

Multispecies Health in the City: Going Beyond the Green

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Abstracts

Mouse in the House: The Biopolitics of 'Transspecies Border Crossing'

Heather Lynch, Glasgow Caledonian University

Mus musculus domesticus is a form of life that is benefitting from human impacts on environment. Not quite as feared as their cousins the rat but nevertheless despised across the world. Only mice brought into the service of human health are allowed to trespass into human worlds, the rest are condemned. In this presentation I will discuss a particular encounter with a mouse which transfigured a Glasgow home into warzone. This tale offers insight into the violence of multispecies living. A violence that Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito finds at the centre of community. This violence that impacts human and non-human life offers insight into the repercussions of human biopolitical attempts to dominate the life worlds of the planet. Human capacity for extraction and exploitation of wider environments has ushered in technological developments that have led to improved human life in some ways, albeit unequal. Yet it has resulted in reprisal.

This real-life tale of multispecies trespass, illuminates the harms of the normative biopolitical stance in human/animal relations. It is a story of Nietzschean 'ressentiment' or 'triumph of the weak as weak'. Human-mouse encounters expose what it is to be out of control and powerless in a fast-changing world that invents ever new ways to evade human dominance.

Animal Politics and Environmental Health: The Ambivalent Ecologisation of Urban Rat Management

Maud Chalmandrier, University of Amsterdam

So-called "pest" animals such as pigeons, rats, cockroaches, and bedbugs, thrive in cities in a persistent and sometimes even resurgent way, inextricably connected to urban life. Contemporary urban pest management has faced many challenges, ranging from more restrictive regulations on the use of toxic products potentially harmful to the environment and human health, to phenomena of species resistance, the promotion of human-wildlife cohabitation and growing ethical concern on animal welfare. This movement expresses the "ecologisation" of urban politics at the intersection between greening, urban biodiversity and public health. The communication critically explores politics and practices of urban rat management under ecologisation processes, focusing on the everyday work of municipal employees in relation to rats' life and the urban environment.

The field research is based on an ethnographic study of the municipal hygiene and salubrity service of the Parisian administration in charge of rat management in the city's public indoor and outdoor spaces, which is historically part of the health (and not green spaces) department. Since 2017, Paris has been developing an "integrated pest management" strategy for rat populations as part of the new municipal environmental health plan. Based on a theoretical approach inspired by animal geography and sociology of work, the method combines field observations, municipal archives and interviews.

I first examine how the long-standing urban rat management has been incorporated into the "environmental health" strategy of the Parisian administration, recently promoted and labelled as a One Health approach, and how it reconfigures politics and rat framing as part of urban nature. I particularly show how an intensification of "war" on rats aimed at making them invisible to the everyday experience of city dwellers, was associated with the integration of concerns about the consequences of the use of anticoagulant rodenticides for human, animal and environmental health.

Then, I explore multispecies interactions involved in the technologies and embodied practices of professionals performing rat control, analysing traps and baits as ecological devices (Kelty, 2023). I focus on rats' ability to ignore and resist human spatial control, and how issues of toxic entanglements are negotiated when trying to target rat populations while preserving other living beings.

The results aim to show how pest controllers deal with the complex social and environmental interdependencies in which the management of so-called urban pests is embedded, thus highlighting the ambivalent articulation between ecologisation processes and multispecies cohabitation in contemporary urban nature politics.

Unloved Animals and the Pursuit of Urban Health: What Can Freshwater Parasites and Bed Bugs Teach Us?

Joëlle Salomon Cavin, University of Lausanne

In recent years, my research has focused on the issue of "unloved" animals in urban environments (e.g. Indésirables!?). While urban nature is often associated with greenery and improving quality of life, I am more specifically interested in a type of unwanted urban wildlife that can diminish this quality of life. From simple nuisances such as pigeons or noisy crows, to more invasive species like rats that penetrate personal spaces, urban wildlife can severely impact health, as seen with tiger mosquitoes, which are vectors for diseases.

In this seminar, I will use my current projects—one on human-bedbug relations in domestic spaces, and the other on the perception of freshwater fish parasites—as a starting point to discuss the links between unloved animals and the pursuit of urban health. On one hand, I will demonstrate that bed bugs, while not associated with disease transmission, pose a significant threat to human health in various ways; on the other hand, I will show that parasites, though primarily linked to disease, are key indicators of ecosystem health and align with the One Health approach.

Finding Hope in the Depths of Winter: How Snowdropping Connects Us to Nature

Glen Cousquer, University of Edinburgh

The snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) and its relatives are not native to the UK, although exactly when they were introduced is unclear. They may have been grown as an ornamental garden plant as early as the 16th century, but were not recorded in the wild until the late 18th century. With the development of Occupational Health in the shadow of the Crimean War, the ability for snowdrops, appearing in the depths of winter, to contribute to the recovery of war veterans became well recognised. Today, they continue to help us find hope in dark times. As one of the first signs of Spring they are widely appreciated by many, so much so that they have established surprising allies: In Fife

and the Lothians, for example, organised groups have been snowdropping for decades, and many urban parks and Local Nature Reserves are now splendid places to view these earliest of Spring flowers. The relationships we have with place-time, and with the seasons and rhythms of nature, are thus complex and emergent. This raises challenging questions about the narrow biomedical model of ecosystem health that is favoured in the natural and medical sciences. This presentation will present and discuss the significance of sympoietic worldings that break through the frosty ground, and the frozen wastes of false dualisms.

Reimagining Urban Nature: Exploring Social and Ecological Connections in India

Seema Mundoli, Azim Premji University

During our research and outreach on nature in cities in India we have often had to begin by clarifying that there IS nature in cities. In doing this we have used the lens of commons in exploring the interlinkages between nature—that is often unacknowledged or ignored—and society. We have looked at different ecosystems from lakes, ponds, parks, wooded groves, cemeteries, remnant grazing lands, and avenue trees to understand the social, cultural, subsistence and economic relationships that people have with urban nature, as well as the ecological importance of urban ecosystems for the city. Our concern has been to highlight not just the critical role of nature in cities, but also how visions of urban planning that are neither socially just nor environmentally sustainable erode long-standing relationships that a city and its residents had with nature. Our research and outreach focus on how we can envision cities in the global south where both nature and people can thrive—and not just exist.

Urban Leopards and Feral Life: Multispecies Health in Landscapes of Urban-Wild Enmeshment

Nitin Bathla, ETH Zurich

As urbanization extends its reach into agrarian regions and so-called “nature-protected” areas, the cultural constructs of “urban” and “wilderness”—if they were ever truly distinct—are dissolving, becoming increasingly intertwined. Alongside this pervasive urbanization and the intensification of agrarian practices, rewilding movements have emerged to address environmental anxieties by reintegrating elements of wilderness into urbanized landscapes. A striking consequence is the growing presence of megafauna—such as leopards, wolves, cougars, and foxes—in human-inhabited agrarian and urban environments where they often subsist on feral lifeforms like dogs. This contribution focuses on leopards, whose presence is notably increasing in cities across South and Southeast Asia, as well as Africa. Against this backdrop, it examines the emergence of post-conservation strategies in South Asia that seek to navigate human-megafauna coexistence. These strategies reimagine human-megafauna coexistence, aiming to foster mutual survival and well-being within these enmeshed landscapes.

Rewilding and Operational Autonomy in Healthy and Sustainable Multispecies Cities

Christoph D. D. Rupprecht, Ehime University

In the quest for healthy urban ecosystems, proposals for rewilding cities have led to considerable debate. Following work by Prior and Ward, rewilding restores implies increasing the autonomy of biotic and abiotic agents through relinquishing human control. The concept of multispecies sustainability likewise connects meeting the diverse needs of multiple species through operational autonomy. However, health-focused policies have often focused on reducing nonhuman autonomy. Considering examples from informal green space to experimental campus interventions and speculative fiction, I argue that changes in our understanding of (more-than-human) health and cities are inextricably linked.

Making Breathing Visible: Agricultural Practices and Urban Atmospheres in India

Vasundhara Bhojvaid, Shiv Nadar University

Since 2014 Delhi has remained the most (air) polluted city in the world. One reason for this, is the long range transport of pollution from open biomass burning in upwind rural regions during the crop burning season twice a year. In the states of northern India, farmers typically have around two weeks between bringing in the rice and planting the wheat. Farmer unions have actively protested against strict enforcement of stubble burning laws, arguing they are unfair and ignore other sources of pollution. In air quality management science, policy and advocacy, farmers have been vilified as causative agents of the detrimental effects of air pollution in Delhi, while their bodily health and livelihood practices have been overlooked. Through a focus on breath and breathing, I will foreground the environmental connections between farming livelihoods, dwindling water in agricultural fields, urban governance and climate change. This will allow an interrogation of how urban-rural dynamics are made and dissolved by freely flowing, ephemeral air that remains transboundary and does not recognize where a city ends or begins.

Mosquito Affordances: Health and Ecologies Beyond the Green and the Grey

Tullio da Silva Maia, University of Amsterdam

Investment in green infrastructures in wealthy and economically emergent countries has been a common response to potential harming effects of climate changes. Green roofs, community gardens and public parks are some of the common examples of infrastructural networks aimed at promoting sustainable and *healthy* cities. Common side effect of such planning are undesired multispecies encounters. For instance, the flourishing of beings such as rats, snakes, fungi and microbes in green spaces of cities can be disruptive to Edenic imaginaries of greener – therefore healthier – cities. What can we, multidisciplinary scholars, learn from undesired encounters happening when the forest green meets the urban grey? In this paper, I navigate through mosquito ecologies to trouble standard spatial understandings of disease and health, which commonly rely on dichotomic categories such as healthy/unhealthy city/forest. Mosquito species such as *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus* adapt easily to environments conventionally understood as *anthropomorphised*, among which rural areas and forest edges. Their thriving in such environments is understood here in terms of affordances, a concept I use to provoke conventional ecological understandings of spaces. Namely, they look at

species as passively distributed in coherently organised and categorised spaces. From the affordance perspective, species – and people, infrastructures, regulations, and so on – are actively producing spaces that blur city-forest divisions. By navigating through this ecological understanding of species and spaces, I propose possibilities of living with mosquitoes that understand care and security as produced through – not despite of – mosquito nuisance buzz, landing, and bites.

Rethinking Blue Spaces as Multifunctional Landscapes

Sukanya Basu, University of Göttingen

Urban blue spaces—such as lakes, rivers, ponds, and wetlands—are vital for ecology, recreation, and culture, yet their role in sustainable food systems remains overlooked. As cities face food insecurity, climate change, and socio-economic disparities, these spaces offer untapped potential for urban resilience. However, foraging in cities is often stigmatized, with edible plants dismissed as weeds and removed to maintain manicured landscapes. This erases traditional knowledge of edible and medicinal species, disrupting ecosystems and diminishing cultural heritage. Our study on foraging in blue spaces across four major Indian cities, based on 1,200 survey responses, highlights its significance. Over half of respondents forage, with higher participation among socioeconomically vulnerable groups, particularly women and individuals from marginalized castes. Access to home or community gardens and intergenerational knowledge strongly influence foraging practices. Urban blue and green spaces, if designed inclusively, can enhance food security and biodiversity. However, current management often excludes traditional, community-driven relationships with nature. Recognizing foraging as a valuable urban practice can restore lost food knowledge, promote environmental justice, and foster resilient, multifunctional landscapes. Policymakers must move beyond aestheticized spaces to embrace nature-based solutions that nourish both people and ecosystems.

Keynote

Visioning Healthy More-Than-Human Cities

Alice J. Hovorka, York University

In cities around the world, humans encounter *nature* at every turn. Cities are made up of ecological processes (water cycles, soil formation, air circulation, energy flows) and provide habitat for diverse plants and animals that collectively shape urban form, function, and everyday life. In short, cities are more-than-human. Unfortunately, cities are often conceptualized in anthropocentric terms, rendering invisible the nature upon which humans depend, the nature that allows humans to thrive, and the nature that itself has a right to exist. What happens when we re-conceptualize ‘the city’ in terms of humans and nonhumans living together as part of complex ecologies, all deserving recognition and opportunities to flourish within their own urban experiences? How might this help us vision necessarily *healthy* cities? Empirical examples of urban agriculture and urban animals help us imagine the possibilities. Feminist posthumanist conceptual frames help us articulate the possibilities therein.