

Wildlife Recovery with Christopher Preston

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Capering]

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In an age when endangered species are dying out by the hundreds, philosopher Christopher Preston argues that there's hope to be found in the stories of successful wildlife recoveries. These animals not only have a lot to teach us about restoration, but they can also help bridge the political divide over climate change.

Christopher Preston: Some people might think wildlife is polarizing. I actually think it's the opposite. I think wildlife can bring people together. People love to see animals. People love that little spark, that little surprise that happens when you see songbirds show up in your yard or you see a fox trotting down a hedgerow. People love this. So why not think of animals as a way to bring people together?

We'll discuss the ethics of wildlife recovery and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Christopher Preston, welcome to the show. We're here to discuss your book, *Tenacious Beasts, Wildlife Recoveries That Change How We Think about Animals*. I normally save this question for last, but I want to start with it here. Why did you write this book? Why do you care about this topic?

Christopher Preston: Well, I'm an environmental philosopher and a lot of my work until recently had been on technology and the ethics of emerging technologies. And one book in particular, *The Synthetic Age* was about the takeover of the natural world by technology. And by the end of that book, I realized that was never gonna happen because biology always has something to say about it. And so I wanted to dig in with *Tenacious Beasts* and talk about how wildlife pushes back against our best laid plans.

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Christiane: In your chapter about the resurgence of wolves in Europe and North America (because this is a book about wildlife recovery), you write that how we humans think about nature really matters when we're thinking about conservation and environmentalism. And you write that in order to coexist with endangered wildlife, like wolves or bears, that we need to develop something you call a wildlife etiquette. And you argue that philosophy can actually help us develop this wildlife etiquette. So can you help us understand how that might happen?

Christopher Preston: Sure, so I started to notice that wildlife were recovering a little bit more than you might think. If you just listen to the stories about biodiversity decline, you would think that everything was disappearing, but wildlife is recovering in some cases. And so I wanted to look at how these species could change how we think about them.

Imagine a species has gone for a century. We only have old ideas about what that species is. So the wolf is a good example. We have historic ideas and senses of what a wolf might threaten in our lives and how difficult the wolf might be to get along with. But we're a century on, we know more about the wolf. We have more technologies for tracking its movements. We have more understanding of its behavior. We have more ways to learn about the wolf in a 21st-century way and not have an outdated understanding of the wolf. And so part of that 21st-century way of understanding the wolf is to learn etiquette for being around it. What do we need to do to keep it happy and how can we avoid conflict? How can we pick up habits that we might not have known about a century ago? But habits that will allow a successful coexistence.

Christiane: And how can we use philosophy to help us figure that out?

Christopher Preston: Teddy Roosevelt called wolves “beasts of waste and desolation.” And that cements in place a certain idea of the wolf as being the antithesis of civilization. So if there's the wild and the domestic, the domestic is the human world that we all live in the wild, is the world out there that we have to keep at bay.

Previously, the wolf was firmly located in that world, that out there, wild world. But perhaps we know a little bit more about the wolf now, which might convince us that that's not exactly where the wolf belongs. And rather curiously, the wolf is the creature that 15,000 years ago walked into our lives and became the domestic dog. And so the wolf has quite literally walked across that boundary between the wild and the domesticated.

So this is about changing ideas. Getting along with the wolf is not just about figuring out how to put a radio collar on it. It's changing ideas as to what the wolf is, where the wolf belongs and how we can interact successfully with it. So to me, that's as much a philosophical task as it is a task in wildlife biology.

Christiane: Another thing I, I loved about the book is that you talk about the ways that indigenous communities and their sort of various philosophies on wildlife stewardship sort of changed your thinking. So maybe give us an example of, of one of one way of thinking that you, that you've sort of changed after talking to indigenous communities about wildlife recovery.

Christopher Preston: Interestingly, I didn't set out to say, OK, I've, I've got to learn a bunch of stuff from indigenous philosophy here. What I set out to do was to understand the recoveries and then see how those recoveries helped us to think differently. So let me illustrate that with the case of the beaver.

So the beaver is back in North America, it's up from about 100,000 to about 15 million. And what we've been learning about the beaver is if you've got a river or a creek that needs restoring, there isn't a better way to do it than to have a few beavers show up. Or maybe you can translocate a beaver into that river system. So we have a dam there where I'm sitting right now in Missoula, Montana that came out about a decade ago—the Milltown Dam—and a bunch of sediments were drained and dredged from behind the dam and the floodplain is now being restored and some beavers have moved in.

Now, we can look at those beavers and see how they do this. What is it that a beaver does to make an ecosystem healthy again? How do beavers restore ecosystems? They're the best they are at restoring river ecosystems. So we have been learning from beavers. We've quite literally been studying them. I went out on the river with a PhD student at the University of Montana who is quite literally studying the ecosystem that the beaver creates.

So what we're doing is we are apprenticing ourselves to the beaver. We're recognizing that the beaver is an expert. We're recognizing the beaver knows how to do something better than how, how we would do it or how we know how to do it. And this relationship of apprenticeship and learning and respecting the beaver, that's a relationship that is embedded in indigenous cultures.

This is an attitude towards the living world that is already there in indigenous cultures. And I found just by looking at the beaver return and, and how people are trying to learn from the

beaver that there is resonance with those indigenous ways of thinking. And I find that to be a very happy kind of resonance.

Christiane: I think another thing I found fascinating about your chapters on like the indigenous relationship to wildlife was the section about buffalos returning to the American West. And, and you drew a really interesting conclusion from the way that indigenous people think about buffalo restoration, which is that we should focus less on genetic purity. Tell us the story there.

Christopher Preston: In the bison chapter, I deal with another successful restoration. Plains bison have recovered from about probably as low as 340 to 500,000. Today. It's widely recognized as a conservation success story, but there's an interesting twist in that story. Conservation biology usually prioritizes genetic purity.

So you don't have the species recovered unless you've got *the* purest version of that wildlife species. Any sort of genetic pollution in terms of some hybridization with another species or even worse, some hybridization with a domestic species that's problematic. Now, the Plains bison has really brought that concern to the forefront because of these 500,000 bison that are now existing in the American West, almost all of them, and perhaps all of them, (there's been some studies very recently suggesting that this is true of all Plains bison), almost all of them, or maybe all of them have cattle genes and to a conservation biologist that initially seems like a massive problem because the species is not the original species, it's not genetically pure.

And so perhaps the restoration has not been as successful as it set out to be. It turns out that some of the indigenous Blackfeet bison folk who I spoke to were not as fussed about that issue of genetic purity as some of the conservation biologists might be. And Teri Dahle, who is a Blackfeet artist who used to work for the restoration initiative, she said, "This idea of genetic purity pisses me off. It's a Western scientific notion." And she says, "We Indians have had that issue of purity thrown in our faces all along and I'm sick of it. And so at least from Teri's perspective, the obsession with genetics is not necessarily helpful. And she said, "These animals look like bison, they act like bison. They play the same role as bison in our culture. So I don't think we should be so fanatical about genetic purity."

Christiane: Do you get the sense that European/Western conservationists are sort of accepting of that idea or is that, is that a sort of fight that we have yet to fight?

Christopher Preston: It's an interesting question and I should say that Teri's view (Teri is Blackfeet, as I mentioned), wasn't shared universally across the other indigenous bison experts I spoke to. So I spoke to somebody on the Flathead reservation just north of me here from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes. And they insisted that genetic purity was still important. So where Western conservation biology stands on this, I'm not sure exactly.

But one thing that is clear is as time moves on human influence on wildlife is only going to increase whether that's through us, taking up more space and wildlife having to adapt to living around us or whether that is because of climate change, there's no doubt that our influence is going to increase. And so including some recognition of that in our conceptions of wildlife seems important.

And if I can just add one little tidbit about the bison, which I think is an interesting fact here. The bison that were originally on the North American continent were way bigger than Plains bison. There was a bison called *Bison Priscus*, the Steppe Bison, *Bison Latifrons* which had these enormous seven-foot horns coming out the side of their heads. Now, over time those bison shrank in size on this continent.

And there's two possible explanations of why they shrank in size. One explanation is that climate change forced them to be smaller because essentially smaller animals can get rid of heat a little bit better. But another explanation is that these bison had to become quicker to dodge a new predator that threw spears and that new predator was us—humans. So Plains bison might already have been influenced by humanity, which means the influence from today moving forwards might not be quite as unique or original as we thought.

Perhaps we need to accept that the destinies of our species and some wildlife species are entwined. So that's a provocation that I'm not sure where I stand on it exactly, but it definitely seems to be something that's changing over time.

Christiane: There's no changing the fact that humans have intervened on wildlife and, and have done so for tens of thousands of years at this point. But the question of how much do we do it now, right, I think was, is, is just one of the, the the most interesting ethics questions of the book. And this comes to the fore in your chapter about the Barred Owl. There's a kind of controversial conservation effort to help the Spotted Owl by killing Barred Owls, and you spend some time with a woman who is a Barred Owl executioner basically. She hunts them and kills them, to sort of help the Spotted Owl populations recover. You write about how you as an ethicist think through whether or not to engage in a practice like

this. What's your take on this? How much should we humans be interfering with wildlife in the name of conservation?

Christopher Preston: So the best cases are cases where all you have to do for an animal to recover is to stop killing it. And this happens, for example, with wolves, it happens with whales, you stop killing it, they come back. In other cases, you have to stay very involved. And the northern Spotted Owl is such an example. If you leave the northern Spotted Owl on its own, it is probably gonna be wiped out by the Barred Owl.

So the question is, do we suppress the Barred Owl? Do we intervene in order to give the Spotted Owl a chance? And suppression and intervention here as you point out, it means killing, it means executing. And if you are going to do that, if you're going to kill one owl to save another, you've got to be clear on a number of ethical background principles here to be sure that it can be justified. So you've got to be clear one that it is, in fact, the Barred Owl that is causing the Spotted Owl's decline. You've got to be clear that whatever technique you engage with is going to work. You've got to be clear that the cause of the problem was some sort of mistake or some sort of intervention that humans made earlier to set the system out of whack.

Because if this was a natural recolonization where Barred Owls had just arrived on their own into Spotted Owl territory, it would be very hard to justify the killing of them to save the Spotted Owl. So a number of things have to line up for the ethical argument to hold water and to be quite frank. It's not clear even if those things line up. So even if it is the case that humans caused the arrival of the Barred Owl in Spotted Owl territory, even if it is the case that the Barred Owl is uniquely responsible for the Spotted Owls decline.

If it is the case that you can do something about it, it's still not clear that you should actually be out there shooting Barred Owls to save Spotted Owls. And though I was out in the forest with somebody who felt like it was justified, and I spoke to the coordinator of this experiment who also laid out the reasons why they thought it was justified. I spoke to two other owl specialists who didn't think that was worth doing. And this included one specialist who had spent eight years working to protect the northern Spotted Owl.

So even after those eight years, they felt like this was not a technique that we should be doing, it was not justified and whatever the Spotted Owls fate, we should accept that. So this remains a really tricky one, but it's just loaded with ethics. It's a, it's a really fascinating ethical case study. And in, in some ways, it's, it's a horrific case study because the options here are pretty limited.

Christiane: If we don't know how to answer the question, *is it better just to do nothing?* Is that, is that your sort of stance or?

Christopher Preston: The role of the ethicist here is to lay out the different considerations. I've actually always thought that was the role of the ethicist and the environmental ethicist. I've always felt a little embarrassed when somebody tells me about a big environmental problem and then says, well, you're an environmental ethicist, you can solve this problem for me.

So I don't see myself as being in the business of solving problems. But I do see myself as being in the business of laying out the ethical terrain. And if the ethical terrain is laid out really clearly, that opens up the possibility of a set of stakeholders, interested parties, getting together and deciding what their priorities should be. And I would say with the Spotted Owl personally, it's hard for me to decide which strategy is preferable, suppressing the Barred Owl in perpetuity, because you can't do this just for a couple of years and then the problem's gone away. These Barred Owls keep arriving into Spotted Owl territory. So it's really hard for me to say, if suppressing them in perpetuity is appropriate, or if watching the Barred Owl eliminate the Spotted Owl from its historic territory or possibly hybridize with the Spotted Owl in that territory, whether that is the way we should go. It's very, it's very complicated, very difficult to decide. My role I think is to just help as many people as possible to understand the ethics there so that the decision can be made in a, in a democratic way with the interested parties.

Christiane: So you write and I'll quote you, "We need to relearn how to live with wildlife if this partnership is to flourish. This is a practical sort of learning, but also a philosophical one. It requires a wholesale reorientation in how to think about wildlife." And so, yeah, how do we start reframing the way that we're thinking about wildlife? Maybe with the help of philosophy?

Christopher Preston: Yeah, so some people have heard a bit about this book and said, oh, you've written a rewilding book and I've resisted that characterization because rewilding tends to create the impression you want to move people off a landscape, bring animals back and let that landscape be turned over to animals.

To me, that's not a very progressive idea of where we need to head from here. The old version of wildlife conservation was that well, people live over in one place and wildlife lives out there in the wilds. Increasingly, wildlife, if it is to recover, is gonna live with us and amongst us and in some ways even calling it "wildlife" creates the wrong impression from

the start because it creates the impression that these critters belong somewhere else out in the wild. So I do see this as a philosophical task thinking about how these animals might live amongst us and with us.

An interesting illustration of that happens at the end of last summer, when the berry crop failed in the hills around Missoula where I live and all of the black bears in the hills came into town to look for enough to eat. And we had, according to the bear expert, between 150 and 200 black bears in town at the end of last summer, which was pretty amazing.

There was actually, there was a black bear eating cakes out of the dumpster at the back of the bakery just up the street from where I live here. Now, we all had to keep our eyes open just be a little bit more alert if you went for a walk in the early morning. But what was striking is that there was not a single injury, not a single bad encounter between black bears and people for that month or so that these bears were in town. Now, let's be clear, I'm not recommending that we have black bears living in town all the time.

But what I am suggesting, is the way that went for a month in Missoula doesn't indicate something about our conception of wild animals, but it does indicate something about how if you're careful if you're thoughtful about it, a little bit of cohabitation is possible. And if you can do that with a black bear, think about all the bird species in town, you could do that with. Or rodent species, for example. Think about different ways that humans and wildlife can interact and go about our respective business and not cause each other problems.

And so for me, this is a philosophical rethinking of the relationship between humans and wildlife. It's a rethinking that's informed by science and it's informed by best practices. So that bakery needs to put a lock on its dumpster. You can't encourage the bear to come and eat cakes from the back of the bakery. But these informed practices can help, I think, with this philosophical reorientation. Which would one, give wildlife much more of a chance than they've had for perhaps the last century and two, bring a richness to our lives that I think is missing when wildlife are not present because having those bears in town last summer was uplifting for almost everybody in town. People really enjoyed it.

Christiane: I know Missoula is more of a college town, right, but, I'm assuming there's some farmers around, and, and farmers, I think, maybe are the ones that have the, the biggest problem with, with this sort of, with, with wildlife, with coming closer because they, you know, kill livestock or run through crops or whatever. So, I guess my question is, is there a way to convince farmers that, that this is an ok thing or is it, is it, you know, do they have a point? Do farmers have, have an argument here?

Christopher Preston: So I'm, I'm glad you've raised that. It is important that I don't sound like some kind of Pollyanna, "Hey, bring the wildlife back. No problem. Nobody has to pay any price for this." What is true is that when there is a price to be paid, it is born disproportionately by certain people. So if we're talking wolves and you happen to run a flock of sheep, you will probably pay a price that someone like me living in the city, teaching my philosophy classes doesn't have to pay.

So a prerequisite here is that those who want to see wildlife return have to be proactive and aggressive about making sure that those who might pay a disproportionate burden are fairly and promptly compensated. And often a lot of that burden is economic, but it's not just economic. Some of it is personal and social. The loss of animals is a pretty hard thing for a livestock owner to bear. So it's absolutely essential that those who advocate for wildlife are very serious about making good on the, the real, the not imagined, the real losses that those wildlife causes. But alongside that, it's important to recognize as I've mentioned already, there are new techniques available for cohabiting with wildlife.

We know better how to keep wolf packs intact, for example, and to keep them away from livestock. So it's important to know that we've got new techniques but also to know accurately and realistically what the scale of the harm is. So I looked up some numbers. I was writing something recently. This is actually since the book, but I was writing something recently about the number of cattle that wolves take in Montana on an annual basis. And the statistic—and this is from the Montana Bureau of Livestock, which is taking an impartial view on this, this is not a this is not from one side or the other—the numbers here are that wolves annually take 0.0016 of the Montana cattle herd. And if you listen to the politics around wolf, around wolves in Montana, you would find that number hard to believe because it, if you listen to the politics around it, you might think wolves were taking 1/5 of all of the cattle in Montana, but it is 0.0016. So there is a role here for accurate information about what is at stake numerically. And there's also a role here for up-to-date practices, well funded, effective practices to bring that number down if possible, even lower than it is already.

Christiane: What's the role of creativity in wildlife conservation?

Christopher Preston: Learning how to live with wildlife, takes imagination. It takes creativity. It takes a willingness to dissociate yourself from previous stories and previous concepts of wildlife that might have got in the way of cohabitation. So the idea here is that we say, all right, I'm gonna try something different.

I'm gonna think about how I can keep my past practices but do them in a way that is more wildlife-friendly. And a few months ago, I was with my students on a ranch on the edge of Yellowstone National Park. And the ranch owner was saying how she had figured out the safest and the most dangerous times to have her cattle out on the landscape. And particularly she was talking about when the cattle were giving birth to their calves and just by watching carefully what was going on, she figured out that if she moved her cattle out onto the land at a particular time of year and refrained from moving them out at the most dangerous time of year, she could cut her losses down to a fraction of what they were.

This took creativity. It also took courage. Because there was a narrative about how to run cattle that she had to be willing to change and she had to be willing to give up that dominant narrative and say I'm gonna do something different. So she was always looking, she was always watching, she was always reading the science and she was coming up with new ways of doing old practices that in the end were better both for her, and for her cattle and for the wolves because nobody wants trouble.

Nobody wants to have wolves killing animals if you can avoid it. If possible, that seems like the best solution. So that sort of creativity, thinking differently, imagining, how can this work perhaps in a way that's different from how it's been working for the last little while? Perhaps we can figure out a better way to do it. That's where I think creativity is needed if we are to successfully cohabit with wildlife.

Christiane: What I found the most interesting is that it's not, hey, you, farmers, you change your mind and come to our side. It's like, no, everybody has to change everything about the way that they think both, both sides, both conservationists and people who maybe aren't so friendly to conservation need to change the way that they think about wildlife.

Christopher Preston: Yeah. And, and one of the things I found myself saying, as I've been going around talking about this book is, some people might, might think wildlife is polarizing. I actually think it's the opposite. I think wildlife can bring people together. People love to see animals. People love that little spark, that little surprise that happens when you see songbirds show up in your yard or you see a fox trotting down the hedgerow. People love this. So why not think of animals as a way to bring people together? Yes, there are some difficult animals that are harder for some people to live with than for other people, depending on the job they do.

But can we not see animals as a glue that would help us overcome some of our conflicts? And I started thinking this way when I was investigating the prairie recoveries and, and the

bison, and I spoke to a guy who is an expert at building fences. So his name was Andrew Jakes and building fences that keep domestic animals in, but allow passage for wildlife species who might want to move through a ranch or through a particular landscape.

And what he said to me was this, we would start off talking about bison and then we started talking about Pronghorn Antelope and he said, "I haven't met anybody yet who doesn't love a Pronghorn." I said, "Really, even when there's a herd of Pronghorn on your fields? He said, "Yep, they ranchers love them. They don't mind them. They, they're not big enough, they don't eat enough that it's an economic problem. They're a beautiful animal to look at. If you like to hunt, they're a good game species. I haven't met anybody who doesn't like a Pronghorn."

So let's take that idea. There's nobody who doesn't like Pronghorn. And let's let that idea blossom. Let's let that bloom in such a way that we can use animals as a way of bringing people together. I actually think there's a lot more potential for that to happen than for animals to divide us. But if you listen to the media, if you listen to the politics of it, you would think that all animals do is divide us and I'd like to imagine a future where that's not the case.

Christiane: So yeah, this book is just full of interesting questions and things to think about. What's the one that continues to capture you the most? What's the most interesting one to you?

Christopher Preston: I got really excited about the way that wildlife can help us with climate change. When I looked into the science, there's a word for this which I don't recommend you use at the dinner table or with friends, "zoogeochemistry." That literally means the way that animals impact the chemical cycles. But zoogeochemistry for me comes down to whales helping capture carbon.

How do whales help us capture carbon? Well as whales recover, first of all, they hold a lot of carbon in their bodies. Big animals hold a lot of carbon compared to smaller animals and when those whales die, that carbon flutters down to the bottom of the ocean where it rests, it gets buried by marine snow and it ends up being sequestered for the long term. So that's one way whales help us with carbon. They also help us with carbon by eating in one location and then excreting what they eat in another location.

So this can be eating at the bottom of the ocean and excreting at the top or it can be eating in their feeding grounds which tend to be Arctic and Antarctic waters and then migrating and

losing all that weight in their breeding grounds, which tend to be tropical waters. And when whales lose that weight and excrete somewhere, they create nutrient blooms which leads to phytoplankton growth, which leads to the capturing of carbon. So for me, this is just a remarkable synergy. These whales, which most people are gonna love anyway because they are so smart and they are so charismatic and they are such personalities.

We can also love them because they are helping us with the climate change problem. They are helping us sequester carbon. I mean, we've got to do a lot of this carbon sequestration over the next century if the earth is to stay within inhabitable limits. But isn't this wonderful that whales can help us do this? So can we not look at whales as not just charismatic and spectacular, but look at them as allies and partners, creatures that are on the same side as us in the carbon struggle. To me, this is the most exciting way to look at animals as allies and partners in the years ahead.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Town Market]

Christiane: If you want to find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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