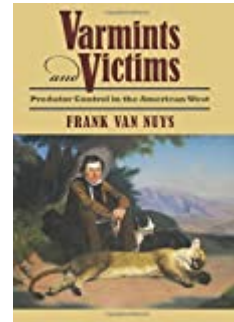


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Van Nuys. *Varmints and Victims: Predator Control in the American West.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. xiv + 338 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-2131-6.



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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

This is a welcome addition to the growing body of historical studies about the treatment of predatory animals in the American West. The outline of the story was sketched by Donald Worster in *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* [1977] nearly a generation ago. Since then Thomas Dunlap (*Saving America's Wildlife: Ecology and the American Mind, 1850-1990* [1988]), Jon Coleman (*Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* [2004]), Karen R. Jones (*Wolf Mountains: A History of Wolves along the Great Divide* [2002]), Dan Flores (*Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History* [2016]), and others have filled in many of the contours with insightful detail. What Frank Van Nuys adds is rigorous research in both archival and published sources and an accurate, fair-minded treatment of a highly emotional topic. In popular discourse over the politics of predators, where it seems everyone is shouting and everything appears as a symbol of a much deeper (and perhaps menacing) meaning, Van Nuys brings a calm, rational, and confident voice to the table.

Varmints and Victims begins the story in the early nineteenth century with the contrast between indigenous peoples' practical respect and mythological reverence for wolves and bears and the beliefs of Christian pastoralists who felt they had biblical sanction to

subdue nature as well as a practical mandate to eliminate wild beasts. Hostility toward predators mounted later in the century as livestock herders and big game hunting groups came to see predators, especially wolves, as archvillains. Aided by the tools of applied industrial technology—primarily mass-produced strychnine and manufactured steel traps—and fueled by global markets for fur, including Russian army purchases of pelts from wolfers on the Great Plains, predators faced an industrial-scale slaughter that was not possible on earlier frontiers. Van Nuys considers a range of explanations for this nineteenth-century animal apocalypse, including Manifest Destiny, global markets in fur, sport hunting, and the protection of domestic livestock, and concludes that it was western pragmatism, a concern for survival and sustenance, more than an ideological commitment or even mere bloodlust that doomed predators in the West (p. 23).

As livestock interests and concerns for big game hunting came to dominate state legislatures, western states followed their eastern predecessors and placed bounties on predators and other unwanted species. Van Nuys concludes that, despite widespread fraud and abuse (mostly collateral poisoning of other species), these bounty systems were largely successful in reducing, if

not eliminating, most predators. Even so, some combination of the persistence of a few problem predators (à lone wolves), the Progressive zeal for efficiency and professional expertise, and the political need for the Bureau of Biological Survey to ensure its own relevance and funding led to the federal campaign of predator extermination in the West. Predator control assumed a western identity, Van Nuys suggests, because the vast wilderness landscapes of the region provided the psychic space for predators to haunt the imagination while public lands in the West, especially national parks, created a federal responsibility for the animals that lived there.

In the middle chapters of this book, Van Nuys narrates the labyrinthine bureaucratic struggles within the federal government over the fate of the predator control campaign. âA small but persistent cadre of dissenting mammologists,â including Ernest Thompson Seton and Joseph Grinnell, advanced ecological arguments against the extermination of predatory species and charged the Bureau of Biological Survey with caring more for their jobs than for science or the public welfare (p. 91). For a few decades in the middle of the twentieth century, two groups of government-funded scientists led by Vernon Bailey, Stanley Young, and Edward Goldman on the one side and Aldo Leopold and the Murie brothers (Adolph and Olaus) on the other fought a bitter internecine quarrel not only over the nature of predatory animals but also concerning the relationship between science and society. Together these two groups had more interest in and knowledge of the habits and behaviors of predators than anyone else on the planet. Yet the disagreements between control and preservation, Van Nuys explains, ran

so deep that they jeopardized friendships and careers.

This same emotional intensity, Van Nuys argues, permeated late twentieth-century debates over reintroduction, preservation, and ultimately the hunting of predators. Buoyed by support from an increasingly urbanized West and the rise of environmental attitudes represented in the 1973 Endangered Species Act, wildlife advocates successfully turned the animal villains of a previous century into wildlife heroes. This part of the story is more recent and will be more familiar to many readers. Finally, it is difficult to resist the ultimate irony that Van Nuys detects for the protectors of wild predators: wolf reintroduction has been so successful that wolf advocates may now have to come to terms with the practical necessity of allowing hunting of this âsplendid game animalâ (p. 245).

It is worth noting, more as observation than criticism, that this is more political history than environmental or cultural. *Varmints and Victims* focuses on four predators in particular: wolves, coyotes, grizzly bears, and mountain lions. What these animals have in common is their political definition as predators. There is not a great deal here of the ecology, behavior, or even dietary preferences of each of these predators. Nor is there much detail on the different ways that cultures have constructed patterns of symbolic meaning for these wild animals. These topics have been explored elsewhere. *Varmints and Victims* makes a much-needed contribution to our understanding of how humans have treated predators and should receive a wide audience among scholars, students, and the general public.

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