

[Review] Irus Braverman.

Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel.

University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 362 pp,

ISBN 978-1-5179-1526-1.

Esther Alloun

University of New South Wales

Irus Braverman's latest book, *Settling Nature*, brings together her recently published essays on the topic of environmental conservation in Palestine-Israel with updated material. Braverman is a well-known scholar in Environmental Studies. I first came across her work many years ago, through her book *Planted Flags* (2009) that looked at the politics of tree-planting in Israel and Palestine. It was also the first time I came across such a thorough account of the ways in which nature is everything but 'benign, neutral, and apolitical' in Israel and Palestine (*Settling Nature*, 247). It was a timely read that encouraged me along the research journey I was embarking on – a PhD where I looked at animal activism in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian West Bank – one throughout which I would be told time and again that animals and their protection are 'not about politics' (Alloun). In *Settling Nature*, Braverman returns to the topic of environmental politics and Israel's nature conservation regime. She shows, through a series of case studies ranging from the management of national parks and nature reserves (chapters 1, 3 and 5) to the protection of wild flora and fauna (chapters 2, 4 and 6), that 'nature management is much more central to the settler colonial project that is commonly recognised' (1).

However, and unlike popular broad-brushed accounts of greenwashing or environmental colonialism, Braverman does not present a simple narrative of conservation as a 'green façade' (2) or a thin veil to mask land grabbing and Palestinian oppression orchestrated by Jewish Israeli officials. Instead, she illuminates how, alongside and despite the great diversity of people (many of whom genuinely care about the land and animals) and ideologies that inform

the different layers of administrations and legal regimes involved, nature management is eminently political, ultimately driven by the settler state's imperative to expand its territory and secure Jewish control. Braverman's attention to diverse people, places, viewpoints (to be blunt, her way of not considering Jewish Israelis a uniform group or a mouthpiece for their government) and the ability to go beneath and beyond dominant narratives about Palestine-Israel, is one of the many strengths of the book.

Braverman is also able to provide this rich, nuanced account because of her positionality and methodology: as a Jewish Israeli herself (now living in the United States) and a nature lover and educator, she uses insider ethnography and builds on decades of involvement in the field as well as formal interviews with 70 people, primarily Israeli scientists and nature officials. As I have argued elsewhere (Alloun and Cook), ethnographies are a powerful tool for getting to the heart of complexity and complicity in politically fraught and polarised contexts. Without being there on the ground and building relationships with people, how would Braverman notice the game of musical chairs officials play between military and civil administrations (chapter 1)? The ambivalent, changing and at times contradictory positions different minorities like Druze, Bedouins, and Palestinians occupy (chapters 1 and 4)? Or the ways that for many Jewish Israelis working in conservation, 'there exists both self-reflection about their role as settlers and empathy, admiration even, toward the native' (47; see also 67)?

With precision and honesty (Braverman includes personal stories from her compulsory military service in Israel, and shares her doubts and discomfort over the ethics of visiting and interviewing Jewish Israelis in Occupied Territories), the analysis therefore delves into the fine grain without losing sight of the structure. Indeed, the book makes a compelling case for how nature administration on both sides of the Green Line (the boundary line established in 1967 that technically separates 'Israel proper' from the Palestinian territories) is actually part of a *single settler colonial regime* – a point long argued by scholars of Palestine-Israel working within a settler colonial paradigm (see for example, Svirsky). Braverman's work advances this argument through the lenses of green militarism and lawfare among others. She painstakingly traces how the settler state weaponizes scientific knowledge and the rule of law *everywhere* between the River and the Sea – wavering between what she calls the 'hyperlegalities' of rigid administration

and the arbitrary, ‘whimsical’ application of different laws in the ‘Wild West Bank’ (174) – to further dispossess Palestinians, this time in the name of protecting particular animals, trees or aromatic herbs. In this sense, the book makes an important contribution to Animal Studies scholarship focused on the cojoined and synergistic logics of oppression that animate colonial violence but also violence towards marginalised humans and non-humans.

Settling Nature draws on various bodies of literature and there are a lot of different ideas and concepts in the book. At times, the reader may wonder whether all these concepts are necessary, and why they are not more thoroughly examined, or woven in with the ethnographic narrative and examples. For instance, Braverman coins the term ‘settler ecologies’ at the start of the book, but it is mostly the conclusion that convinced me of what the framework could explain and do (other concepts like ‘juxtapositions’ and ‘ecologies of movement’, remained less clear).

The Animal Studies readership may also be surprised that animal voices and agency are not all that central to Braverman’s work: she admits it herself, the book is not ‘written from a multispecies perspective per se...[instead] committed to unravelling the *entanglements* between human and nonhuman lives’ (256). Indeed, in the book, animals act as ‘proxies’ (124), ‘totemic displacements’ (236), and agents for one side of the colonial binary or the other: reintroduced biblical animals like the fallow deer are ‘an extension of the state project, a reminder of its constant presence in the landscape’ (63); the cows act as ‘technologies for [Jewish Israeli] land takeover and control’ in the West Bank (39); vultures become an instrument of nature’s militarisation; and olive trees remain a symbol of Palestinian dignity and *sumud* (steadfastness). This is not surprising, and I think entirely understandable from the perspective of what the book seeks to achieve (another recent book on the subject follows a similar pattern, see my review of Penny Johnson’s *Animals in Conflict* in this journal). Reverting to the idea of ‘entanglements’ does not however answer the very real and tricky question put to me by animal activists on both sides of the Green Line: what of the actual animals? What happens when you put their interests first, even when these go against the interests of oppressed humans?

This leads to my final point. In tracing the contours of settler ecologies, Braverman also presents us with an ‘active hope’ (267) and possibilities ‘for reimagining nature that transcend the grip of settler ecologies’ (20), since after all, ‘ecology is about coexistence and relationality’ (16). In charting ‘a path out of the colonial present’ (16), she follows particular examples of people doing something unexpected, something that disrupts colonial binaries and/or species hierarchy: an Israeli border inspector putting the welfare of bees and birds above the letter of the law (chapter 2); Jewish Israelis protesting with Palestinians to save their homes from demolition ordered to make way for a nature reserve in Jerusalem (chapter 3); the cooperation between an Israeli veterinarian and a Palestinian zoologist to care for an injured eagle that Braverman facilitated (chapter 6).

I would argue that Braverman makes both too much and too little of these examples. Too much because she treats them as beacons for a future framed within terms of ‘transcendence’, ‘moving beyond categories and divides’ (69), and other idealised notions of justice and decolonisation. Too little because she is quick to dismiss these examples as fleeting, small, and ultimately falling short. Yet, and as I have argued in the context of intersectional human-animal rights alliances in Palestine-Israel (Alloun and Cook 2023), taking seriously these small, ordinary, contingent acts that exist and persist in the interstices of the structure is a radical move. When acknowledging (as Braverman also does) the enormity and power of the settler state apparatus, its social, legal, and affective logics, and the difficulties involved in forging alliances across the binary (for example, the colonised often does not want the help of the coloniser, something evident in some of Braverman’s examples, see pages 109 and 240-241), we can see that these examples may fall short of the structurally transformative goals imagined by theorists, but they are also generative of a socially and ethically ‘otherwise’ that matters. I also think that Palestinian attempts at animal and environmental conservation that are already underway (for instance the work of the Palestinian Animal League) can further help us nurture active hope for a different future, and also deserve ongoing attention.

Overall, though, *Settling Nature* is an excellent and accessible book that politicises nature conservation in the context of a settler colonial project, while shining a light on its complexity and diverse forms.

Works Cited

- Alloun, Esther. 'That's the Beauty of It, It's Very Simple!': Animal Rights and Settler Colonialism in Palestine–Israel'. *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2018, pp.559-574, DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2017.1414138
- Alloun, Esther and Nicole Cook. 'Actually Existing Intersectionality: The Place-based and Embodied Politics of Animal and Human Rights Activism'. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*. Online First, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486231159626>
- Braverman, Irus. *Planted Flags: Trees, Land, and Law in Israel/Palestine*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Svirsky, Marcelo. *After Israel: Towards Cultural Transformation*. Zed Books, 2014.