

The Rhetoric of Wolves in Discourses of Exploration:
Encountering Animals, Inhabitants and the
Wilderness in the New World

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Abstract

Dealing with works of natural history and records of exploration, this paper surveys how wolves intermediated between the English and the new world. Whereas live wolves were rare in England after their extermination, wolves in imagination remained familiar figures for the English. First of all, since most people shared common ideas about wolves, picturing them as fierce devourers, these carnivores were used in conveying the images of certain animals in the new world. Inclusive ways of categorisation enabled the English to comprehend hitherto unknown animals according to the established order. Animals resembling wolves were loosely classified as wolves. Rhetorical comparisons, too, helped understanding. With metaphors and similes, the features of yet-unnamed species were described in relation to their similarities to familiar, known animals. The rhetoric of wolves was used in introducing musk deer or sled dogs, for example. However, the utilisation of wolves in explaining the new world did not draw parallels only between animals in England and overseas. It also compared and contrasted lives of people in different worlds. The rhetoric of wolves was intertwined with episodes of local inhabitants. Wolves were commodified along with other animals, and their edibility was attested by the observation of native lifestyles. Merchant explorers from England learned practical and often profitable use of diverse creatures from local people. One notable example was the reinterpretation and commodification of sea-wolves, or seals. The interaction between English explorers and locals could be observed through accounts of such commodified animals. Yet, the rhetoric of wolves did not always highlight the profitable aspects of the new world. It reminded not only the explorers but also the readers of the presence of the wilderness and signified possible dangers in unfamiliar places. Being extinct in England, wolves in the new world would have been considered troublesome by the explorers as well as their readers. Wolves were recorded among frequently seen animals, and their vulgarity meant the explorers' continual need to be aware of wild, possibly threatening animals. In some voyage logs, wolves were referred to in episodes born out of interaction and communication with native people. Those references to wolves revealed the recorders' awareness of natural threats on the one hand, and urged the readers in England to imagine the wild where the explorers were travelling on the other

hand. In this way, wolves functioned as intermediators for the English readers to understand animals, inhabitants, and the wilderness in newly explored regions.