Epilogue

The growing popularity of the hunting manuals coincided with the rapid
destruction and degradation of the forests and the gradual extinction of the animals
that medieval hunters had once killed *par noblesce et gentillesce et par avoir biaux
deduiz*, a process that was most noticeable and most rapid in England. The English
royal forests had reached their greatest extent during the reign of Henry II (1154-
1189); after this period, disafforestation on the average exceeded forestment, and as
the size of the forests declined, so did the power of the crown over them. Over time,
the land was granted away to barons, leased to landholders, and, in later centuries,
simply sold for much-needed income. Although disafforestation did not necessarily
imply deforestation, in many cases it did: the stringent forest laws had protected the
land from the encroachment of agriculture and the depredations of woodcutters and
charcoal-burners, all of which were far more dangerous to the health of the forests
than even the most zealous hunter or night poacher.¹

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the royal forests in England were
significant sources of revenue for the crown and thus jealously protected. However,
the importance of the forests sharply declined in the fourteenth century as the direct
taxation of commercial wealth became the main source of crown revenue; in
consequence, they came to be considered primarily as game preserves for royalty and
nobility, much as they had been in William the Conqueror’s day. As the population
recovered from the Black Death, the forests, regardless of whether or not they were

¹ The date usually given for the decline of the royal forests in England is 1327, the year in which
Edward III disafforested all of Surrey. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the forest
administration became more and more ineffectual: the regular Forest Eyre disappeared after 1368
(though it was briefly revitalized under Henry VII); the regard (that is, the inspection of the forest to
determine trespasses and damage) was discontinued in the southern forests after 1387. See also Michel
owned by the crown, disappeared at an alarming rate. Timber was needed for building and firewood was needed for heating those buildings; the growing wool trade meant that more merchant ships needed to be built, and iron could only be smelted with charcoal. By the sixteenth century, the English forests were fragmented and in poor condition, some of them containing nothing larger than foxes and rabbits. The English navy needed ships, so the forests were felled for timber until the end of the eighteenth century, by which point there was not much left to fell. The small plots of woodland that were still left after that date were considered obsolete relics, good for nothing more than sheltering crop-devouring wildlife. Anything common is despised and anything rare is cherished, of course, and public opinion has since swung all the way around. The remaining woodlands in England are treasured as part of the national heritage and their remaining flora and fauna carefully managed; but these patches of trees are a far cry from the vast forests that once covered much of the island.

The evolution of the hunting manuals provides not only a picture of changing social conditions in Western Europe but also a rough sketch of the transformation of the landscape. Some of the differences between manuals can be accounted for by changes in hunting fashion or local availability of certain animals, but the overall picture is one of steady ecological decline. This decline was the most dramatic in the British Isles: because of the islands’ relatively small size and physical isolation from the rest of Europe, the extinction of native species could not be remedied by animal migrations or recolonizations.

William Twiti’s Le Art de Vénerie (1327) mentions seven animals of chase and venery: the red deer, boar, wolf, fallow deer, roe deer, fox, and hare. Edward of

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Norwich, following Gaston’s example in the early fifteenth century, added the lynx, otter, and badger to his list, but could only say of the wolf that “fewe men be be3end þe see [i. e. in France] þe which ne haue seie som of hem” (MG 7: 877-878). In the late fifteenth century, the Boke of Huntyng reproduced Twiti’s list of animals (though by now the list was outdated) and added the marten, an animal that a medieval hunter would never have bothered with but which had apparently become fair game in forests where large animals were growing scarce. By the late sixteenth century, Thomas Cockaine’s A Short Treatise of Hunting makes no mention of large carnivores and omnivores at all and treats a fairly homogeneous group of generally nontthreatening animals, the larger of which probably only managed to survive through careful conservation: the red deer, fallow deer, roe deer, fox, hare, otter, and marten. Gervase Markham saw no need to mention the otter in the mid-seventeenth century, as it was all but extinct. The quintessential British foxhunt, the source of so much controversy in recent years, is a product of necessity: by the eighteenth century, there was simply nothing left to catch.

The bears are gone from western Europe, and only a few lynxes and wolves survive in the most inaccessible parts of France. The Pyrenean ibex, once so common that Gaston claims to have seen five hundred animals in a single hunting trip, is extinct. Otters and even the lowly pine martens are severely endangered. The wild boar still flourishes in France, where it is a favored quarry of big-game hunters, but England’s native populations were hunted out long ago. Ironically, it is only by reading the old hunting books – those same books that describe the best and most
efficient ways of killing animals – that we can get a sense of what the land used to be like.\(^3\)

Lest the ending of the story be too grim, let us look to an analogue, perhaps a hopeful one and at least an instructive one, in American history. Henry David Thoreau lived at Walden Pond, on the edge of Concord, Massachusetts, for two years in the mid-1840s. At that time, the natural resources of the area were freely exploited by hunters, fishermen, loggers, railroad workers, and ice-cutters. Although it was apparently a place of great natural beauty, it is clear that the ecosystem had already sustained heavy damage. The lack of animals in the area is striking: Thoreau’s famous observations of wildlife are necessarily restricted to rodents, birds, and insects, with the occasional fox or otter or raccoon. In his essay “Winter Animals,” he recalls hearing the tales told by the old hunters and those who remembered them, as well as reading an eighteenth-century fur-trader’s accounting book (a kind of hunting book, if you will). It is only through these oral and written cynegetical accounts that Thoreau knows the area was once populated by moose, bear, mountain lions, gray foxes, and deer – all animals, he says, without either visible relief or regret, that are not now found there. Mid-nineteenth-century Walden Pond was, in many ways, very much like modern-day Western Europe. Thoreau was fond of his mice, just as the English are fond of their hedgehogs and badgers. No doubt \textit{Walden} would have been a very

\(^3\)Even more ironically, the only large wild animals that managed to survive were those that were preserved because they provided good sport. Roe deer were nearly exterminated in England by the eighteenth century, and their populations only rebounded due to conservation efforts spearheaded by hunters. The wild boars in England today are escapees from breeding farms; many consider them a threat to humans and domestic animals and are lobbying for their extermination. See Laura Smith-Spark, “On the Wild Boar Trail,” \textit{BBC News Online} 14 October 2003, 22 December 2004 \texttt{<www.bbc.co.uk>}. Unfortunately, such conservation efforts mean little in the overall picture. The reinstatement or preservation of individual species does nothing to restore destroyed or severely unbalanced ecosystems.
different book, if it would have been written at all, if those woods had still contained large carnivores.

The area around Concord has not returned to the way it was before European settlement; but as abandoned agricultural land reverted back to forest, most of the animals returned, in one fashion or another. Today, the region is home to gray fox, bobcat, black bear, moose, and whitetail deer, as well as Thoreau’s otters and raccoons and hares. If Western Europe provides us with a cautionary tale, perhaps Walden Pond offers us an accidental and partial success story.

It would be naïve to hope that England’s forests will reseed themselves or that the fens, long ago drained for agriculture, will go back to being fens; or, for that matter, that the human population will or should tolerate the reintroduction of wolves into the countryside. But it should be sobering to think that five centuries from now, diligent scholars might have to piece together a picture of the African savanna or the Amazonian rain forest from the descriptions of nineteenth-century big-game hunters. Hunters were the first nature writers and they have always been some of the best; but they do not have to be, and should not be, the last.