

The Dangerous Myth of the Noble Beast

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I recently read a student's paper saying 'as more forests are cleared and fragmented, elephants have no choice but to encroach into plantations in their search for food, water, and mates' and the myth of *le bon sauvage* immediately came to mind.

The myth of the noble savage, popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, has to some extent impregnated conservation biology's philosophy in recent decades. This myth is an idealization of people living in traditional societies, attributing them a noble spirit and behavior. Accordingly, conservation biologists have often assumed that human traditional societies always live sustainably and in harmony with their environment. Now we know, however, that conservation by indigenous people is uncommon (Raymond 2007) and that, for example, stone-age societies wiped out over 90% and 70% of large mammal species when they reached Australia and the Americas (Barnosky *et al.* 2004).

The myth of the noble beast is very similar and also widely spread in conservation biology. Large herbivores and carnivores often come into conflict with people not because they have no other option but as part of their optimal foraging strategy (Stephens 1986). For example, food for elephants can be very limited in a pristine tropical rainforest yet abundant in nearby plantations and human-dominated landscapes (crops and early succession plants are excellent elephant forage). In this situation, elephants may choose to come out of the forest we consider their legitimate habitat and 'encroach' into human areas, resulting in the well-known human-elephant conflict. The key driver of conflict in this scenario is not the amount of forest available for the elephant but the amount of interface between forest and crops.

Certainly animals are not to be blamed for human-wildlife conflicts. But the conservation of species like elephants and tigers in the 21st century requires effective mitigation of these conflicts and thus understanding the behavioral and ecological drivers leading to them. The myth of the noble beast has appealing emotional implications but can lead to ineffective mitigation policies and thus should be avoided in favor of a realistic understanding of wildlife ecological foraging behavior and ecology.

References

Barnosky AD, Koch P, Feranec R & Wing S (2004) Assessing the causes of late Pleistocene extinctions on the continents. *Science* **306**: 70-75.

Raymond H (2007) The ecologically noble savage debate. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **36**: 177-190.

Stephens DW (1986) *Foraging Theory*. Princeton University Press.



Young elephant bull about to be translocated away from rubber and durian plantations in Kelanta, northern Peninsular Malaysia.