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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exhibiting Extinction: Martha and the Monument, Two Modes of Remembering Nature

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Abstract

Through examination of memorials to passenger pigeons in American zoos, museums, and parks, this essay analyzes the rhetoric and imagery of historical extinctions as seen in these memorials to understand the ways people have contextualized the loss of species. Exhibits and memorials to extinct animals are timestamps representing human-animal relationships at particular moments in time. They also reflect national and local narratives that reveal differing stories and contexts relevant for understanding the cultural impacts of extinction. The human spaces and modes of representation that the passenger pigeon has inhabited present only a slice of the story; the memories they create and reinforce become part of the cultural modes of dealing with extinction that is often more popular and more poignant than historical narratives documenting their declines. This research adds to the literature on constructions of Nature in American culture by connecting 19th-century declension narratives with 20th-century extinctions, and problematizes the American ideology of abundance.

Keywords:

extinction; passenger pigeon; American culture; monuments; museums; zoos

Introduction

Standing on a Wisconsin bluff overlooking the lush confluence of the Wyalusing and Mississippi Rivers, naturalist Aldo Leopold confessed an uncertainty. It was 1947 and he was speaking to a crowd gathered in Wyalusing State Park to install a monument to the passenger pigeon which had gone extinct nearly fifty years prior. ‘We meet here to commemorate the death of a species. This monument symbolizes our sorrow’, he began. A few paragraphs later, he asserts: ‘For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun’.¹

The extinction of the passenger pigeon at the turn of the nineteenth century stands as a pivotal moment in American environmental history. The bird had been so numerous that fears of its disappearance would have been laughable. Like so much of the language about the American frontier, reports about passenger pigeons were filled with awe at their abundance. Once it was gone, people struggled to make sense of its extinction. Scientists and curators played out conversations about the meaning of extinction in traditional modes of nature representation—the zoological park and the museum diorama. The monument Leopold introduced was a new addition to these modes of nature representation and reflects the shifting dialogue about human-animal relationships.

In examining how a species lives in memory after its death, cultural conversations about nature and wildness are revealed, and about the placement of animals within stories of human history. Historian Mark V. Barrow has called extinct birds ‘nature’s ghosts’—and indeed, they haunt the imagined landscapes from which they have disappeared. The stories people tell themselves about these disappearances, and the kinds of images they use to remember lost species, reveals how animals are perceived in relationship to human culture.² Ursula Heise has astutely explored the idea of extinction stories and argues that ‘biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondarily issues of science’. The stories, she says, ‘explain why we care, not just as individuals but as communities and cultures’.³ This essay draws on her proposal using exhibits dedicated to the passenger pigeon extinction as a lens through which to view the shifting stories Americans have told about species extinction and its implications.

The history of the passenger pigeon extinction has been detailed by historians; this essay explores the rhetoric after extinction as humans who had shared the landscape with passenger pigeons sought to signify their loss and make meaning of both pigeon body and the landscape from which it was now gone.⁴ This essay examines the rhetoric of extinction present in places of public memory—zoo, museum, and monument—using a single species to unpack how this extinct animal became part of regional and national heritage through acts of remembrance.

While the zoo and museum display the animal itself and ask visitors to imagine it back in its native habitat, the monument places the viewer in the habitat and asks her to imagine the animal upon it. In this reversal, memories of the passenger pigeon are drawn to its absence. I propose that seeing taxidermy bodies of passenger pigeons in traditional exhibition modes objectifies and distances the viewer from the animal and from the extinction story even as it tries to educate. At the monument, however, visitors are prompted to contemplate the human-animal relationship and to consider extinction not as a fact of history or tragedy of heritage, but as a loss for the landscape and the human experience of it. In the national museum, the passenger pigeon is an animal thing; as memorialized in its former habitat, it is a lost experience. In examining the divisions between national and local, these exhibits provide insight in the Anthropocene into the importance of considering the impact of various methods of exhibiting extinction as the count of species we remember rises.

The American context

The idea of natural abundance had been a defining feature of America since the nation earned its independence at the end of the eighteenth century. Its open spaces, resources, and wildlife differed markedly from more densely-settled and industrializing European landscapes. One of the first astute observers of American culture, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, asserted it was the people's connection to land that defined national identity. Both founding father Thomas Jefferson and the artist Thomas Cole wrote letters to European counterparts expounding the greatness in size and abundance of American wilderness.⁵

During most of the nineteenth century, the American landscape seemed inexhaustible. The ideology of 'Manifest Destiny'—the belief that western culture and Christianity would and should overtake the native inhabitants (human and non-human animals)—brought unfettered settlement to lands west of the Mississippi River. In mainstream American culture, and in federal policy, declining numbers of the landscape's original inhabitants were framed as an inevitable byproduct of national 'progress'. Those who were curious about, or admired, the pre-Anglo-settlement western landscape collected objects and specimens, and painted portraits and landscapes, in acts that scholars later called salvage anthropology. This idea of collecting things before they are gone could also be applied to natural specimens as both filled the halls and storage spaces of nineteenth-century museums.

The pace of American settlement slowed at the end of the century sparking a seminal moment in the culture. In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced at Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition (celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas) that the frontier was closed. In his talk, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', Turner used census data to show the century-old pattern of populating lands was now no longer possible.⁶ Americans were caught in a cultural crux, asking how then to define themselves if not by a continuous movement into wild spaces.

Turner's declaration symbolically marked the end of the era of American expansion. Conversely, so too ended the imagined era of unquestioned abundance. The growth of both natural history museums and monuments in America coincided with this increased settlement, then closing, of western lands. This connection integrally bound the study and collection of animal species to their population declines. Just a few years before Turner made his declaration, naturalist William Temple Hornaday published *The Extermination of the American Bison* (1889), in which he demonstrated the wasteful slaughter of a once-abundant species and proposed action to save its dwindling numbers. Using his publication, zoological specimens, and the museum mode, Hornaday and his allies succeeded in reviving that species as the passenger pigeon began to fall from the skies.⁷

The extinction story

While many readers may be familiar with this extinction story, it is worth rehearsing it here with particular attention to the language used to describe the species. The story of passenger pigeon decline has become both history and parable. During most of the nineteenth century, passenger pigeons migrated each Spring from Virginia to Michigan—followed by a stream of market hunters. In 1813, John James Audubon observed flocks in Kentucky and wrote: 'The air was literally filled with Pigeons; the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse; the dung fell in spots, not unlike melting flakes of snow; and the continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose'.⁸ Many other than Audubon noticed the manner in which their flocks darkened the sky and stood in awe at their sheer numbers. One 1871

Wisconsin observer out early in the morning to see the males leaving their nests commented on the sound of their awakening:

And then arose a roar, compared with which all previous noises ever heard are but lullabies... The sound was condensed terror. Imagine a thousand threshing machines running under full headway, with an equal quota of railroad trains passing through covered bridges—imagine these massed into a single flock, and you possibly have a faint conception of the terrific roar following the monstrous black cloud of pigeons as they passed in rapid flight in the gray light of morning, a few feet before our faces.⁹

Little is ever said about individual birds, their color, or their character. Comments about the abundance of birds far outweigh those that describe—or appreciate—singular specimens. Even the naturalist Alexander Wilson wrote: ‘I took [it] for a tornado, about to overwhelm the house and everything round in destruction’.¹⁰

Although a combination of habitat loss (specifically forests for nesting grounds), market, and recreational hunting put pressure on passenger pigeon populations, in stories told shortly after its decline, the most singled-out culprit was the amateur sportsman. One such hunter admitted: ‘The slaughter was terrible beyond any description’. He explains they shot until their guns were too hot to load then used pistols while lying down or swung clubs in the air hitting birds at random. Once killed or wounded, the birds’ necks were broken; these sportsmen robbed nests and shot parents caring for their young. The tale implicates not commercial hunting (thereby not blaming market forces) but people who engage in hunting in a reckless manner.¹¹

Stating the date of extinction of the species depends upon what you mean by extinction. If the word means the death of the last individual known to science, then 1914. If it is the last scientifically confirmed sighting in the wild, then 1900. If local stories of remaining nesting grounds and flocks are considered, though unconfirmed by scientists, then the pigeons may have lived in the wild until 1913. If the experience of the birds in great flocks, then 1882.¹² Though the latter is the least accurate of the traditional dates of extinction, there is something about the experience of the animal that essentially changed. In numerous accounts of the passenger pigeon’s decline—from the nineteenth century to our own—authors continue to include quotes about the abundance of birds. The flocks that blot out the sun and create a wind all their own are how people experienced these birds. Few describe the bird in individual detail. In addition to Audubon’s often quoted passage above which has become almost a mantra of nostalgia, others wrote similarly:

The prodigious flights of these ‘millions of millions of birds’ have exhausted the numerical superlatives of the English tongue. ‘They darkened the sky like locusts;’ ‘the hemisphere was never entirely free of them;’ ‘all the pigeons of the world apparently passed in review;’ ‘their incredible multitudes were like thunder-clouds in heaven;’ and countless other figures, mixed and pure, have entered the history of their migrations.¹³

Wild passenger pigeons were not single individual birds but an experience of a landscape, of an interaction, sensations, and a natural world that still had the ability to overtake one’s senses. They were migrants and that very freedom to roam in massive flocks was essential to both the lives of the pigeons and to how humans experienced and interacted with them. As Vinciane Despret puts in in our own time: ‘Humanity has lost winged eclipses’.¹⁴

After the passenger pigeon seemed extinct, either through denial or optimism or a confused combination of both, people kept looking for them. In 1909, the American Ornithologists’

Union (AOU) launched a comprehensive hunt offering prizes of over \$2000 for nests or nesting sites. This call for information seemed to acknowledge a disconnect of scientist from local information. Offering monetary rewards, the AOU hoped locals would come forward with information they could not themselves obtain. They received many reports, but “confirmed” none. In 1912, they called off the hunt.¹⁵

The next year, in his publication, *Our Vanishing Wildlife* (1913), Hornaday listed the pigeon on his ‘Roll Call of the Dead Species of American Birds’: ‘The fate of this species should be a lasting lesson to the world at large. Any wild bird or mammal species can be exterminated by commercial interests in twenty years time, or less’. An illustration inserted into this section depicts a tombstone. The top reads: ‘SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN’ then listed eleven species of birds that had gone extinct in America. The bottom of the stone bears the inscription: ‘EXTERMINATED BY CIVILIZED MAN 1840-1910’.¹⁶

Exhibiting the last of her kind

There yet remained one living passenger pigeon, Martha, housed at the Cincinnati Zoo. Her mate, George, had died in 1910. They had been named for the nation’s first couple, George and Martha Washington. Natural and national meanings were thus conspicuously conflated in the act of seeing these birds. Hornaday had already put the species on his tombstone before Martha’s death in 1914, making her more than a curiosity, but herself a memorial to her species.

A label outside her cage explained she was the last of her kind. In his *Forest and Stream* article, ‘The Last Surviving Passenger Pigeon’, published eight months before Martha’s death later in 1914, D.H. Eaton called her ‘the sole survivor of the countless millions’. The image of Martha as survivor implied a strength, a resilience, not victimization. Eaton continued:

*Guarded by Supt. Sol. Stephan as a jewel of inestimable value, it occupies a unique position in the bird world, as the only living representative of its race. It has become famous throughout the country, and ornithologists and bird lovers have made pilgrimages to the Zoo for the express purpose of seeing the bird before it passes away, and the Passenger Pigeon joins the Dodo and the Great Auk on the list of extinct species.*¹⁷

Like Hornaday, Eaton contextualized Martha with a global heritage of lost birds. In her life as a specimen of a species extinct in the wild, Martha was distanced from her nationalistic meanings. She was of course named before knowledge that she would be the last living passenger pigeon. Her pairing with George was hoped to be productive, to restore the species, as had been done with endangered bison to save them from the brink of extinction.¹⁸ When that failed, more globalized language of inevitability set in. She became a relic, ‘a jewel’, preserved only for the purpose of pilgrims seeking the sublime.

The Cincinnati Zoo furthered the idea of pilgrimage and sublime through its choices of exhibition space for Martha. They housed her inside a Japanese-style pagoda. Originally built in 1875 as aviaries, several pagodas lined a walkway at the zoo housing a variety of birds.¹⁹ The architectural form was adopted as a Romantic place for contemplation in American landscape gardens. Pagodas existed in many forms throughout East and Southeast Asia, with origins in India where the domed stupa represented sacred mountains and contained sacred objects. The Japanese form has right angles and normally ascends 5 levels, representing the natural world. Japanese architecture ‘is an understanding of the natural world as a source of spiritual insight and an instructive mirror of human emotion’.²⁰

As historian Nigel Rothfels has demonstrated, European zoos of the Victorian era, what he labels the 'bourgeois zoo', built structures for their animals to counter the negative impressions that simple cages had upon the public. An encaged animal was increasingly becoming a thing of concern or pity. But to disguise the cage as pagodas and temples gave the public 'a way of imagining animals in human contexts'. Rothfels argues that such structures were created for public demand over the scientific reason for zoos as collections for study. Zoos were parks and spaces of recreation 'the animals appealed to the visual, tactile, and aural desires of the gardens' patrons'. As such, they 'celebrate the tasks of enlightened and bourgeois progress in the world. They showcased the optimism, power, and ambitions of the new bourgeois elite...'.²¹

American zoo design differed in some aspects, explains historian Elizabeth Hanson. Many Americans found European zoos too crowded and urban. Although the structures of the Cincinnati Zoo were similar to German counterparts, the land chosen for the zoo, Hanson points out, was not in the city. It was a hilly landscape three miles from the urban space that had been used previously for religious retreats and recreation. For Americans, Hanson argues, looking at animals was considered a 'moral activity', and the setting of zoos in parks associated with the picturesque underscored that aesthetic and cultural purpose of nature appreciation.²²

Whether to release American zoos from the colonial narrative is a debate for another essay. What is significant here is that the Cincinnati Zoo was modeled directly on the Frankfurt Zoo, and many supporters of this, the second zoo in America, were German immigrants eager to recreate the animal amusements from their youth. Direct connections existed between Germany and Cincinnati. Zoo secretary, Lee Williams, and later the zoo director, Sol Stephan both served as Carl Hagenbeck's animal brokers in America.²³ Thus, the architecture and enclosures were closely aligned with what Rothfels calls 'nineteenth-century temples to nature'.²⁴ Its setting in a former ground for religious retreat underscored the meaning of a visit to the zoo even further.

Moreover, the focus on Asian structures emphasized the exotic. Martha in the pagoda was not just an object removed from her native habitat but an animal removed from its nation of origin. In the pagoda, despite her name, Martha lost her American-ness. The effect is instead one that distanced the viewer from the reality of extinction. The pigeon moved from the American landscape to the imagined exotic, an other realm of something out there. The form of the pagoda also aroused Romantic notions of the sublime. Entering it, visitors were signaled to appropriate affect. Beyond aesthetics, the placement of Martha in this structure implied she no longer fit within the visual realm of western civilization. Her species' extinction countered the narrative of progress inherent in that community's ideology. If zoos had been forums for the display of power and optimism, Martha reversed that narrative.²⁵

After her death, the zoo placed the last Carolina Parakeet into the very same cage. He died there in 1918. Martha's existence in the zoo as the last of her kind reflects ideas about extinction and shifted the potential meaning and role of zoological displays. No longer were they only gardens of the world in miniature, they were species sanctuaries. The 'temples to nature' became places to ponder human impacts upon the environment, not merely to celebrate nature's diversity but to contemplate the continuation—or not—of that diversity. The act of seeing Martha at the zoo offered the opportunity to contemplate loss rather than celebrate abundance.

When Martha died on September 1, 1914, zoo staff immediately iced her body and shipped her to the Smithsonian. She became part of the collection and exhibition at the U.S. National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History). Her original

catalog label read: ‘Twas ‘Martha,’ Most Certainly the Last of Her Kind’.²⁶ In the initial ‘twas’ is an acknowledgement that she is no more but it is a rather poetic term for a scientific specimen. The relic did not replace the species. She was indeed a dead individual not merely a scientific specimen. In this act of preservation was an acknowledgement of Martha’s role as representative for her species, as well as the significance of the end of frontier abundance in the American imaginary. If bison had come to stand for a conservation success; passenger pigeon represented a failure.

It was not out of the ordinary for the Smithsonian to label an animal as an object or to mount one for exhibition. The museum mode was accustomed to collecting and displaying dead animals for scientific and educational purposes. Museum exhibition of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century explicitly ordered the world in a progressive narrative with western cultural productions at the pinnacle.²⁷ Nature, too, had been displayed with pride by Americans eager to prove their national might. In fact, an extinct animal had once been central to the success of museums’ public appeal. In 1801, Charles Willson Peale articulated a skeleton of a mastodon at his Philadelphia Museum. It was a sensation. It was a significant scientific achievement, but it was also a topic for debate as the concept of extinction was not fully understood. When Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark on their expedition in 1804, he told them to look for mastodons. When it stood in the museum, visitors did not yet know whether such a creature would be found alive. Thus, they would not have felt a sense of loss, but a sense of hope or awe. Extinction was not a closed door but a ponderable possibility.²⁸

In the next century, however, Martha’s taxidermy body at the Smithsonian served as a reminder and a warning against the excesses of civilization. She also represented the iconic role nature had played in American history and heritage. Curators resurrected her body and posed it on a twig. She is turned half away from the viewer. In photographs of her exhibit from the 1920s and 1950s, her chest is turned outward as her neck turns to direct her gaze towards the visitor.²⁹

Natural history museums have long had this heritage of displaying the dead. In Donna Haraway’s assessment, museums are sacred places where visitors imagine relationships with nature. ‘No matter how many people crowd the great hall, the experience is of individual communion with nature’, she writes:

*The sacrament will be enacted for each worshipper; here is no nature constituted from statistical reality and a probability calculus. This is not a random world, populated by late 20th-century cyborgs, for whom the threat of decadence is a nostalgic memory of a dim organic past, but the moment of origin where nature and culture, private and public, profane and sacred meet—a moment of incarnation in the encounter of man and animal.*³⁰

Within this context, to meet Martha in the exhibit case of the National Museum was to enact a moment of connection with the iconic specimen. When Haraway uses the word ‘decadence’ she means the impacts of urbanization, industrialization, and civilization. Taxidermy dioramas allows for an imagined organic past in which human and nature had a different relationship. Thus, to view an extinct animal in the museum case is to extend further her argument that ‘... the Museum fulfilled its scientific purpose of conservation, of preservation, of the production of permanence’.³¹ There, in viewing Martha’s body, viewers could imagine away extinction even as they were faced with its glass-eyed gaze.

Martha in the museum was an anomaly to early twentieth-century viewers in another way. Many animals in dioramas of the time were killed by humans. Though taxidermy aimed to mask the violent encounters that caused the death, the narrative that reinforced the glory of

the hunter was familiar to many museum goers. Martha, however, died of natural causes, the last of her kind because of the wastefulness of hunters. Sans violence, her body can be read in perhaps a more sacred way. She was a survivor—being the last of one’s kind is tragic, yet heroic. If the diorama is viewed as Haraway suggests, as altars telling salvation stories and signifying virtues, then Martha’s exhibited body extolls the virtues of those who wished to save the species.³² The fact of her body’s existence narrates a story of moral, if not scientific success. In keeping her at the zoo and saving her body at the museum, the extinction story is less tragic. Martha perched on a twig, her body resurrected, her gaze recreated, is a fact of history, a relic of westward expansion and industrialization.

In the 1950s, Martha found a new home in the exhibit *Birds of the World*. She bore the label: ‘MARTHA, last of her species, died at 1 pm, 1 September 1914, age 29, in the Cincinnati Zoological Garden. EXTINCT’. The exhibit label is more straightforward and factual than her 1914 collection label, more statement of fact than epitaph. It was a subtle difference, but to say ‘last of her species’ instead of ‘Most Certainly the Last of her Kind’ suggests a loss of nostalgia. While both nod to her gender and individuality, ‘species’ separated her out from a family of others as a scientific thing that can be named. ‘Kind’ implies a belonging and an uniqueness. Then, consider the blunt word ‘EXTINCT’. It is the final word, printed in all caps for emphasis. No wavering of ‘Most Certainly’ but a stamping out of the species. Yet, both labels name her as an individual, as a celebrity, as an icon of extinction.

The hall also contained a group of passenger pigeons perched on an oak branch in front of a painted backdrop where birds in flight scattered in the distance. Jane Desmond calls these ‘environmental dioramas...[that] animate the animal body in time by situating it in an implied narrative that includes moments ‘before’ and ‘after’ that which we see frozen in front of us’.³³ They perch, many of them looking in that direction. One opens his wings as if to try to rejoin the flock—but the action is futile. Knowing the ‘before’ story of extinction, the birds seem to look longingly to an impossible ‘after’.³⁴ *Birds of the World* reflected a mid-century movement in museum exhibition that began to be more inspired by ideas of ecology and conservation. Originally viewed as salvage hunters to collect before things disappeared, museums took on a new role, as did zoos, as places where species can be saved and conservation conversations could be discussed and shared with a public audience.³⁵

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Martha was a representative sample, an animal thing, narrating the story of the passenger pigeon extinction. Her body bore the weight of national narratives. The frontier had lain waste to much of the wilderness in which Americans had invested their early identity. Thus, curators exhibited Martha as an historical object. Even in *Birds of the World*, she remained a curiosity, set apart from the flock and singled out for her symbolic role as a harbinger of a changing relationship to nature.

Monumentalizing extinction

In his series of canvases, *Course of Empire* (1833-1836), landscape painter Thomas Cole contemplated the relationship between nature and civilization. Each of the five images depicts a phase of the rise and fall of an imagined city built from the wilderness and, in the end, returned to a natural state. The final canvas, *Desolation*, shows nature taking over the ruins of the city. A few animals remain as the promise of nature’s renewal including several birds, the most visible one perched atop a single column. The painting expresses Cole’s anxieties about American uses of the land as well as his belief that nature would return if civilization failed. Cole voiced his ‘regret’ for such changes to the land he witnessed in his time:

*I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away. The ravages of the axe are daily increasing. The most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. This is a regret rather than a complaint. Such is the road society has to travel.*³⁶

Even as Cole celebrated the unique character of America's natural wildness, he commented upon its misuse and loss as an inevitability.³⁷ He has regret, not hope.

Since the nation's early decades, nature held important symbolism for national identity steeped in Romantic aesthetics. When Europeans critiqued the new nation for having no monuments, ruins, or history upon its landscape, artists responded with canvases depicting grand natural landscapes. Hudson River School painters worked in the modes of the pastoral and the sublime, making meaning and placing narratives upon wilderness and developing countryside alike. After a visit to Italy in 1832, Thomas Cole wrote adamantly about the superiority of the American landscape elevating wilderness above landscapes representative of human achievements.³⁸ Meanwhile, in the poems of Romantic writers, ruins overgrown with vegetation were source of inspiration. 'Their exuberant and wild fecundity promised the inevitable victory of Nature', explains Christopher Woodward, 'a Nature which was fertile, democratic, and free'. In nature's reclamation of the ruins of civilizations, Romantics saw 'hope for the future' in the invasion of plants that suggested 'the inevitable victory of Nature'.³⁹ Ruins were a sublime commentary upon the shortcomings of human activities. Rhetoric of loss has a deep heritage in the American environmental imagination derived from declension narratives developed during the foundation of Nature's Nation.⁴⁰ 'In these stories', explains Heise, 'the awareness of nature's beauty and value is intimately linked to a foreboding sense of its looming destruction'.⁴¹

In the 1940s, a group of Wisconsin's most active conservationists and ornithologists came together to remember the local loss of the passenger pigeon. The Passenger Pigeon Monument in Wyalusing State Park mimics the ruins of a small structure, with stones arranged in an open formation like half of the foundation of a cabin. A taller portion of the wall, resembling a chimney, holds a bronze plaque containing an image of an unnamed passenger pigeon and the following text:

Dedicated to the last Wisconsin passenger pigeon shot at Babcock, Sept., 1899. This species became extinct through the avarice and thoughtlessness of man.

The Passenger Pigeon Monument defined itself first as a commemoration to a specific landscape's last specimen. It echoed the traditional extinction story in its placing of blame upon hunters, but went one step further to single out traits not occupations. In his speech at the dedication of the monument, Aldo Leopold did not allow memory and blame to be quite so abstract. 'We who erect this monument are performing a dangerous act', he declared. 'Because our sorrow is genuine, we are tempted to believe that we had no part in the demise of the pigeon'. But 'our grandfathers' were our agents. They had the 'conviction' that it was 'more important to multiply people and comforts than to cherish the beauty of the land in which they live. What we are doing here today is publicly to confess a doubt whether this is true'.⁴² While Cole had 'regret' for the perceived inevitable course of empire, Leopold a century later questioned that inevitability.

Leopold's use of the word 'doubt' echoed the monument's purpose cued in its design. The Passenger Pigeon Monument invoked the aesthetics and emotive spirit of ruins as places of contemplation. 'When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future', argues

Woodward.⁴³ Such places represent collective experiences, Woodward explains. True ruins are not reproductions and maintain a certain aura of originality and authenticity. They demand respect and decorum and an almost ritualized behavior.⁴⁴ Although the Passenger Pigeon Monument is indeed a reproduction, the thing that it memorialized was not. Pointing towards the landscape and referencing the bird that had been lost from it, the true ruin here was nature.

In the erection of the Passenger Pigeon Monument, Cole's trope was turned on its head. The 'ruin' at Wyalusing aroused the intended human emotion—contemplation. As Woodward suggests: 'A ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator'.⁴⁵ While exhibitions of Martha's body looked to the past and a culture's national ambitions, the monument looked to the future. It drew attention to the absence not the relic and opened the dialogue about the cultural and environmental impact of extinction. By the time Leopold, himself a reformed hunter, spoke at this memorial, he was famous for his philosophy of 'thinking like a mountain'—the idea that one must be part of the landscape in order to know what is best for its stewardship. In his dedication speech, he recognized the local significance of the monument:

*We grieve because no living man will see again the on-rushing phalanx of victorious birds, sweeping a path for spring across the March skies, chasing the defeated winter from all the woods and prairies of Wisconsin.*⁴⁶

Leopold acknowledged that what people are here to commemorate in 1947 is not the loss of a species but the loss of seasonal changes on the Wisconsin landscape and the stories that went with that experience of the natural world. The generation who knew the sights and sounds of massive pigeon flocks were dying out. Once they were gone, Leopold suggested, the memory of their past abundance was something 'only the oldest oaks will remember, and at long last only the hills will know'.⁴⁷ He acknowledged a broader loss than a single species' extinction couched in habitat. There was an experience, a way of knowing nature, and a way in which nature communicated with humans, that was lost. Moreover, it was the local landscape that felt the absence. The failure of frontier settlers and pigeons to evolve together had caused what Thom Van Dooren has called co-extinction, a process by which species loss is tied to human culture and traditions. They evolve alongside each other and when a species is endangered or extinct, the loss is both environmental and cultural.⁴⁸ The significance of the passenger pigeon extinction in Wisconsin was not the same as the meaning presented by the Smithsonian. Here, there were no pigeon bodies to contemplate—and that was the point. Absence was the marker of extinction, not death.

Art historian Kirk Savage has examined the history of monuments in America and explains their function within society at both their time of creation and in subsequent eras:

*Public monuments are an inherently conservative art form. They obey the logic of the last word, the logic of closure. Inscriptions are fixed forever; statues do not move and change. Traditionally, this means that monuments strip the hero or event of historical complexities and condense the subject's significance to a few patriotic lessons frozen for all time.*⁴⁹

Recall the inscription on the monument. Avarice and thoughtlessness were to blame. The extinction was defined as a result of both carelessness and greed. The patriotic lesson was simple and direct. Historical complexity was masked behind the text. Blame not a market of consumers, sport hunters, frontier settlement, but avarice and thoughtlessness as if American westward expansion and the environmental havoc it generated could be boiled down to these abstract contemptible traits.

Historian Jennifer Price viewed the memorial's creation as an explicitly cultural act, a 'modern parable'. Monuments do not speak in historical narratives. They speak in symbols. Masking the true causes of extinction is the very function of a monument. As Heise points out, 'what is lost, in [Price's] analysis, is not just particular ties to nature but also particular stories about these ties, so that thinking about extinction becomes a story about the loss of stories'.⁵⁰ Walking the trail to the monument and taking in the view from the bluff after having the pigeon's memory invoked by the plaque was meant to mask the ravages and disconnects of modernity in the interest of imagining a better relationship to nature. The burden of creating meaning was on the visitor not the monument.⁵¹ The monument thus contains multitudinous interpretations, evokes various emotions, depending upon the visitor's own thoughts, intentions, politics, and mood. Its one constant is its location.

'This, then, is a monument to a bird we have lost, and to a doubt we have gained', declared Leopold.⁵² His language and the ruin-like architecture of the Wyalusing memorial reflect the inheritance of a century of envisioning loss upon the landscape. Ruins spoke the language of decline. It is the impact that changed. Cole believed nature would outlive civilization; Leopold's doubt is whether or not this is true. Leopold's speech made meaning of the place for mid-twentieth century Americans. Savage argues that even though they are meant for closure, monuments take on a life of their own after being erected. Savage writes of twenty-first century monuments: 'Memorial spaces find themselves juggling the relatively new psychological demands of discovery and healing with traditional demands for patriotic or inspirational teaching'.⁵³ Leopold made those patriotic lessons explicit in his speech, but for those encountering the Wyalusing monument after its erection, the plaque (and previous knowledge) was their only guide. Instead of leaving the monument to visitors' own discovery, the park installed a new interpretive sign to instruct visitors in how to experience the monument. The text reads:

As you walk to the Passenger Pigeon Monument, imagine huge flocks of pigeons flying up this river valley. They twist and turn as one. Together, they land to feed on acorns and other tree nuts. Together, they nest in colonies that stretch for miles.

The text tells the brief story of the extinction casting it as a 'tragic demise' that should prompt future 'conservation' of resources. The largest font on the sign reads: 'All that is left...a reminder to never forget'. The park's desire to teach overtook the monument's role as silent memorial. The poignancy of the plaque is now countered and softened by the explanation.⁵⁴

In the erection of the monument itself, local conservationists, bird lovers, and scientists created their own meaning for the extinction. And in our era, the monument takes on another, third meaning, as the first of many such events.⁵⁵ Looking over the natural landscape, the structure also memorializes place. Juxtaposing the memory of the animal with its original habitat one can imagine the thunderous flocks that once visited the area. The sensations, the sounds, the feel, the smells, of the species—the experience of it as a wild animal—if one knows the tale—can be here reimagined. Thus, the monument attached the animal to its environment in ways that zoos and museum exhibits did not.

As the harbinger of the field of ecology, Leopold is an important voice to have commented upon this extinction in this location. The Wyalusing monument can be read as both human-centered and ecology-centric. To erect a monument to an animal is acknowledgement of the species' role in history and memory; to build it in the shape of the ruins of a civilization shows the confusion over how to remember nature that cannot remember itself. Thus, the ruin is human-centric because to acknowledge the loss one must acknowledge that the species itself is

no longer aware of its loss and the loss itself has meaning only in the human world. ‘Had the funeral been ours’, Leopold proclaimed, ‘the pigeons would hardly have mourned us’.⁵⁶

Conclusion

In 2015, the Smithsonian exhibited Martha for the 100th anniversary of her death. The exhibit, entitled *Once There Were Billions: Vanished Birds of North America* featured Martha herself, but placed in a case with other specimens in front of a backdrop illustrating hunters shooting at an enormous flock of passenger pigeons. Martha herself (labeled #11) was upright, perched on a stick, her back to the viewer but her eye pointed directly out to return the gaze of the viewer. To her right, also on the stick, was a male passenger pigeon (#10) (unnamed, but those who know the story may imagine George) faced out, his head pointed upwards and a seed in his beak. Beneath them, another passenger pigeon (#12) lied belly-up, as if in wake, prompting visitors to mourn as they would at a human coffin. The individual bird expanded to the individual species. The passenger pigeon was joined in the exhibit by the Carolina Parakeet, Labrador Duck, Heath Hen, and Great Auk. The singular icon was now just one of multitudes lost to the landscape. In the 21st century, this extinction is more than a parable and a warning; it is reality. The abundance of American nature is now depicted as something lost—not an ‘embarrassment of riches’ but an ‘embarrassment of losses’.

Extinction and the course of American empire are interwoven and the task of a national museum like the Smithsonian is to make individual objects speak to national meanings, but in the Wyalusing memorial we see something different. This was a local monument erected by local activists. They considered what the lost species meant for the natural and cultural landscape, as well as for the residents and descendants of those who had experienced the species. National icons such as Martha are useful conservation tools, but in American history, most wildlife conservation began with local initiatives and regulations.⁵⁷

This article discusses just one species in various post-life contexts, but has sought to highlight the methodology of each act of remembrance with historical and regional context. Extinctions have their global and contemporary contexts, as well. Dolly Jorgenson recently included the Wyalusing memorial in her examination of monuments to extinction from various times and places. In talking about Wyalusing, she parallels its creation with WWII monuments, but it is important to recognize the national narrative creating the latter comes from the National Park Service under pressure to reconcile the horrors of a recent tragedy, while the Wyalusing monument is erected in a state park by local activists about an event that occurred some thirty years prior.⁵⁸ It is not that the fervor for monuments at the time is unrelated, but the thing that sets Wyalusing apart is this local context which is important in both the making and the experiencing of the memorial landscape itself. A trip to Washington DC might include seeing war monuments or passenger pigeons or Martha herself. But a trip to Wyalusing is one most likely taken by locals already inclined to enjoy the out of doors and whose local heritage is more intimately intertwined with that of the lost species. Thus, to remove the regional context is to miss the point. Unlike a national museum or monuments meant to memorialize all extinct species, Wyalusing presents a message that includes human and animal, living and extinct, on an ever-evolving cultural landscape. By removing exhibits and monuments from the particularities of their historical and regional context, we risk reinforcing the abstractions that contributed to extinction.

At 100, Martha has lived longer in her afterlife than in her life. At the zoo, Martha was made exotic. Extinction stood as a thing of wonder and awe. Pilgrimage, not penance, was

enacted. In the museum, she and others of her species, posed as relics of an era of expansion, regretted by some but cast as inevitable. By contrast, the monument opened the dialogue about extinction and place. The animal was no longer present—and that was the point. Its physical absence was the message. At the Smithsonian, passenger pigeon bodies were tourist attractions and icons of national identity; in Wyalusing, their absent bodies were heritage. While each form of exhibition may include processes of simultaneous remembering and forgetting, the intentions of the local memorial more explicitly aimed to incorporate the animal and its story into its continually evolving heritage instead of preserving it in an historical past.

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Endnotes

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57. The first bison conservation law, for example, was Idaho's 1864 protection passed after the species was eradicated from the state. In the 1870s, a bill failed to gain President Grant's signature. Hornaday's activism—largely supported by national and urban supporters from the East—came nearly 30 years later.

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