



NATURALISTS PRESENT THE SURVEILLANCE OF biodiversity through counting species and populations as a mode of knowledge that allows informed public action to bend the course of natural history. In England, such monitoring, initially pioneered under the Environmental Trusts, only became important after the publication of a governmental report “Biodiversity: The UK action plan” in 1994 that built upon the recently ratified Rio Convention.

The range of the activities unleashed under this new form of surveillance is striking: Several thousand people attempt to relentlessly inventory all the animals and plants of England in all the hidden recesses of the national territory, giving rise to huge data flows. Though the scale of coordination and research activity is a social success story, the effectiveness of the resulting inventories in inciting public action has been difficult to assess. There is a gap between the importance of the wildlife monitoring system and the invisibility of the links between statistics and effective environmental protection. I would like to pursue the idea that these inventories are devices which are partly self-sufficient. The efficacy of counting and mapping wildlife lies in the act itself. These acts of counting should therefore be seen as a way of repopulating the natural world and of dealing with the deep feelings of loss that drive amateur naturalists.

A dual form of surveillance is practiced in these spaces: pastoral (care, protection, solicitude) and governmental (security, control, economic measure, power). In this essay, I explore this duality of surveillance through fieldwork in Somerset (UK), and I focus my inquiry on amateur naturalist movements. I have observed a shift in how the relation between recording and monitoring is conceived by these naturalists that echoes the ambivalence of the very act of counting itself.

RECORDING : SURVEILLANCE AS CARE

Recording is the term commonly used by naturalists. It means recording a state of the world at a given instant, but also keeping a trace of the recorder’s lived experience. Records are textual, iconographic and informatic traces which demonstrate, testify and evoke a natural history that is at the same time very personal. These records are kept with care since they are conceived as memory landmarks to reconstitute the past, both in nature and in the life of the naturalist. Recording fulfills a desire for completeness. It expresses a submission to an unknowable reality that it hopes to circumscribe. It adheres humbly and consciously to a multitude, whose profusion it patiently tries to assimilate. Naturalists compare themselves to collectors. Recording follows the gestures of collecting eggs, butterflies, insects, bones, feathers – gestures they performed in their childhood that gave them series to complete. For naturalists, collecting produces a series of facts rather than specimens, but it also accumulates things seen, touched or heard. Records are entities of numbers, paper or ink that make things present in their absence.

RECORDING and MONITORING

BETWEEN TWO FORMS OF SURVEILLANCE

VANESSA MANCERON argues that when naturalists take part in monitoring programs on their “local patch,” they are caught between two forms surveillance: care and control.

This engagement with recording also takes shape in the spatial and temporal aspects of the personal lives of naturalists. At a spatial level, recording implies exploring every corner of a territory shared with other living beings. In the English countryside, where many people originating from the city live, familiarity with local places is part of a feeling of belonging that relies less on filiation than on the production of a “home”. This familiar territory, like a garden or a street, is usually made close to one’s house. Naturalists call this territory “local patch”. It can be a piece of land, a path, a trajectory. This territory is built by walking and counting, with eyes and ears oriented towards certain living beings rather than others. These patches are not landscapes but assemblages of colors, forms, textures and sounds and exist for the naturalist recorder an abstract rather than figurative representation. This attachment to places does not refer to human sociability, which is perceived as unstable, but instead to a non-human population. Those who play the role of ancestors are the earlier naturalists who have walked on the same paths, and whose records are sometimes kept preciously in their home.

Inventories are therefore spatial, temporal and social connectors. More than a pastime, they are a form of affective and sensitive engagement of individuals in the world (Lorimer, 2008). Maps and inventories are means to repopulating nature. Counting is a way to make sure that all known living beings are there, as a shepherd counts his cattle. Counting those who remain is also a way to bring new beings into existence: It is a form of insurance and reinsurance. It domesticates and breeds the wild.

MONITORING: SURVEILLANCE AS CONTROL

Monitoring is the term used by conservation managers and by scientists to describe a method of recording that is endowed with a program assigned to a scientific protocol that is theoretically reproducible and reliable. Monitoring is linked to surveillance, vigilance and control. This type of gathering is used for management planning, including the administration of territories dedicated to conservation. Trusts, including Wildlife Trusts as the county level, have been key enablers of “monitoring” networks that have been set up since two decades. This particular brand of locally anchored participatory devices could network naturalists who were observing plants or birds by themselves or in small groups.

In this context, inventories are defined as devices to measure acceptable variables in relation to a previously determined desired state of nature. These inventories can be read as norms transformed into figures, and they act as whistleblowers in case of a threat to a site or to a species. They can also provide metrics that allow protection projects to be evaluated by funding organizations. These counting practices are situated at the articulation of, on one side, a planning-oriented government that requires indicators to assess administration oriented results. On the other, the practices support a strategic mode of governance interested in potential interactions between society and the environment (urbanization and biodiversity, for instance), and relying on statistics to support and strengthen local, national and international negotiations



TOP
Volunteers prepare for a day of observing.



LEFT
A naturalist spies nature.

to win institutional and financial support for preservation efforts.

The now common use of atlases which provide tool to enable users of biodiversity information to find, access and visualize data on plants and animals brings to light the emergence of risk mapping as a mode of government. Mapping gains authority and credibility not only through its objectifying strength, but also through a series of actions that aim to acknowledge the legitimacy of the map and endow it with an operating capacity. The atlas designed to inform decision-makers about risk objectifies, in a strong visual way, facts that must trigger consent and stimulate reactions at the local and global levels. Holes on the map representing the disappearance of species produce anxiety among key stakeholders and help to make a case for action.

Counting thus means working for an institutional power. Naturalist amateurs call themselves “volunteers”. This term refers to a form of enrollment in an “army” of observers at the service of nature. The use of this expression attempts to evoke patriotic tones since the goal is to mobilize efforts to save local species and promote biodiversity as part of broader efforts at preserving territorial and historical integrity. This public injunction has led naturalist amateurs to organize the recruitment and training of walkers, to renounce previously widespread practices of free roaming and keen observation of their patches, to dedicate time to natural reserves, to collect their data without receiving anything back, and to keep for themselves a very individualized and localized record of their knowledge.

This process of promoting monitoring, databases, standardized set of techniques and atlases gives rise to resistances, avoidance, and sometimes conflicts with the environmentalist bodies (Ellis & Waterton, 2004). Despite occasional setbacks, the inventorying system it produces continues to develop and grow. Indeed, the desire to inventory lies to the moral sense of duty that comes out of an ascetic ethics. Naturalist occupations enter the category of “pastime”. These practices take on both pleasant and useful qualities, but also require a strong personal discipline. Naturalism was promoted during the Victorian era as a form of education and personal accomplishment that endow the practitioner with a “godly” and sane morality (Allen, 1976).

Today, the feeling of duty comes from adherence to a political community through trust institutions, which attempt to enact change by representing their work as a force at the service of society, an adviser of governments, and a civic movement. Data cumulated from individual gatherers in a central database makes possible the construction of an image of a totality that provides a visual or spatial representation of the evolution and the distribution of all England’s species. This totality is the result of a social network and everyone feels proud to take part in the national effort.

CONCLUSION

Biodiversity monitors oscillate between two forms of surveillance. On one side, surveillance is a form of care for the well-being of non-humans they take in their charge. Counting and making inventories often constitutes a cooperative, affective and descriptive form of surveillance. Naturalist amateurs consider themselves as lookouts or watchmen. They know their “local patch” well and feel the duty to protect and care for it. From their point of view watching means being careful vigilant. Their relationship to local wildlife bears a similarity to the way a gardener tends to his garden or a shepherd presides over his flock.

On the other side, surveillance is a form of control over the territory and over other humans in order to guarantee the development of best preservation practices. In that context, the amateurs also conceive their role as the equivalent of wardens or guards. Counting and making inventories refer to the concept of “local eyes”, a relationship to the natural world that is an equivalent to the “neighborhood watch”. This form of sentinel is norma-

tive and prescriptive. The naturalists are amateurs in both senses of the term: they are volunteers and members of a political community, but they also have attachment to a territory that they share with other living beings. The coexistence of these two dispositions explains why the system of surveillance holds together.

For naturalists, inventories belong to three registers: a charity activity, a way to fight against urban projects and a sentinel of species extinction. This last aspect involves the act of sensing danger. Naturalists know in detail their local patches. This knowledge so intimately linked to place corresponds to an individual measurement of species presence in the natural field. Naturalists are considered as eye witnesses by conservationist bodies, but not as specialists dedicated to sending reliable warning signals of species extinction. In fact, the warning device is the monitoring system itself: the individual act of seeing and counting, subsequently gathered and interested into massive national data systems, is the only method capable of sounding an alarm and declaring that a crisis has been triggered. In this sense, the “canary in the mine” trope refers to the decline of a particular species. When a familiar bird is declared to be in danger, the bodies and groups focused on wildlife conservation give an alert to the rest of the world, including to national authorities. Interpreted in this way, the recording of a bird species disappearing, like the canary in the mine, alerts humans that the future of wildlife, as well as their own destiny on planet Earth, are imperiled. ■

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