

IUCN Red List, Chapter 7 relates how we have in recent memory witnessed the extinction of a mustelid: the sea mink *Neovison macrondon*, formerly found along North America's east coast and last recorded in 1894. The Critically Endangered European mink could become the next mammalian extinction this century, and over half of otter species are threatened.

*The Biology and Conservation of Musteloids* is a comprehensive synthesis of and much-needed addition to its field. As well as offering a valuable reference for everything we know about musteloid ecology, the book also identifies avenues for further work and research, in both ecology and conservation. I note that the volumes on canids and felids are available as a two-volume set named *Biology and Conservation of Wild Carnivores*. Hopefully this volume on musteloids will be added to this, to form a trilogy, with musteloids taking their rightful place alongside their larger relatives.

LYDIA MURPHY MKA Ecology Ltd, Cambridge, UK. E-mail [murphy.lydia4@googlemail.com](mailto:murphy.lydia4@googlemail.com)

---

**Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World** by Corey Ross (2017) 496 pp., Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. ISBN 978-0-199590414 (hbk), GBP 45.00.

In 1938 the geographer Carl Ortwin Sauer wrote that European freebooters had overrun the world, believing that their technologies could replace nature. In this lengthy and ambitious book, Corey Ross examines Sauer's conclusion, asking how European institutions, worldviews and technologies affected the natural world in their tropical colonies and, subsequently, how these impacts have shaped today's biosphere. In general terms, we know the answer to this question. But the details and Ross's conclusions merit a careful reading.

The book focuses on the largest imperial expansion in history when, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a small number of European countries extended the territory under their control by 23 million km<sup>2</sup>—to more than half of the global land surface and a quarter of the world's population. In addition to reshaping politics, social systems and economic activities, the activities of these imperial powers reshaped the forests, grasslands, rivers, coastal plains, soils and mountains. The imperial appetite for natural resources created and shaped new and existing forms of production, from plantations and agricultural fields to mines and forest extraction regimes. As the environmental consequences of these actions were noticed, the imperial powers also moved to conserve the same soil, forests and animals that were being exploited.

But the natural world was not passive in the face of imperial designs, but rather shaped institutions, markets and appetites. Not every crop could be grown everywhere, rivers often rebelled against damming, soils degraded under novel irrigation regimes, and oil was not evenly distributed under the ground. Corey focuses on the interplay of human exploitation and natural constraints, creating what he calls a socioecological framework that 'sought to reorder nature–society arrangements across large parts of the globe' (p. 4). This framework was often insufficiently responsive to local ecologies and institutions and often failed to deliver on expectations.

Ross divides the book into three parts: the environmental impacts of imperial trade networks, with chapters on cotton, cocoa, rubber, tin, copper and oil; conservation and environmental management, with chapters on the politics of nature conservation, forests, agriculture and the environment; and political ecology (really woven throughout the book). There is an excellent concluding chapter on tropical environments and the legacies of empire.

Unlike much of the existing literature, Ross focuses not only on Britain's empire, but also on those of France, Germany, the Netherlands

and Belgium. He includes extensive literature, much not in English, bringing welcome diversity and facilitating comparison between the imperial approaches, assumptions and outcomes. The book focuses on the period from the 1860s to when the process of decolonization began between the 1940s and early 1960s.

As Corey points out, the imperial appetite also shaped local institutions and politics and was aided and abetted by local elites, who took the opportunity to strengthen their own power and control. But non-elites were also drawn in, moving and changing their own resource patterns, often under the heavy hand of resource exploiters, but sometimes of their own volition and for their own reasons.

One of the premises upon which European countries based their imperial legitimacy was that their mastery of more advanced technology—and thus a claimed mastery of nature—allowed, and even compelled, these countries to bring so-called civilization to the lands they claimed. The approaches to framing ecological problems as ones that European technologies could solve strengthened the authority of technical experts over the local knowledge systems of indigenous communities and led to '...the equally prevalent sense of overconfidence in the ability of scientists and modern states to manage ecosystems on a 'rational' and sustainable basis' (p. 418).

The web of trade and exploitation woven by European imperial powers for their own hegemonic reasons is one of the legacies Ross showcases. This web long preceded the study of 'telecoupling'—distant connections of human and natural systems—that is in vogue nowadays. Reading this book is an important task for many of us who have forgotten how many of the environmental problems we are currently facing were, and continue to be, shaped by the legacies of imperialism. Understanding this history will help us shape the future.

KENT H. REDFORD Archipelago Consulting, Portland, Maine, USA  
E-mail [redfordkh@gmail.com](mailto:redfordkh@gmail.com)