

The World Hunt: An Environmental History of the Commodification of Animals  
By **John F. Richards**. University of California Press, 2014 (161 pages).  
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*The World Hunt: An Environmental History of the Commodification of Animals* is written by John F. Richards, a 'pioneer in environmental history' as J. R. McNeill calls him in his introduction to the volume. This introduction explains how this unique yet not always easily accessible text exploring the environmental and socio-economic dimensions of commercial exploitation of non-humans came into being, and how it can be seen in the contexts of the history of human relationships to the environment and of contemporary ethics.

*The World Hunt* is an unusual volume in that it blends environmental history, the dispassionate narrative of facts, with a voice that is at times full of hurt, as it expresses genuine concern for the voiceless victims of hunters' increasingly global pursuits. The volume is essentially an extract from the meticulously researched and finely detailed history of hunting, fishing and whaling presented in Richards' exhaustive *The Unending Frontier*.

The narrative takes place between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, beginning with descriptions of extractive human activities that are geographically scattered and relatively limited in scale, but progressing on to a 'hunt' of truly global proportions, in which the hunted become global refugees of the on-going war that is captured by the sub-title's term 'commodification'. Linking the 'hunt' from the title with 'commodification' from the subtitle is one of the subtlest achievements of this book.

While in many accounts animals are seen as either 'natural' victims of humans, staple foods that are parts of human livelihoods, or as attributes in the enactment of traditional practices, in which hunters and hunted form a continuous circle of life, Richards places the hunt in a different context. From the fur trade in North America to the New World fisheries and whaling in the Northern Oceans, over time, the animals are subjected to a kind of 'new consumerism', meaning, for example in the context of Creek fur traders (from the southeastern United States) that 'most native manufacturers fell away and the society depended on imported goods' (p. 37). This 'new consumerism', which expands beyond the immediate necessity of the local tribe and goes beyond livelihood or traditional practices, starts to take shape into something that, while locally grounded, becomes increasingly intertwined in the web of exploitation. Be it the Siberian eskimos (now commonly called the Inuit), the English west country merchants, or the French whalers, each, while involved in different types of activities, seem to have formed a net of perfect entrapment that grew more elaborate with the passing of time and development of human civilization.

Not all the episodes described in this volume are equally well researched (perhaps for the lack of specific data), nor are some of the comparisons between different types of practices and underlying social and economic motivations internally consistent throughout the volume. While some sections—like the ones on Russian fur traders in chapter 2—remain thickly descriptive and place-bound and take up many pages, the section on early coastal whaling in the Arctic shifts between Spitsbergen’s bays and harbors and the Muscovy company to the Dutch whaling investors of the Noordsche Compagnie in Amsterdam within a few pages. These latter descriptions are bundled into Chapter 4, on Whales and Walruses in the Northern Oceans—a chapter as vast as the area it describes. These inconsistencies are possibly due to the fact that the present volume is an extract from the larger one, or to the simple fact that some records are patchy, especially as earlier historians rarely focused on the precise nature and scale, let alone the ecological consequences, of these ‘hunts’.

As it stands, *The World Hunt* is not always an easy read. Before she has gotten used to one place and time and one group of hunters or traders, the reader is suddenly transported elsewhere, believing that this virtual transport is linked by the invisible, consistent line of ‘commodification’, and yet unsure as to where the writer will take her next.

Sometimes Richards mixes grueling facts and measured details, including statistics on annual climatic changes in particular regions, with sudden, rare affective expressions and personal judgments, such as ‘three centuries of mayhem inflicted by European hunters’ (p. 150), or the ‘collective and individual trauma inflicted by the whalers on the survivors – highly intelligent, highly sociable animals’ (p. 154). In using these expressions, Richards sets his environmental history far apart from mainstream historians, who have referred to tales of human achievement, victory, and the strength of spirit in the face of cruel nature on the one hand, and to tons of meat and rich harvests on the other. None of these historians saw the tears in the grey oceans. But it is precisely this mix of facts and sharp reflections, as well as the author’s bold sweeping historical brush, that paints the canvas of the vast oceans or open steppes that slowly, across the centuries, take on the color of human greed and animal blood. It is this that makes this volume unique.

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