Budding Beliefs: The Role of Victorian Naturalists in Wildlife Conservation

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In 1886, American ornithologist Frank Chapman witnessed a fashionable partygoer in London wearing a dress hemmed with the heads of finches and the plumage of a robin. The anonymous lady was just one among millions who adorned themselves at the expense of the natural world. London was one of the centers of the fashion industry, importing feathers from across the empire, particularly from favorite species like birds of paradise and exotic herons.[1] Between 1870 and 1920, the United Kingdom imported 40 million lb of ornamental plumage, a number that did not even include the further importation of ostrich feathers.[2] One London dealer estimated that he sold two million birds per year.[3] A single auction sale in London in 1887 included 400,000 hummingbirds.[4] The trade did not just encompass foreign species, however, as gull, starling, and sparrow feathers offered an affordable choice for the many women wishing to emulate luxury fashion. By the 1870s, women's hats were not just displaying prime feathers, but the heads and even entire bodies of birds.[5]

It was within this atmosphere – a period that witnessed not only the commodification of any seemingly useful species, but also massive environmental transformations due to the dominating influence of industry and urbanization – that wildlife protection laws first emerged within Britain. The overlap between animal welfare and conservation concerns at this time meant that the sentiments expressed by a wide array of individuals and organizations contributed to this early legislation, including vocal opponents of vivisection, vegetarians, and the female founders of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (the RSPB). However, for the sake of brevity, today I'll be focusing on the work of published naturalists.

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[1] Robin W. Doughty. *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[2] Doughty. *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation,* 25.

[3] Samstag. *For Love of Birds*.

[4] "After Many Days," 57.

[5] Doughty. *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation*.

The Victorian equivalents of David Attenborough, naturalists captured their audiences with descriptions of the wonders of nature, which roused and indeed instructed readers to observe and examine these spectacles in person. Naturalists likewise used their works to vocally criticize exploitative practices. In essence, their work was not just instructional, but also sentimental. To borrow from the French biologist Jacques Couteasu: "people will protect what they love. Yet we only love what we know." Yet, we can also glimpse the limitations of the cultural connections that naturalists inspired readers to make with nature. The resulting love for flora and fauna could at times be superficial and self-serving. But even when genuine, it extended primarily to those creatures that fit within established value systems. Species that remained unfamiliar or unrelatable would have to wait until ecologically-based conservation emerged in the late 20th century before they would enjoy similar protections.

No animals have received quite the same attention in British conservation as birds. The earliest wildlife protection laws (excluding game laws that were inevitably anthropocentric) were centered on the protection of avian species. Continuing this legacy, the RSPB remains the UK's largest wildlife charity. The reasons for this are varied, but this success has been partially dependent on the characteristics of the animals themselves, many of which appeal to human emotions. The devotion of mated pairs to their eggs and fledglings, and to each other, appealed to Victorian domestic ideals. The processes of building nests, incubating young, and bringing home food to the same spot for months at a time also allowed observers the chance to recognize birds as individuals, rather than perceiving them as a homogenous group. The image of cheerful, family-oriented, and helpless visitors to the garden certainly made its way into appeals for protection.

Naturalists were vocal about the value of birds in particular and the unimaginable cruelty that harm to these moral creatures represented. Charles Waterton, the English naturalist who created one of the first recognizable wildlife refuges, was an early advocate for avian protection. In his *Essays on Natural History*, Waterton expressed his disgust towards killing seabirds for sport, saying:

> No profit attends the carnage; the poor unfortunate birds serve merely as marks to aim at, and they are generally left where they fall. Did these heartless gunmen

> reflect, but for one moment, how many innocent birds their shot destroys; how many fall disabled on the waves, there to linger for hours, perhaps for days, in torture and in anguish; did they but consider how many helpless young ones will never see again their parents coming to the rock with food; they would, methinks, adopt some other plan to try their skill, or cheat the lingering hour.[6]

Waterton's lament encapsulates the resentment that spread not only due to the extent of the slaughter, but also because of the methods with which these animals were caught. One practice involved the use of teagles, lines with hooks baited not for fish, but for seabirds, laid upon the ground.[7] Only the largest birds were kept, thus the rest were left wounded or released with hooks still attached. Likewise, bird catchers would cut off the wings of living seabirds and discard the injured birds in the ocean, leaving the animals to succumb to their wounds or drown. Although seagulls did not have the same appeal of species like birds of paradise, their plumage was still extensively used in hats. For instance, hunters could receive one shilling for "white gulls," with one man obtaining a contract for 10,000 of these animals with a London dealer.[8] In addition to the inhumane methods used, many were disturbed by the fact that birds were often killed during the breeding season or while protecting young, when they were most vulnerable to predation.

The mutilation and indiscriminate killing characteristic of the 19th century became the focus of noted naturalists. Professor Alfred Newton appealed to his female audience when he suggested that, "fair and innocent as the snowy plumes may appear on a lady's hat, I must tell the wearer the truth—she bears the murderer's brand on her forehead."[9] Ornithologist W. H. Hudson similarly lamented while also playing upon Victorian ideals of domesticity.

> There is nothing in the whole earth so pitiable as this – so pitiable and so shameful – that for such a purpose human cunning should take advantage of that feeling and instinct, which we regard as so noble in our own species, and as

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[6] Charles Waterton. *Essays on Natural History, Chiefly Ornithology, 5th ed* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1844).

[7] Parliament. *The Parliamentary Debates (Authorised Edition), Fourth Series, Third Session of the Twenty-Eighth Parliament of the United Kingdom or Great Britain and Ireland, vol. CXC. Comprising period from Wednesday, third day of June, 1908 to Wednesday, twenty-fourth day of June, 1908.* London: Wyman and Sons, Ltd., 1908.

[8] Sheail. *Nature in Trust.*

[9] Sheail. *Nature in Trust*, 4.

> something sacred – the tender passion of the parents for its offspring, which causes it to neglect its own safety, and to perish miserably, a sacrifice to its love![10]

Activists likewise asked fashionable women to reconsider their actions from a Christian perspective, from which their actions could be viewed as sin.

> Do you imagine that the Creator, in whom you believe, ever created these birds to be murdered, cruelly and brutally massacred, merely that their feathers and wings and bodies might minister to your vanity and love of display, and personal adornment?[11]

To those fighting for animal rights, if birds were God's creation, then the greatest hypocrisy was to promote the destruction of these creatures in church, a common place to flaunt new accessories. The effectiveness of these appeals, combined with the campaigning effort of entities like the RSPB, would lead to a series of legislative protections beginning in 1869.

But most other species were not as fortunate. In addition to organisms like birds and ferns, marine seaweeds and invertebrates caught the attention of curious Victorians. The small size, relatively sedentary nature, and striking appearance of coastal creatures meant that they could be easily observed, captured, and cultivated. This hands-on experience with nature would lead to a fashionable craze, which could inspire emotional attachment to nature in broad terms, but which would ultimately put species in danger of overexploitation and expose anthropocentric trends in human-wildlife interactions. While appealing, these animals were strange novelties that would have to wait until systematic, habitat-based conservation and ecologically-based mentalities in the late 20th century to gain true conservation status.

One of the most influential figures in this history was the English naturalist Philip Henry Gosse, because of his role in popularizing home aquariums. Gosse's work on marine life praised what many would consider off-putting or mundane, such as seeing God's work within seaweed: "how manifold are the indications of infinite intelligence and goodness even in these things proverbial for their vileness!"[12] His description of

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[10] Samstag. *For Love of Birds*, 33.
[11] "After many days," *The Animal's Friend* 2 (1896): 55-57, 57.
[12] Gosse. *The Ocean*, 59.

anemones' ability to camouflage themselves with shells, gravel, and seaweed at low tide likewise brought "lowly" invertebrates into the spotlight.

> There is an instinct displayed by this species, which one would not expect to find in a creature of so low an organization, and which is worthy of our admiration, as showing how mindful the gracious Creator and Preserver is of His creatures' well-being.[13]

Gosse anticipated questions about his focus on small creatures like marine snails – "why does he talk to us about such common trash as periwinkles?" – but compelled his readers to look more closely, at which point they would find traits to admire.[14] The sea-mouse, a type of marine worm, was not spectacular, Gosse argued, until one looked at its "long silky hair which covers each side…equaling the splendours of the Humming-birds, or the Diamond beetles."[15] In addition to appearances, Gosse marveled at the behavior of invertebrates, characterizing them as having some level of personality and intelligence. His observations included a symbiotic relationship, described as "companionship" in his work, between a crab and a marine worm. A prawn was also observed "washing himself after dinner, or at any other spare moment" making him "most scrupulously clean."[16]

It was his contention that "there is an idiosyncrasy in the inferior animals…sufficient to communicate individuality of character."[17] While the description of animals as "inferior" may sound grating to a present day reader, Gosse's assertion that aquarium animals possess individualism, essentially personality, must be contextualized within prevailing ideas at the time. The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed remarkably inhumane treatment of animals, including the suffocation of specimens for experiments on vacuums and the widespread use of vivisection on intelligent creatures. These practices were at times justified by the theory that animals are simply machines, without reason or feelings.[18] Certainly, Gosse's works suggest he must have dissected his fair

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[13] Gosse. *The Ocean*, 72.
[14] Philip Henry Gosse. *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of he Deep Sea, 2nd ed*. (London: John Van Voorst, 1856), 23.
[15] Gosse. *The Aquarium*, 152.
[16] Gosse. *The Aquarium*, 170.
[17] Gosse. *The Aquarium*, iv.
[18] Janie Hinds. "Dr. Rush and Mr. Peale: The Figure of the Animal in Late Eighteenth-Century Medical Discourse." *Early American Literature* 48, no. 3 (2013): 641-670.

share of marine creatures, as well as subjecting them to questionable conditions during transport to and within his aquariums. Yet, his recognition of individualized behavior stands distinct against contemporaneous dismissal of animal sentience.

Gosse's work contributed to a short-lived aquarium craze***
in the mid-19th century that witnessed the installation of 150,000 gallons worth of tanks at the Crystal Palace and the proliferation of personal aquariums sometimes housed within kitchen dishes and other small trinkets. The inhabitants of these tanks were inevitably often taken directly from the wild, particularly given encouragement from naturalists to do so. But scouring the coasts at low tide to imprison unfortunate tide pool dwellers was not enough for the most ambitious collector. Instead, the naturalist's dredge was invented to scrape the seabed floor in the same way as fisheries' oyster dredges. Gosse describes the collection of an abundance of species with delight. What is missing from his description, however, is any sense that this practice was at all damaging or exploitative. His dredging ventures also included taking the tiny Atlantic bobtail squid "in considerable numbers."[19] His fondness for these animals (putting aside the fact he tore them from their ocean homes) represented an apparent change of heart, given that he initially viewed cephalopods as "hideous, repulsive, fierce, atrocious creatures."[20] This suggests there was a limit to his admiration for wildlife, perhaps confined to those species he found personally amusing.

Plucking thousands of specimens from the fields, forests, and sea was paradoxically perceived to be a sign of industriousness, intellectual curiosity, and appreciation for God's creation. In 1823, the Irish naturalist James Clealand wrote of disappearing limpets, saying that, "my Patellas are nearly extirpated, they became so much the fashion."[21] The consequences of over-collecting were even publicized by Gosse's own son, Edmund.

> The ring of living beauty drawn about our shores was a very thin and fragile one. It had existed all those centuries solely in consequence of the indifference, the blissful ignorance of man. These rock-basins, fringed by corallines…thronged with beautiful sensitive forms of life, – they exist no longer, they are all profaned,

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[19] Gosse. *The Aquarium*, 59.
[20] Gosse. *The Aquarium*, 58.
[21] Allen. *The Naturalist in Britain*, 113.

> and emptied, and vulgarised. An army of 'collectors' has passed over them, and ravaged every corner of them. The fairy paradise has been violated, the exquisite product of centuries of natural selection has been crushed under the rough paw of well-meaning, idle-minded curiosity. That my Father, himself so reverent, so conservative, had by the popularity of his books acquired the direct responsibility for a calamity that he had never anticipated, became clear enough to himself before many years had passed, and cost him great chagrin.[22]

What emerges, then, is a bittersweet and contradictory legacy – a blend of entitlement and control and affection and appreciation. Invertebrates enjoyed popular admiration, but new cultural connections with these animals did not result in widespread conservation attitudes, as happened for birds. Instead, fascination with invertebrates led to their transplantation from coastal cliffs and the sea floor to frequently undersized tanks that initially would have poorly recreated proper water conditions and interspecies dynamics. However, readers also would have internalized appreciative descriptions of "lowly" creatures with individual characteristics, the consequences of which are nearly impossible to accurately measure. It would be fair, however, to say that a new underwater world had been revealed, which acted to suggest that humans were connected to ecosystems that were much larger and more varied than people could have imagined at the beginning of the 19th century.

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[22] Edmund Gosse. *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments, 8th ed*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 149-150.