), which “invited affective attachment to domestic animals but failed to compel proactive conservation” (ibid.). Examining parks in chapter 7 and zoos in chapter 10 as sites of uneasy refuge, Brecher argues that “[i]n twentieth-century Japan, the paradigms of *bogo* (conservation) and *aigo* (loving protection) served as largely ineffective bases for animal protection and welfare” (246). Essentially, Brecher shows that both modes failed in being largely anthropomorphic and geared toward serving human goals of interacting with animals. Readers might assume that the author criticizes Japan for not doing enough to protect its fauna, whether domesticated or wild, with the illusive “West,” and possibly the United States, as a continuing yardstick. Developed countries with a similar population density as Japan might be a better comparison. Although this conceit evokes *nihonjinron* (discourses on Japaneseness) ideologies assuming Japan's uniqueness, Brecher notes how “[c]ultural exceptionalism, long fallen out of favor in other contexts, has continued to inform Japanese narratives surrounding the whaling debate” (261).

In conclusion, Brecher's book is a fascinating study surrounding the evolution of Japanese attitudes toward the natural world, and specifically, toward wild animals. He provides readers with an engaging interdisciplinary approach to the topic including literary sources, scientific studies, and even woodblock prints to enliven his narrative while also providing a unique glimpse into Japan's storied intellectual history.

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