‘Nature is healing’: The politics of enchantment
Cathy Elliott

The coronavirus crisis is demonstrating that nature has an enduring power to enchant us. But we must move away from constructions of ‘nature’ as separate from – a threat to or a victim of – humankind. After the crisis we must use the enchanting power of nature to build more sustainable relationships between us and the natural world.

‘This is the goats’ town now. It’s their time.’ Leroy Bennett, Llandudno resident[1]

A herd of mountain goats has come down from the Great Orme mountain and taken charge of the seaside town of Llandudno during the national lockdown. Unless you have a front garden, hedge or bay tree in that town that you are particularly fond of, you have probably been enchanted by the sight of these fantastic creatures clipclopping around as if they owned the place.[2] Meanwhile, we have also heard news of wild boar roaming through the streets of Bergamo, and the more prosaic flourishing of British wildflowers because the spring mowing of roadside verges has been delayed. It is tempting to take read these stories as signs that nature is resurging without the damaging influence of human beings, now that we have gone into retreat, and even that the natural world would be better off without our malign influence.

It’s not too difficult to see how this logic might lead to the posters, allegedly distributed by Extinction Rebellion (though most probably a hoax), saying ‘Corona is the cure. Humans are the disease’.[3] Things do not have to get so explicitly dark, though, to betray a curious assumption that humans are something separate from, and destructive to, nature. Any account of social distancing that tells a story of humans in retreat and nature resurgent is operating with the assumption that humans and nature are in some way opposing and antagonistic, if unequal, forces.

This narrative only works in the case of the Llandudno goats if you only look at a snapshot in time, however. A slightly longer historical perspective reveals a much more intertwined and interdependent story. After all, Kashmiri goats did not arrive on a Welsh mountainside spontaneously. According to local historian Eve Parry, the ancestors of these goats were imported first to France from Northern India for their wool. A pair was purchased by a Squire Christopher Tower in Brentford, Essex, in the early nineteenth century. He managed to breed a flock and produce a cashmere shawl, a very fashionable item at the time. George IV admired the shawl and gladly accepted the gift of two goats which soon became the fast-growing Windsor herd. They ended up in North Wales when Sir Savage Mostyn obtained a pair from Queen Victoria later that century and took them to the grounds of Gloddaeth Hall. It could be that they escaped onto Great Orme, but more likely they were grazed there with sheep, according to established local practice. Despite a local authority plan to cull the flock in the 1990s, their human neighbours rallied round to save them and so over one hundred goats now live and thrive and are enjoyed by tourists and walkers.[4] Their recent forays into town are also by no means the first and, according to the council, nothing especially unusual.

This is a fully human story, then. A story about commerce, about the march of textiles around the world, about power, prestige and royalty, about fashion, about agriculture and farming practice, about local politics and activism, about tourism and about annoying incursions of wildlife into nicely manicured gardens. The goats are also nothing unusual in being a human introduction to the British landscape. If we want to classify them alongside the startling London parakeets or grey squirrels as 'non-native' (and therefore, perhaps, 'less natural') we will also have to relinquish our attachment to deer, hare, partridges, pheasants, rabbits, and sycamore. Depending on how far back you want to go, other familiar species that seem part of our national natural world, such as oak or sparrows, also have their own history of human entanglement without which they would not be here. Similarly, everyone who has ever tried to grow a trendy wildflower meadow in their garden will know that they take a fair amount of human maintenance. These familiar flowers grow in low fertility agricultural land and need not only regular mowing, but also the fastidious removal of the cuttings to ensure soil fertility doesn't build back up. If the lockdown continues and the mowing of verges does not resume in the summer and autumn, the wildflowers will give way to perennial weeds, scrub, and eventually woodland.

The stories of goats and wildflowers are fully human, but also, like any human story, fully natural. Human beings are part of nature; we shape and are shaped by it. Whilst the landscapes we inhabit, no matter how green, would be unrecognisable without constant human action, every schoolchild now understands quite well that we cannot survive without natural processes that replenish the soil, the air and the seas. This account of survival is, moreover, not only about our bare physical existence. In his best-selling book of apocalyptic non-fiction, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, David Wallace-Wells provocatively suggests that if we didn't need 'nature' to survive, we could lose it without worrying too much.[5] Whilst this sounds extreme, viewing nature as a quantifiable good outside of human life, whose beneficial effects can be calculated and perhaps even priced up, is not uncommon.[6] However, our experiences of being trapped indoors, our longing to be out in the park or countryside, the painful visibility of social inequality viewed through the lens of who has access to a garden, and who doesn't, gives the accountant's view of nature the lie. Nature is not some external and calculable commodity, any more than it is our hapless victim. It is intrinsic to what we are and indispensable to our flourishing. We cannot exist without it and neither can it persist in its current form without our full involvement.

None of this is to say that we have to continue with our accustomed ways of living without learning anything from our current confinement. We should remember our great joy at the sight of the goats and the wildflowers and our misery at the thought that our green spaces might be closed to us. Future policy talk about the environmental implications of post-Brexit trade talks, the Green New Deal or a Green Recovery from this lockdown is vital if we and our planet are to survive. However, we need to steer clear of ideas about nature which produce untenable divisions between the natural and human world. For example, as Methmann and Rothe have shown, deliberations in the UN Security Council often portray nature in the age of the climate emergency as an apocalyptic enemy coming to destroy us.[7]

This is profoundly unhelpful. Nature is not separate from humans. It is not an enemy coming from us, nor a helpless victim that we need to save (from ourselves), nor even an external calculable good. When we think about life after lockdown, and about the climate crisis, we

need to draw on the love and enchantment we derive from nature. We can work with the grain of the instinct that makes our hearts leap at the sight of those woolly white goats: the instinct that led many to campaign to save them despite the fact that they are, in some ways, a nuisance. We can channel our enjoyment at the genius of farmers who use the nimbleness of goats to keep their sheep off the more perilous bits of mountain,[8] as well as our revulsion at the idea of imprisoned rows of overcrowded, factory-farmed animals emitting carbon and silently growing the next antibiotic resistant bug or zoonotic virus.

As Jane Bennett puts it in her critique of the commonly accepted Weberian idea that the contemporary world is a disenchanted one, there is no useful politics that can possibly emerge from 'an alienated existence on a dead planet'.[9] A politics of enchantment, on the other hand, will help us to learn more about the intimate alliances we already have with the natural world and draw energy and commitment from the love we already feel. The question of how precisely that might be done is the one we now need patiently to answer.

Cathy Elliott is a Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Political Science at UCL and a contributing editor for *Renewal.*

Endnotes

[1] Quoted in Josh Barrie, 'Goats invade Llandudno as empty streets give wildlife a chance to flourish during coronavirus lockdown', *i*, 31 March 2020: https://inews.co.uk/news/environment/goats-llandudno-wales-town-coronavirus-uk-lockdown-wildlife-2523916.

[2] If you have somehow missed this story, I urge you to enjoy these pictures: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/gallery/2020/mar/31/mountain-goats-of-great-orme-hit-llandudno-in-pictures.

[3] Jen Mills ''Extinction Rebellion' poster says 'corona is the cure, humans the disease'', *Metro*, 25 March 2020: https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/25/extinction-rebellion-posters-says-corona-cure-humans-disease-12457392/.

[4] Eve Parry, 'Aliens on the Great Orme', 1999, reproduced online: https://web.archive.org/web/20170630122239/http://www.llandudno.com/goats.html.

[5] David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: A story of the future,* Allen Lane, London 2019, p35.

[6] See Tony Juniper, *What Has Nature Ever Done For Us? How money really does grow on trees,* Profile Books, London 2013.

[7] Chris Methmann and Delf Rothe, 'Apocalypse Now! From exceptional rhetoric to risk management in global climate politics', in Methmann, Rothe, and Benjamin Stephan, (eds) *Interpretive Approaches to Global Climate Governance: (De)constructing the greenhouse,* Routledge, London 2013.

[8] Parry, 'Aliens on the Great Orme'.

[9] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001, p4.