

BOOK REVIEW


Traditional Christian views include the belief that humans have the moral right to hunt, trap, eat, or otherwise use animals, though this view has more recently been challenged by Christian animal rights (CAR) activists urging the church to re-evaluate this belief. The goal of Dominion over Wildlife? An Environmental Theology of Human–Wildlife Relations is to succinctly address arguments made by CAR activists, primarily through interpretation of Scripture, but also through scientific evidence. It is an uncommon effort to meld creationism with evolution as a unifying base against anti-consumptive wildlife-use arguments. The author, Stephen M. Vantassel, is arguably one of few with the necessarily unique background to delve into this equally unique topic. Vantassel has a Ph.D. in theology, owned and operated a nuisance wildlife control business for 10 years, and is currently the Project Coordinator for the Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management Extension Program (http://icwdm.org) at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Traditional views of Dominionism hold that Christians had the moral right to the consumptive use of animals (e.g., domestic animals, wildlife), including managing, killing, and eating animals. The first half of this book, as expected, relies heavily on breaking down arguments by CAR activists using Old and New Testament passages, including that the Old Testament contains many references to trapping and snaring animals. Vantassel summarizes CAR arguments as including virtually any interaction between animals and humans as exploitive, and he believes that CAR arguments are impossible to implement and unsupported by Scripture. Christian animal rights arguments transpired after a shift in ideologies appeared through 3 major events: the rise of egalitarian ideals during the 1700s, the eventual popularity of Darwin (1859), and the environmental protection movement originating during the 1960s (e.g., Carson 1962) whereby doubt was instilled about the ability of humans to manage the environment in a responsible manner. The author challenges CAR arguments on a point-by-point basis during the first several chapters by citing examples and alternative interpretations of biblical passages, which may be somewhat difficult to follow for readers without a reasonable background in theology. Nevertheless, Vantassel provides compelling arguments against the CAR activist ideology and draws several parallels for nontheologians, such as analogies to the occasional use of poor model-fitting techniques in science.

Vantassel also provides scientific evidence to support the consumptive use of wildlife, particularly through the use of a case study on trapping coyotes (Chapter 6). Vantassel counters claims that trapping is excessively cruel and results in environmental mismanagement through discussion of the shortcomings of blanket statements (e.g., trappers do not wish to cause undue animal suffering, feasible alternatives to trapping may not exist, a wide range of trap types and methodology exists, trapping is highly regulated in much of the world). The author cautions readers to critically evaluate CAR arguments while also considering the complexities of wildlife management. This chapter in particular should be of interest to wildlife managers, regardless of the school of thought prescribed by the individual.

A full chapter, The CAR Movement’s Argument from Ethics, is devoted to addressing ethical arguments against consumptive use of wildlife, some of which may stand independent of Scripture. These arguments are loosely based on compassion (i.e., a connection exists between violent acts and eating meat, vegetarianism shows compassion), restraint (i.e., freedom from gluttony and greed through simplicity in life), and stewardship (i.e., vegetarianism constitutes good stewardship through use of fewer resources and is a healthier lifestyle). Vantassel counters each argument, concluding that many facts have been ignored and that the end result would be, among other things, a reduction of our freedom to enjoy the bounty of the earth. Ironically, within some of these arguments, CAR activists would seem to be walking a very fine line by using science (e.g., evolutionary theory) to minimize distinctions between humans and animal suffering.

The final 2 chapters (7 and 8) include a summary of the CAR position and Vantassel’s alternative ideology. Shepherdism, as Vantassel describes, is the responsible and sustainable use of animals (including killing and eating) by humans (rulers of the biosphere), which echoes Aldo Leopold’s land-ethical principle (Leopold 1949). According to the author, Shepherdism more accurately incorporates biblical teaching and scientific evidence than other human–wildlife relationship models, but it avoids the negative stereotypes associated with Dominionism. The author acknowledges that CAR activists generally have maintained Christian ideals in that they have focused on persuasion, not violence, to deliver their messages, albeit messages based on muddled thinking.

Curiously, throughout the final chapter (Shepherdism: A Biblically Grounded Ethic for Human–Wildlife Relations), Shepherdism is explicitly mentioned only during the first and last paragraphs, and explicitly defined during the latter. Vantassel provides thoughts on the use of animals for canned hunts, circuses, and zoos, and that if the goal of animal use is harvest, then some level of pain and suffering is to be expected. However, as methods of harvest improve, then the level of animal pain and suffering tolerated by humans should decrease. Vantassel also discusses opposing thoughts of inclusion and exclusion of humans with nature. Dominion Over Wildlife? is a well-written book that should be of interest to both theologians and scientists. Vantassel