

Imagined big cats in the British countryside

In contrast to recent research analysing an environmental aelurophobia (fear or hatred of cats) in Australia (Franklin 2006; 2011), the author has been researching another 'cats and society' story from the UK which appears to reverse the Australian case in interesting ways. According to this story, one told predominantly by *social scientists* (but supported by scientists and governmental agencies), the widespread claims and beliefs about the presence of non-native (big) cats throughout Britain are largely imagined fantasies, social constructions and media-driven hysterias. The key elements of this story are as follows: a few big cats, escapees, have been found but a belief arose around the preposterous (and unproven) possibility of their surviving and breeding in the countryside; a number of cult-like cryptozoological groups have formed to study and monitor these animals (developing equally preposterous imaginaries that link these cats to other mythic and primordial bestiaries); the press have picked up on these stories and instead of promoting a healthy scepticism they have reinforced a positive sense of their presence, particularly around the rural hinterlands of cities and town; and in turn, the constant stream of big-cat stories has served to create a solid sense of their presence in the countryside and thus are they 'seen' in the half light and shadows, predominantly by urbanites. However, this desire to believe in their presence draws on very deep seated meanings and changing relationships between British society and British nature.

Such sightings are likened to the long history of imaginary beasts in the UK and a yearned-for return of true wildness. In short, for some reason it appears that people now believe them to be there *but more than* that, they want them to be there, they have become the focus for a new form of *Aelurophilia*, or the love of (wild) cats.

According to this social science story (see Buller 2004; 2009), in pre-scientific Britain, the countryside resounded with all manner of wild animals, beasts, dragons and dangerous spirits. These gave a sharp definition, (an important binary boundary) to their sense of humanity, society and culture, a sense of self

and their ontological security. The advent of natural history in the seventeenth century, with its rational and empirical ontology, chased the imagined bestiary away while the extension of hunting and bounties killed the last of the wolves somewhere between the 17th and 18th centuries. With its remaining stock of 'meek' native animals so tightly nestled into the remaining and highly ordered spaces of hedgerow, coppice, woodland and meadow, the UK had become barely wild at all. Then, modern farming methods rendered the countryside ever more controlled, tame and domesticated with decreasing amounts of habitat. 'What we are left with is safe and sanitised nature, a complete reversal from the time when the non-urban used to be a wild place, where nymphs lure homebound warriors and where dark forces lay in wait. Pre-industrial civilisation hid behind the city walls. Post-industrial civilisation on the other hand, having tamed nature, spurns the city for the safety of the suburb and country' (Buller 2009:10).

However, as cities greened and gained urban forests through suburbanisation and garden city movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, the boundaries between city and countryside, culture and nature began to blur, break down and hybridise. Rare animals like the dormouse, peregrine falcon and properly wild animals such as the fox and badger took refuge in suburban gardens and parks. According to this story, under such circumstances older ontological coordinates of self and society also break down leading inevitably to the search for order elsewhere. As Henry Buller (2009:13) argues:

'If the human and the non-human elements of the countryside are to be bound together in a new relational hybridity, where should the former look for the necessary boundaries that define their own difference and offer the enduring psychological reassurance of knowing that the 'inside' can only exist if there is an 'outside' beyond it? In other words, *we still need the wild*.

Or more specifically: '... these feline messengers reveal our society's essential ambivalence towards the 'Promethean Fear' of Nature's power and ability to resist human appropriation. Nature not only needs to be conceptualised as 'outside' and 'other', it needs to be perceived as such (Buller 2009:23).

So, the vast majority of big cat sightings are not real (though they gain credibility from a few real cases) but an artefact of a deep-seated longing for order to be re-established.

Whatmore and Thorne (1998), and Wolch and Emel (1995) showed that recent anxieties about environmental degradation, bio-ethical displacement and species eradication have shifted attention onto defining and legitimating 'true nature' as wildness, and in spatial terms, wilderness (Franklin 2006b). This too has driven new binary pairings such as 'them/there – us/here, society-nature, domesticated-wild and so on' (Buller 2004). However plausible these musings are, the relevant binaries are always relative to *specific people*, and the focus and perspective of Buller's analysis is almost entirely focussed on urban people and culture. First, as he says, the alien cat phenomenon can be understood by 'modern urban society's impatience with rural nature's all too "human face." Second, he argues that big cat sightings are mostly made by urban people and 'appear to occur most often in the accessible and essentially urbanised countryside of major roads, low-density housing estates and proximal metropolis' (2009:17). Buller is influenced by the writing of Mike Davis in relation to the mountain lion phenomenon in L.A.: 'The Otherness of wild animals is the gestalt which we are constantly refashioning in the image of our own urban confusion and alienation' (Davis 1998:267 in Buller p. 22).

While the sighting evidence shows that indeed some sightings are made in urban hinterlands it is a gross exaggeration to claim that they are an urban or peri-urban phenomenon. In fact, a substantial number of sightings, possibly the majority occur in deeper rural locations and most of the hot spots are close to wild areas and away from any major city (e.g. Dorset, Forest of Dean, Dartmoor, remote rural Wales). This means that any analysis, which rests on the structural contrast and significance of the urban-wild boundary, cannot make an adequate *general* account of big cat sightings in the UK.

The anthropologist Samantha Hurn (2009), for example, reports evidence of sightings from Ceredigion, Wales. As she argues, in remote West Wales 'sightings seemed to be rather common' and her case study suggests an entirely different

reason why rural people may view ABCs (Alien Big Cats) positively. This very different story suggests that their positive meaning derived from becoming associated as *a symbol of resistance and liberation* for the local welsh community against historical and contemporary interference from outsiders (especially the English) and a *natural antidote* to an unwanted animal that was associated with them: the fox.

In this particular locality local people were still angry at the introduction of the imported English fox to the estates of the local gentry in the 19th and 20th centuries. Hurn relates how foxes spread rapidly and caused massive damage to small farm livestock and the livelihood of the 'honest working Welsh' (11). In recent years, two pieces of legislation pursued by the 'English' parliament had a powerful bearing on how local people would relate to the presence of big cats. The first was the 1976 Dangerous Animals Act which in effect meant that local people who kept big cats as pets could no longer do so. As a result they were liberated into the hills where, they became the scourge of the fox but remained mostly hidden from the community. Then, in the 1990s the English parliament also attempted to legislate against fox hunting and this interference in their main means of controlling an animal they never wanted reinforced their already positive disposition towards 'their' big cats.

For many of Hurn's local farmers, ABCs came to be viewed as highly politicized animals, as 'markers of belonging in a rural community'. She agrees therefore with Wilbert (2006:45) where he suggests that such animals appear as a kind of return of the repressed... celebrated as forms of resistance.'

Hurn's analysis suggests that the social meanings of big cat experiences are socially *contingent* and symptomatic of the wider historical and social milieu of the localities into which big cats enter. Her analysis reminds us that in matters of nature and environment meanings are rarely shared in the manner suggested by Buller's grand (and generalising) narratives of urban/domestic versus rural/wild imaginaries. Rather, as McNaughton and Urry (1999) suggest, they typically hinge on *contested natures* and social conflict.

There are also problems associated with Buller's view that the big cats 'have meaning' but 'exist [mostly] in non-material terms'. Hurn's paper reports that there was robust published forensic evidence for the big cats in her locality (Coad 2007) that substantiated her respondent's view that the big cats are real and known, if few in number.

Buller's view is shared by many other commentators, including tellingly perhaps, many governmental and scientific organisations (Wilbert 2006; Hurn 2009). However their 'contestation' should properly be made an element of the analysis, a view to be explored *sociologically*, rather than taken at face value.

In Buller's account attention focused predominantly on the human sightings and the dialogue and myth making that stemmed from them. The fact that there are many instances of recorded and scientifically validated cases of non-native cats at large in Britain is not adequately dealt with and particularly so in instances where the scientific/governmental communities (who have largely supported the 'myth' hypothesis) have been shown to hide firm evidence from the public gaze. The fact that very significant numbers of non-native cats were imported and kept in private collections, zoos and as individual animals remains at once acknowledged and detached from the 'mythic sightings narrative'. Buller recognises that the myth making is based on extrapolations from a few plausible or proven cases of big cat escapees (and here he makes much of Serres interest in how the real and imaginary take on an independent life of their own as intermediaries or 'angels', to use Serres (2003) term) but throughout his article he is predominantly scathing of their more widespread presence. Indeed he is not above exaggeration himself – at one point, for example, he notes that 'it is rather comforting to learn that the English countryside offers 'optimum conditions' for the reproduction of lion and tigers', but this was clearly included to discredit big cat sightings and organisations rather than reflect fairly on their claims which barely ever mention these animals.

Second, Buller's socio-cultural environmental history is sketchy at best and there is a failure to explain why it is that non-native and very exotic cats (such as lions and tigers) could be deemed *fitting* animals to restore a sense of lost wildness. If

such a longing was generally true, then the British would be surely be doing what the Swedes, Canadians and Norwegians have done: to restore their own 'dangerous wild animals' in the form of wolves, boars and bears (Marvin, 2011a, 2011b; Pretty, 2007; Whatamore and Thorn 1998). However such enthusiasm is at best, half-hearted (Marvin 2011).

The other possibility is that this alleged *desire* for big cats is misplaced or simply wrong. Perhaps, there is a fear and belief in them because they really **are** there and a belief is sustained through regular sightings of them. This is clearly the case for the large cluster of sightings recorded for the remote Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire during the 2000s. These also remained speculative and 'mythic' until, under a Freedom of Information request to the Forestry Commission (FC), it was 'revealed by the scientists that the government agency confirmed that two "reliable" sightings of large cats have taken place in the last seven years' (Woodward 2009). Why were they not reported in the proper way? Could it possibly be because the Forest of Dean is a major commodified leisure facility and an important investment of the FC? They know that people are actually sensible: they don't want big cats in their forests where their children come to learn and play (the animals in question were probably leopards) -and would keep them away if there were.

The 'longing for the wild' thesis is problematic because it rests too much on reported sightings and newspaper accounts **and** places too much emphasis on their urban origins. In Hurn's case a different story emerged because instead of using sightings as primary data, she embarked on a qualitative investigation *in the area where they were seen*. In this case the sightings could be related to beliefs and knowledge that only made sense once they were placed in their wider social and historical context. It begged the question as to whether this was a one-off or whether similar results might be found if it were repeated elsewhere in similar circumstances.

Results from a preliminary field study of big cats in rural and remote localities in South West England.

The study reported here, conducted in early 2011 was designed to investigate two remote rural areas of England which had been hotspots of reports and sightings of big cats. Here, Buller's urban thesis would not hold. Country people would be less prone to this imaginary because, from their isolated and barely changed landscapes, a sense of self based on boundaries between the city and the wild would not apply.

Even if rural people are charmed by media hype, it does not necessarily imply that they will receive such sightings in a *positive* way. After all, they are not protected from such wildness by the city's protective membranes. It could equally create a negative sense of fear and awe leading to demands for their removal but it is not possible to read this from the sightings reports alone. Further, if farmers and landowners had the most to lose, it might create the very opposite situation: where sightings are **not** reported. Re-introduced wolves in Sweden and Norway are famously not reported by locals because they wish to be able to quietly hunt and kill them on sight and therefore avoid the environmental media hype and criticism that a real sighting would create (Marvin 2011). Like the Forestry Commission at the Forest of Dean, many of them also run tourism-based businesses and small localities have become more dependent on the tourist pound.

Sightings in Dorset and Dartmoor

Preliminary fieldwork was conducted in two case study areas in a rural (North Dorset) and a remote (Dartmoor) area of the UK for ten weeks in spring 2011. An ethnographic approach was adopted in which I visited particular villages and hamlets (that were within areas where many sightings had been reported) with the aim of talking to as many people as possible rather than conducting formal interviews. In the very gregarious spaces of pubs, cafes, footpaths and local stores it is very easy to fall into conversation with people and gauge how significant big cat sightings have been and what local people think about them. I

followed Samantha Hurn's (2009) advice to seek conversations rather than interviews. Forty significant conversations were recorded.

Environment

In making a choice about where to conduct fieldwork it became immediately apparent that reported sightings (from Police records and reports to big cat organisations) were very far from random. There were three hot spot areas in Dorset and very large areas where there were none. The three hot spot areas were environment sharing similar characteristics: they all had an abundance of woodlands and pine forest and corridors of wooded areas adjacent to livestock farming. They all had significant river valleys where there was a great deal of cover.

In Dartmoor it was also striking how the hot spots were not out on the really wild open country of the moor (where a lot of urban tourists walk) but closer to those areas where the moor meets denser woodland and more mixed habitat/cover. At first there also seemed no reason why there should be more in the north-eastern sector that includes Chagford, Mortonhampstead, Postbridge and Okehampton, until one walks there and looks closely at ordnance survey maps. Then it is apparent that this area is adjacent to the greatest stands of forest, particularly at Ferworthy (pine) and west of Chagford (very mixed).

None of this is at all conclusive but it is consistent with the possibility of at least one or two animals, and this is, after all, all it might take to generate a small trickle of sightings over the past 20 years. This clustering cannot be explained very easily by the 'longing for the wild thesis': it would predict a far more even and random spacing of reports because, after all, these are imagined rather than real.

Sighting records in these areas also have an interesting pattern. In addition to these district-clustering effects there is also a cascading effect that is not consistent with sightings stimulated by media amplification. Many of the reports to police and big cat organisations in Dorset and Dartmoor involve several

sightings over a very small time scale in one small area. In each case it would not be possible for the witnesses to know of the other instances. This remains difficult to understand if they are imaginary but highly likely if they are not (though two or more people could mistake one animal for another).

Big cats in local communities

I had anticipated that preliminary fieldwork of this nature would generate good general attitudinal data but poor sightings data. However, one of the main findings is that a very large proportion of the people I spoke to claimed to have seen a big cat or have someone in their close social circle who had. Only three people in Dartmoor and 2 people in Dorset claimed to have seen or heard of nothing. I chanced upon and recorded one cascading incident in Dorset that was very definitely a case where the two sightings were made independently and without knowledge of the other. This case was typical of all the encounters I heard in Dorset. The two men were both locally born longstanding residents. One of the sighters was a local land owning Dorset farmer who walked his land twice a day every day all his working life. He knew this topography and wildlife intimately and had never seen a big cat before. But his sighting was made close to his house and according to him there was nothing else it could have been. The other sighter was a retired local builder whose encounter was also relatively close but also, the animal was seen against the grid of a gate so giving him an accurate way of sizing the animal and its long tail. Both saw an animal the same size and colour carrying its tail high in a way dogs do not.

The builder was reluctant to tell me of a prior sighting, two years before, because he did not want to seem eccentric, however this incident led me to believe that such encounters are not widely welcomed. He saw another big cat while in his caravan camping with his wife some 60 kilometres away and he and his wife realised afterwards that they could not stay there. This, in general terms is how these rural people regard the presence of big cats. They did not strike me as being romantic and imaginative but calculating and instrumental in the ordinary way. To the farmer this was bad news indeed. He had sheep and calves and his dog to worry about. Another farmer up the valley had found animals killed in

unusual ways and was clearly intending to defend them. None of the sighters I talked to admitted reporting the sighting. This was again for practical as well as reputational reasons but it indicated that the incidents whether real or mistaken, were not over reported but if anything, *under reported*. In Dartmoor, a retired woman had seen a big cat and no longer felt able to take her dog out onto the hill through the church wicket gate. Another woman had a pony attacked. Another saw one raid her chicken house. Another woman and her mother found a big cat in their farmyard among penned sheep. Another young woman in her twenties was walking along a lane with a friend and saw a big cat and went into shock and became unable to move. A gun merchant's experienced client claimed to have been attacked by one when walking back from a hunt carrying game. A roe deer was found high up in the fork of a beech tree on a farmers land, something that leopards do, or hoaxers perhaps....

In two separate villages on Dartmoor I recorded two conversations, one in a post office involving two middle aged farming women and the postmistress and one in a pub involving a group of retired wealthy villagers, it became clear that big cats had become familiar, regular and normative features of the landscape. In the remote post office all three had encountered a big cat, yet, they had not been aware of each others encounter until I had begun a conversation with one of them. They all had other stories to tell of encounters and in the pub the stories were recounted without excitement or awe. None of them were told after the manner of a ghost story or even an exciting incident.

One elderly woman who had remained quiet came up to me and revealed beyond earshot of the others that she had been brought up in the local 'big house' or manor and that as a girl she was frequently taken to Harrods in London and shown the exotic animals on sale. She said they included many big cats and that in the 1930s many of the other local big houses had small menageries with big cats, including *hers*. Then she told a story of how, during the Second World War when only the women and a skeleton staff of other women were left, they decided to liberate the big cats because there was not enough food to feed them. Others did the same. She said that she has felt terrible ever since, at first for the

welfare of the cats and later for people and farmers when the first sightings of wild living big cats occurred.

To obtain such a story after hearing so many sighting stories was not anticipated but it highlights something that is not at all unusual or remarkable. The wealthy landowning class was both numerous and evenly scattered, particularly across southern England and they had a well known liking for keeping menageries, no doubt emulating the major royal and courtly homes. There were companies supplying these animals, such as Harrods, and they did not stop this trade until after 1976 when keeping such animals was made illegal by the *Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976*. At this time, it is alleged that a lot of owners liberated them rather than comply with the onerous terms of the new license required to keep one (new expensive housing standards, 24 hour presence by owners, security cameras etc).

Clearly, considerably more work remains to be done but the results of this fieldwork shifts in significant ways the commonly held view of the big cat phenomenon in the UK. It does not demonstrate the existence of big cats so much as cast doubt on their purely imagined existence. This paper suggests that views about big cats are likely to depend very much on the *contingent* way they configure with the historical and contemporary forms of human dwelling in the countryside (see Ingold 1995). It confirms Hurn's suspicion that big cats have to be taken more seriously and suggests, yet again perhaps, the dangers of falling back on basic and simplistic binary oppositions in the explanations of complex relationships in our natural environments. Most of all it reaffirms the value of sociological fieldwork as a corrective to armchair sociological theorising.

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