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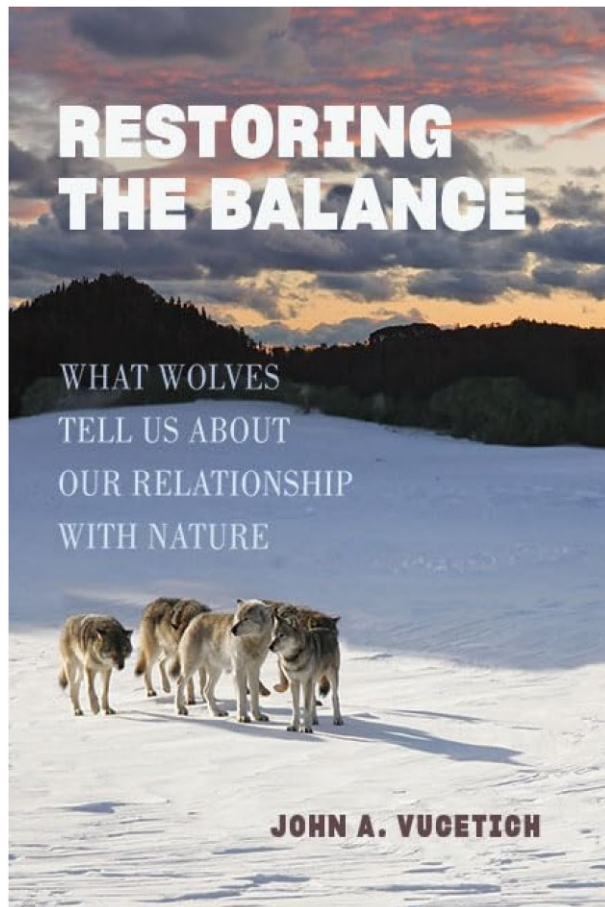
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## Book review

# Echoes of wilderness: the ethical and ecological tapestry of Isle Royale in *Restoring the Balance* by John Vucetich

*Restoring the Balance: What Wolves Tell Us about Our Relationship with Nature*. John A. Vucetich. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021. 416 pp. \$52.00 (ISBN: 978-1421441559, hardcover).



Wolves and other large carnivores occupy charismatic roles as keystone species within ecosystems, serving simultaneously as salient symbols for nature writ large and as physical embodiments of human meaning-making regarding our place and responsibility in a more-than-human world. John Vucetich's *Restoring the Balance: What Wolves Tell Us about Our Relationship with Nature* is a formidable exploration grounded in the ecology of predator and prey dynamics, their shared ecosystems, and the human contexts that determine their fate. This book is an account of the world's longest-running predator–prey study on Isle Royale,

in Lake Superior, in the United States, unfolding through the lives and deaths of wolves and moose within the island wilderness, set against a scientific and policy debate over whether to reintroduce wolves in the face of their possible extinction, a burgeoning moose population, and the severe impacts on the forest ecology. Broadly, it contemplates the global loss of biodiversity and ecosystem health and the philosophical quandaries of when, where, and how to intervene in a crisis of our own making.

Isle Royale, the evocative backdrop of *Restoring the Balance*, is a US national park and a designated wilderness area, remote yet accessible. It offers an ideal natural laboratory for a decades-long observational study chronicling the intricate dynamics between its wolf and moose populations. However, the notion of islandness is fluid; historically, ice bridges have allowed these species to traverse to and from the mainland, although such natural pathways have become increasingly scarce in recent years. This fluctuation in accessibility, compounded by human influences such as diseases and the effects of climate change, has brought the isle's wolves to the brink of genetic isolation and extinction. As Vucetich penned this book, Isle Royale embodied a crucial real-time case study encapsulating the dilemmas and discussions at the forefront of conservation biology and policy.

In all its complexity, Isle Royale mirrors the overarching biodiversity crisis, a crisis marked by the loss of species' geographic range and the interconnections and processes that sustain ecosystem functioning (Carlson et al. 2023). Anthropogenic influences have pushed this wilderness ecosystem to a point where it can only be maintained through repeated intervention. In essence, all ecosystems have similarly become islands, increasingly fragmented as the human population and material consumption expand. We are now confronted with the stark choice of allowing species to go extinct or actively engaging in their restoration. Vucetich's book grapples with these urgent themes through the lens of the Isle Royale case.

*Restoring the Balance* challenges readers with questions about ecosystem restoration, the intricacies of balance in nature, and our interpretative role in assigning meaning to natural processes. Vucetich examines the dynamic interplay of predator and prey systems on Isle Royale, illustrating that equilibrium in nature is not a static state but, rather, a complex, evolving dance of ecological factors, including climate-induced variables such as snow ticks and diseases (Ausband and Mech 2023). Through decades of research, the study uncovers the fallacy of a perpetual balance

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between wolves and moose, revealing instead a fluctuating relationship influenced by both natural and anthropogenic disturbances.

Vucetich's restoration philosophy goes beyond empirical data and incorporates restorative justice into ecological recovery. He highlights principles like common ancestry and ethical consistency, advocating for a compassionate and proactive approach to conservation. Even in limited habitats, he encourages the reintroduction of apex carnivores with human support. This perspective challenges the traditional notion of wilderness and calls for active stewardship, emphasizing our accountability for ecosystem health. The book's central arguments for an ethical engagement with the wild are reinforced by his empirical observations and ethical considerations for human intervention. It is a compelling call to action that inspires us to reevaluate our relationship with nature and adopt a more compassionate approach to conservation.

In the realm of wildlife biology and conservation, wolves occupy a charismatic position, risking the banality of overexposure in popular literature. But Vucetich's book provides a compelling counternarrative, delving deep into the interplay between wolves and their ecosystems and inviting us to reflect on our interconnected fate (Cardini and Crist 2024). The narrative skillfully transitions from a vivid recount of Isle Royale's unique history and the intricate ecological dance of its wolves and moose to a broader contemplation of our stewardship role within the natural world. It is a seamless shift that underlines the profound implications of the Isle Royale microcosm for global biodiversity and ecosystem management.

This book reaches out to a wide spectrum of readers, from those with a casual interest in wolves to scientists and policymakers in

search of substantive wildlife management strategies. Vucetich's synthesis of scientific discovery with pressing conservation issues invites a reevaluation of our role in preserving biodiversity. With the potential to reshape the discourse in wildlife management and conservation biology, *Restoring the Balance* aspires to leave a lasting mark well beyond its final page, inspiring a deeper commitment to environmental ethics and action.

### Aaron Bott, Matt Barnes and Susan Clark

Aaron Bott is a wolf biologist and research associate with the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative (NRCC), in Jackson, Wyoming, in the United States. Matt Barnes is a rangeland ecologist, carnivore coexistence specialist, and research associate with the NRCC. Susan Clark ([susan.g.clark@yale.edu](mailto:susan.g.clark@yale.edu)) is a carnivore ecologist and an integrative policy scientist on human–carnivore coexistence; she is an emeritus professor at Yale University and founder of the NRCC.

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