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Book Review: Beyond the Lens of Conservation: Malagasy and Swiss Imaginations of One Another

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Eva Keller, *Beyond the Lens of Conservation: Malagasy and Swiss Imaginations of One Another* (New York: Berghahn, 2015). ISBN 978-1-78238-552-3. Hardcover. \$95.00.

In the 1990s, a portion of Malagasy on the island of Madagascar became the Masaola National Park, a wildlife preserve and world resource, in part through the efforts of the Zurich Zoo. Later the zoo created “little Masaola,” an exhibit intended to bring to zoo visitors the experience of the exceptionally diverse ecology and rare species of the Malagasy nature park. This work of ethnobiology/environmental anthropology contends that the intended connection between the two sites and those who people them is actually a disconnect. Zoo visitors in Zurich get no understanding of the reality of Masaola, and inhabitants of the park and environs have a misconception of the greater world because the only Europeans they see are representatives of international organizations or researchers, both with power in the park that locals lack.

To buttress her argument, Keller painstakingly describes both the park and the zoo exhibit and also describes zoo visitors’ perceptions of the exhibit and the preserve it represents. Keller also contrasts the Swiss perceptions with those of the indigenous people of Masaola and environs. The result is a well documented illustration of the ease with which miscommunication occurs, even as each party perceives a clear line of communication.

The lack of understanding of each other by people at each end of the Zurich-Madagascar link is exacerbated by a shortfall of reality in what both the zoo and the preserve depict. Keller faults the way the exhibit was set up. Inappropriate and inadequate presentation encourages exhibit visitors to misread what they think they see, what they think they learn. She takes pains to explain how the depiction feeds into preformed schemas held by the visitors, how it is a pre-packaged stereotypical jungle setting, a distortion of the nature conservatory, which in itself misrepresents Masaola by downplaying the human presence. She knows the exhibit is unreal because she knows the reality of Masaola.

Her sympathies as an ethnographer are with the people rather than the ecology. The author has performed anthropological research in Madagascar since 1998. Because of her long-time researching

the people of the region, she is more supportive of the Malagasy inhabitants of the new park and surrounding areas, but equally critical of the park authorities, national and international, and the ways in which they disregard the people who have long lived there.

To oversimplify somewhat, the exhibit shows the zoo visitor not Masaola but a generic if not stereotypical jungle setting, any jungle setting. With the probably laudable goal of making Europeans more ecologically aware, the exhibit almost totally disregards the fact that Masaola is home to not only endangered animals but human beings as well. Zoo visitors leave the exhibit with no understanding that Masaola has been home for many generations.

The displaced and disrupted inhabitants of the preserve, on the other hand, have a sense that the park reflects a real world different from theirs. But it is not Switzerland, but the Malagasy urbanites, local but not the same people as the preserve residents, as well as the representatives of international organizations. The other is real, but it is not the reality of either the zoo exhibit or the zoo visitors.

Keller's methodology at the zoo and in Zurich is sound. The author interviewed exhibit visitors both before and after their tour of the reconstructed environment. She also noted whether visitors to the zoo even paid significant attention to the display and the gift shop/information center located near to the exit. She finds that many visitors seemed uninterested or unaffected, perhaps because they were tired of zoos by the time they reached the Malagasy exhibit at the end of the standard tour, and perhaps because the displays were poorly placed and presented. She also spent time in schools talking with students who had been through the exhibit as well as some who had not but were planning to go. Students were aware of ecological issues, but totally ignorant of the reality of the preserve and of the fact that it was home to people for generations and not vacant parkland suitable for freezing as an animal-only preserve.

For those at the other end, the inhabitants unavoidably and largely negatively impacted by the real park and its overseers, she relies on conversations with people she has dealt with in two specific towns, one on the fringe and the other inside the new park and grandfathered in. In neither case is the park an unalloyed blessing. And the more the outsiders define the park, the more restrictions

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they impose in the newly-defined World Heritage Site, the less the traditional ways of life are acceptable or even possible.

There are no true bad guys in this complicated story of conflict with no viable compromise. The greater world that is supposed to benefit from the preservation of a fragile ecosystem is by its neglect, indifference, and misreading, closer to the villain than are those who are attempting to preserve a traditional way of life that depends on the ability to move into the areas now off limits except to the special outsiders, ecotourists and wildlife researchers and bureaucrats.

By describing both settings—the Zurich Zoo and the Madagascar wildlife preserve—and how people experience them, the author raises issues about how we stereotype, how we assume that both we and the others we are communicating with have the same body of knowledge, how we assume that our knowledge is not only common but the true and real knowledge, and end up not only asking the wrong question but also not understanding the answer anyway. The author deals with human interaction over long distance in seemingly similar but actually totally dissimilar circumstances. And she does so in the context of competing conceptions of reality, competing worldviews and worlds. There is a clash of perceptions if not of realities. Whatever the solution to the conflict, and there may well not be one, it is not to be found in a mock-up of the park at the exit of the Zurich Zoo. Nor is it to be found in a wildlife preserve that continues to expand at the expense of those who have for generations lived in and around it.

Beyond the Lens of Conservation is an interesting study, well-written and illustrated, and the author is clear about her objectives, open about her biases, and able to convey the broader Malagasy-Swiss misunderstanding regardless of how palatable or unpalatable it might be. For the larger problem of finding equitable ways of preserving ecosystems in ways that satisfy both preservationists and inhabitants, Keller has no answers. But, to be fair, no one else seems to either. And Keller's work at least addresses the reality that much of the problem is due to people talking past one another about differing perceptions of reality. The work is nicely done.

~ John H. Barnhill, Ph.D. Houston, Texas