



A relief of a lion from the middle colonnade at the Temple of Hatshepsut, Luxor, Egypt

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## The Transitory Appeal of Exotica

### And the long-term consequences

After the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783 and before he was elected president in 1788, George Washington (1732–1799) returned to his estate at Mount Vernon to live the life of a gentleman farmer. One of his passionate projects was to have a deer park around his house, stocked with fallow deer (*Dama dama*) brought from England. He wrote to George Fairfax (1724–1787), his close friend and fellow Virginia planter, “Do you think it would be in your power, with ease & convenience, to procure for me, a male & female Deer or two. The cost of transportation I would gladly [pay]. If I should ever get relieved from the drudgery of the pen, it would be my wish to

engage in these kind of rural amusements—raising of shrubberies &c.” Washington wrote many such letters, and soon had his exotic wildlife refuge. It was not too long before many of these animals, who acclimated very well to Virginia, escaped and were running wild in the countryside. After his time as president, Washington returned to Mount Vernon and, perhaps as a grumpier old man of sixty-seven, wrote a letter of complaint to his neighbors about what he saw as poaching on his land:

I have been at much expence, and was at a good deal of trouble, to procure Deer; both of the Country & English kind; and have never yet killed one for my own table, altho’

they come into my yard & Gardens, while they are hunted & destroyed by others...

I had them once in a Paddock, but during my absence the fencing was neglected, and getting out, they have run at large ever since. The old ones are now partly wild, and partly tame; their descendants are more wild, but associate with them; and seldom go beyond the limits of my own woodland. But admitting they exceed these, the English deer, more especially, are very distinguishable by the darkness of their colour, and their horns; and I should have hoped, that upon the principle of doing as one would be done by, they would not have been injured by my Neighbours.

Escaping from Washington’s estate and many others, mammals from Europe ran wild. They still range the forests of North America. Many other animals came in with the importation of a European economic system,

including domesticated horses, cattle, donkeys, sheep, goats, chickens, and pigs, and all have become feral or wild at various points in history. French and Spanish colonists also brought many exotic animals, including horses and cattle that spread widely on the Great Plains. Feral hogs (*Sus scrofa*) are found in thirty-five states and number in the millions.

It is difficult to say just what impels humans to bring animals so far from their native habitats, but it is a widespread practice. Every ancient society known to archaeologists practiced this kind of importation of exotic animals. In the twelfth century

BCE, the Egyptian female pharaoh Hatshepsut ruled for twenty-one years (c. 1479–1458 BCE). She had outlived her husband, survived many assassination plots, and was extremely successful in her role as pharaoh, being accepted as a divine ruler like her predecessors. Hatshepsut was a prolific builder, and oversaw the construction of dozens of extraordinary projects, including her dramatic funerary temple and complex near Luxor. And she was a collector of exotic animals—baboons, rhinos, gazelles, elands, impalas, lions, tigers, and giraffes.

The Egyptian fascination with exotic animals considerably predates Hatshepsut’s reign. Around 2,000 years earlier, circa 3500 years BCE, Egyptian rulers had imported animals from south of the Sahara. At the site

of the ancient city of Hierakonpolis, the remains of wildcats, baboons, two elephants, and three hippos have been found buried in a cemetery. Their bones indicate that they had lived for many years in captivity.

Indeed, in many places where complex states emerged, there were gardens and zoos of exotic plants and animals. The Chinese Middle Kingdom stretched from the central Asian steppes to lush tropical jungles, and even before the unification of China in 221 BCE, the elite had built parks and gardens filled with exotic fauna. In the ninth century BCE, Chinese rulers built a garden of 375 hectares



An estimated 6 million feral domestic hogs, introduced to the Americas in the sixteen century, are in thirty-eight states, including Hawai’i, and cause billions of dollars in damage.

(over 925 acres) for a park called the “Garden of Intelligence.” It featured animals from throughout the region, including many tigers and leopards.

The Aztec city of Tenochtitlan contained both gardens of domesticated flowers and wild birds and animals from throughout Mesoamerica. The most coveted and widely-transported

animals in the Americas were birds. Brightly colored tropical birds, such as parrots and macaws, were traded from the jungles of Central America to the pueblos of the American Southwest. And birds from Amazonia were housed in elite residences in the Atacama Desert of Chile, west of the Andes.

Today, exotic species are still brought into the United States for urban zoos, exotic animal parks, or “wildlife safaris,” for breeding to create self-sustaining populations for hunting, and for the pet market—both legal and illegal. Over time, nearly one hundred kinds of large mam-

mals have been imported into the U.S., including fourteen deer species, thirty-four antelope, sixteen sheep, goat, and ibex, eight breeds of cattle, and over a dozen more species, including elephants, rhinos, zebras, giraffes, large cats, and other carnivores. Of these, several are well adapted to the environment and are prolific breeders.

Many of these species now have more wild individuals roaming the forests and plains of the U.S. than exist in their native ranges. This

is true for the aoudad (*Ammotragus lervia*), or Barbary sheep, a native of northern Africa. Dama gazelles (*Nanger dama*) and addax (*Addax nasomaculatus*) are from the same North African and circum-Saharan environments and are Critically Endangered in their home ranges. They are now numerous in the southern



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Wild aoudads are now more numerous in the United States than in their native range in North Africa.

U.S. In 2000, the scimitar horned oryx (*Oryx dammah*) was declared Extinct in the wild by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, but they are especially prized by exotic game ranches in Texas. Some species, such as the bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus*), have been bred in the Americas and returned to Africa to be reintroduced to the native territories where they had been driven to extinction. Other exotics include the sub-Saharan African sable antelope (*Hippotragus niger*), greater kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), Thomson's gazelle (*Eudorcas thomsonii*), and impala (*Aepyceros melampus*). In 2018, the Exotic Wildlife Association estimated that its 2,600 North American members kept over 1 million animals from 125 species.

Many of these animals have escaped captivity and may be adapted well

enough to become permanent parts of the regional fauna. Some, like the 600-lb. Indian nilgai antelope (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), are limited in their range by very cold weather and are confined to the southern coastal plains. Others are easy prey for local predators, such as coyotes. The most widespread and adaptable are axis deer (*Axis axis*) from South Asia, gemsbok and blackbuck (*Antilope cervicapra*) from Africa, and fallow deer from the Middle East and southwest Asia.

There is an interesting twist when we look at the fallow deer that Washington imported from England to Virginia. They weren't native to the British Isles after the last Ice Age. They were brought in by the Romans, and perhaps, by Iron Age people before that. Their populations had declined, however, and they were reintroduced by the Normans after their conquest of England in the eleventh century. After that,

fallow deer were associated with the lands of the aristocracy. By 1300, there were several thousand established deer parks in England, inhabited by fallow deer, red deer (*Cervus elaphus*, kin to the American Elk), and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*). The animals that were brought to General Washington's plantation most likely came from these English wildlife reserves.

Eventually, what was once exotic becomes common, sometimes even annoying, while the never-ending quest for exotica continues.

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