Rachel Carson Center
Perspectives

How to cite:

Ritvo, Harriet. “The Domestic Stain, or Maintaining Standards.” In: “Troubling Species: Care and Belonging in a Relational World,” by The Multispecies Editing Collective, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2017, no. 1, 19–24. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7770.

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

Deutsches Museum

LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN

Harriet Ritvo

The Domestic Stain, or Maintaining Standards

The categories of "wild" and "domesticated" have been taxonomically potent at least since the emergence of modern classification systems in the eighteenth century, and they were socially and economically potent for centuries and millennia before then. Most versions of modern systematic taxonomy have enshrined these categories in the form of nomenclature, emphasizing the value added by domestication with Latinate binomials: thus, *Bos taurus* is the offspring of the extinct ancestral *Bos primigenius*, and *Canis familiaris* is the offspring of the still extant ancestral *Canis lupus*. Two hundred years ago, in the freewheeling early days of systematic zoology, domesticated animal kinds were frequently elevated to the level of genus, with breeds of dogs or cattle consequently allotted their own species or subspecies.[1] But, of course, power does not necessarily produce or even require clarity. Although the categories of "wild" and "domesticated" are implicitly opposed, drawing the line between them—or, to put it another way, establishing mutually exclusive definitions—has never been easy. Many animals (and even more plants) have inevitably remained tantalizingly ambiguous or ambivalent. Several factors have contributed to this persistent imprecision. Some are scientific, deriving ultimately from the elusiveness of an abstract definition of "species" (and consequently of both higher and lower taxa). Others, at least equally influential, reflect cultural notions about categories and relative value. For these reasons, among others, the increasingly sophisticated analytic tools of modern biological science have not made things much clearer.

In particular, although domesticated animals are routinely treated as species separate from their wild ancestors, it has been difficult to pinpoint the theory behind this widespread practice. The guidance offered on this point by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, which, by its own declaration, "acts as adviser and arbiter for the zoological community by generating and disseminating information on the correct use of the scientific names of animals,"[2] is hardly concrete.[3] Nevertheless,

1 See Harriet Ritvo, "Flesh Made Word," chap. 2 in *The Platypus and the Mermaid: And Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

2 International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN), accessed 28 February, 2016, http://iczn.org/.

3 "Wild vs. domestic animal names. The majority of domestic animals and their wild ancestors share the same name but in a few cases the two forms were named separately, which has created confusion. It was proposed that the first available specific name based on a wild population be adopted. Therefore, despite the fact that these names post-dated or were contemporary with those based on domestic derivatives, the Commission recently conserved, as valid, the usage of 17 species names based on wild species. . . . [2003]," from "Biodiversity Studies," ICZN, accessed 28 February, 2016, http://iczn.org/content/biodiversity-studies.

many taxonomists continue to stress the importance of maintaining separate binomials, not only for reasons of intellectual clarity, but also because in many cases both the lived experience and the legal status of the two forms are very different.[4] Such decisiveness prescribes a clear course of action, while leaving the underlying question unanswered.

Or perhaps its implied answer is based on surprising grounds. For example, three distinguished taxonomists have argued that "since wild species and their derivatives are recognizable entities, it is desirable to separate them nomenclaturally when distinct names exist." In this formulation the key term—"recognizable"—refers to judgments that interested laypersons can make as confidently (or as provisionally) as can specialists. The "four main characteristics" of domesticated animals that they specify allow plenty of room for interpretation, or indeed for argument: breeding controlled by humans; provision of a useful product or service; tameness; selection away from the wild type.[5] (One characteristic that they do not mention is that which has ordinarily, although always problematically, been used to establish a boundary between similar species: the ability or inability of crosses to produce fertile hybrid offspring.) One of the commonest kinds of pet thus provides an example of the definitional difficulties that remain (or emerge). Most people would automatically classify house cats as "domesticated," and, as is the case with other domesticated animals, their scientific name *Felis catus* differs from that of their wild ancestor *Felis sylvestris*. Nevertheless, the authors of an article adding five thousand years to cats' historical association with humans (based on both DNA and archaeological evidence) hedge their bets. They answer the question "Are today's cats truly domesticated?" with notable restraint: "Although they satisfy the criterion of tolerating people, most domestic cats are feral and do not rely on people to feed them or to find them mates. . . . The average domestic cat largely retains the wild body plan."[6]

Since the preceding quotations have been taken from articles published in scientific journals, their authors do not commit themselves with regard to whether this ambiguous status is a good thing or a bad thing. Such restraint or objectivity has not, how-

4 Anthea Gentry, Juliet Clutton-Brock, and Colin P. Groves, "The Naming of Wild Animal Species and Their Domestic Derivatives," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 31 (2004): 645–51.
5 Gentry et al., "The Naming of Wild Animal Species," 645, 649.
6 Carlos A. Driscoll, Juliet Clutton-Brock, Andrew C. Kitchener, and Stephen J. O'Brien, "The Evolution of House Cats," *Scientific American* 300, no. 6 (2009): 68–75.

ever, characterized everyone with an interest in whether a particular animal or group of animals is domesticated or wild. Over time, while the desire to distinguish between wild forms and their domesticated relatives has remained constant, the valence of this distinction has shifted significantly. The eighteenth-century practice of labeling breeds as species simultaneously celebrated and reified the power of domestication; it also enhanced the cash value of breeds whose unique qualities were deemed to merit such recognition. But an alternative to the traditional penchant for domestication was already emerging; with the beginning of the Romantic movement, wildness became a symbol of prestige, at least from some privileged perspectives. Thus, the aristocratic proprietors of a few herds of unruly white cattle in the north of England and Scotland allowed them the run of their large estates and fantasized that they were surviving remnants of the aboriginal aurochs.[7] Similar fantasies have subsequently become attainable for more modest proprietors. For example, Bengals are expensive even in comparison to other pedigreed cats, but they are still much more affordable (and cheaper to maintain) than pedigreed cattle, whether ostensibly wild or otherwise. According to the International Bengal Cat Society, the breed is "a medium to large domestic feline that originates from crossings of the small Asian leopard cat to the domestic cat in an attempt to create a companion with an 'exotic' look but a domestic temperament." (To enhance the thrill, prospective owners are warned that "the energetic Bengal is not for people who just want a leopard print cat for decoration.")[8] Other feline hybrids designed to appeal to a similar market include the Savannah (domestic cat and African serval) and the Chausie (domestic cat and Asian jungle cat).

This is not to say that wildness has definitively triumphed in every context—and indeed one explanation for the difficulty of distinguishing wild animals from domesticates is that more or less identical animals can seem very different depending on their circumstances. The modern pit bull is the latest of a series of dog breeds (predecessors include the bulldog, the German shepherd, and the Doberman pinscher) that were appreciated initially for their ferocity (or other qualities associated with their wild relatives), and subsequently for an appearance and a temperament that retains some of the cachet of toughness, without any of its danger. Thus a typical apologist locates them firmly within the realm of domestication, declaring that "pit bulls are not

7 See Harriet Ritvo, "Race, Breed, and Myths of Origin: Chillingham Cattle as Ancient Britons," *Representations* 39 (1992): 1–22.

8 "The Bengal Cat," International Bengal Cat Society, accessed 28 February, 2016, http://www.tibcs.com/whatis.aspx.

the stereotypical devil dog put forth in media myth. They are companion animals who have enhanced the lives of many through their devoted people-loving natures, [and their] positively channeled physical prowess, bravery, and intelligence."[9] Or, as Vicki Hearne—a much less typical apologist—put it, with characteristic intensity: "many Americans believe that there is a breed of dog that is irredeemably, magically vicious. That is not the only reason the current era is going to go down in history as one of the most remarkably hysterical and superstitious of all time, but it is a bigger reason than current speculation allows for."[10]

Such dual significance can be conveyed by animals that begin as wild as well as by those that begin as domesticated. Thus, among the principal attractions for visitors to southern Africa are the numerous national parks and private game reserves, where many kinds of large, wild animals can be viewed in habitats that appear natural, behaving in ways that also appear natural. But it is also possible to view their conspecifics in situations that give a very a different impression—for example, in roadside paddocks that implicitly present various antelope species as incipient food items for people (livestock rather than game), and in tourist attractions that implicitly present ostriches or elephants as pets. In a more generalized, less immediate way, most zoo animals also have similar functions—not just made harmless by captivity and enclosure, and micromanaged according to the policies or whims of their guardians, but available for metaphorical purchase as "adoptees" and as cuddly toys.

Breeding offers a more abstract way to overlay wildness with the trappings of domestication. As the untrammeled reproductive options historically available to both house and barn cats have made them seem somewhat more wild (or feral), the application of the machinery of pedigree developed for elite domesticated breeds can make even tigers seem a little less so. Studbooks have controlled the mating of zoo animals, especially of representatives of species that have become scarce in the wild, for more than half a century.[11] The standard justification for this practice is to maintain genetic diversity and to avoid the inbreeding that may otherwise weaken small captive populations. But it has also frequently been used to reify the category of subspecies (that is, to maintain racial purity). Both agendas mean that zoo animals whose parentage is unknown are precluded from

9 "Pit Bull 101," Canine Justice Network, accessed 28 February, 2016, http://www.defendingdog.com/id7.html.
10 Vicki Hearne, *Bandit: Dossier of a Dangerous Dog* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 7.
11 Peter J. S. Olney, "Studbook," in *Encyclopedia of the World's Zoos, R–Z*, ed. Catharine E. Bell, vol. 3 (Detroit: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 1180.

breeding, and zoo animals whose parentage is deemed inappropriate may be precluded from breathing. The famous episode at the Copenhagen zoo provided an extreme (or at least spectacular) case of the possible consequences of such policies. A young giraffe named Marius (another indication of his status as a notional pet), just past the stage of baby cuteness, was shot, then publicly dissected, then fed to the local lions. In language that resonates at least as much with economics and marketing as with zoology and conservation, he was declared surplus, both genetically (that is, there were no suitable partners for him within the network of approved European zoos) and physically (that is, he took up a lot of room, and accommodation for large zoo animals is limited).

The advent of DNA analysis in recent decades has made it both easier to distinguish between domesticated animals and wild ones, and more difficult. For example, the Scottish Wildcat Association was established in 2007 to protect the small remaining British subpopulation of the very widely distributed species ancestral to domestic cats. (Again, the fact that such creatures are considered worthy of protection signals a distinctively modern valuation of wild animals; Victorian gamekeepers hunted down the ancestors of these cats and nailed their skins to barn doors.) The targeted felines strongly resemble domestic tabbies, although they tend to be larger and more irascible. Perhaps for this reason, the distinction between pure wild animals and those contaminated by miscegenation features prominently on the association's website: "In 2004 a team of scientists . . . estimated that 400 wildcats remained, the other 5,000 or so being feral domestic cats or hybrid mixes of domestic and wildcat." It further advocated "improving legal protection, launching a public awareness campaign, supporting the captive breeding program and creating special reserves for wildcats which would in turn benefit many other species."[12] As a result of these efforts, the Scottish wildcat was declared a "priority species" (at least in Scotland). It therefore became eligible to benefit from the establishment of a studbook, a captive breeding program, and other measures that blur the cultural boundary between the wild and the domesticated, even as they attempt to reinforce the genetic boundary that separates them. The efficacy of these measures has been questionable, however, and the association currently supports an enterprise devoted to "complete feral cat removal across a vast landscape using a humane trap, neuter and return methodology."[13]

12 Scottish Wildcat Association, accessed 5 March, 2014, http://www.scottishwildcats.co.uk/wildcat.html.
13 Wildcat Haven, accessed 28 February, 2016, https://www.wildcathaven.com/about/.

The case of the American bison is more puzzling still. Having teetered on the brink of extinction in the late nineteenth century, it has become one of the success stories of species preservation. Although their free-ranging populations remain far below their historical maximum (in the tens of thousands compared to estimates as high as 50 million or more[14]), bison are now sufficiently numerous to be eaten undiluted as "buffaloburgers" or in hybridized form as "beefalo." But the relation of contemporary bison to the noble former inhabitants of the Great Plains is far from straightforward. The animals who end up in fast food restaurants and grocery stores clearly come from domesticated stock, not from the wild herds that roam Yellowstone National Park; in fact, the name beefalo indicates its mixed descent from both the American bison (*Bison bison*) and the domestic cow (*Bos taurus*). But it also appears that beneath their reassuring demographic success, even the apparently wild bison populations may be similarly compromised. They look like bison and they act like bison; they seem indistinguishable from the iconic beast who once adorned the American nickel. But looks can be deceptive; an article in the *Sierra* magazine pointedly celebrates the 3,700 Yellowstone bison as "free of cattle genes . . . our last wild bison."[15] Despite their reassuring phenotype, most of the current American bison (in public herds as well as in private herds) include substantial genetic contributions from domesticated cattle.[16] At least in theory (and if it is assumed that genotype trumps phenotype), this raises substantial questions about exactly what has been saved and why.

14 "Bison Factsheet," San Diego Zoo, accessed 28 February, 2016, http://library.sandiegozoo.org/factsheets/bison/bison.htm.

15 Molly Loomis, "Bison and Boundaries," *Sierra* (2013): 28.

16 James N. Derr, Philip W. Hedrick, Natalie D. Halbert, Louis Plough, Lauren Dobson, Julie L. King, Calvin Duncan, et al., "Phenotypic Effects of Cattle Mitochondrial DNA in American Bison," *Conservation Biology* 26 (2012): 1130–36.