

The Impact of Colonialism on countries, environments and dogs

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism is a historical practice in which foreign powers have politically, economically and culturally controlled a country or territory, especially between the 16th and 20th centuries. From an environmental point of view, colonialism has caused great changes in landscapes, introducing exotic species, modifying land use and exploiting natural resources often in ways that are harmful to ecosystems. As for dogs, colonialism has also influenced their histories and characteristics. In fact, colonialism has had a profound impact on the natural history of dogs as well, influencing their breeds, their social role and often even their survival in many parts of the world.

KEY WORDS

Colonialization; dogs; environments, biodiversity.

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INTRODUCTION

Colonialism is a historical practice that refers to the political, economic and cultural control of a country or territory by a foreign power. In general, the term refers to the expansion of European powers into other continents and countries, especially in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas between the 16th and 20th centuries. Colonialism has also had a profound impact on the culture and identity of occupied countries. Colonial powers have often imposed their own language, religion and culture and have often sought to suppress the culture and traditions of occupied countries. This has often led to the loss of cultural heritage and cultural identity of occupied countries. The long control exercised by the British Empire over much of North America, parts of Africa, and India is an example of colonial domination. Colonialism has far-reaching environmental effects. Colonial enterprises allowed people to accidentally and knowingly

introduce exotic plants, animals, and diseases to colonies and to bring biota back to Europe and other colonial settings. Colonial actors transformed land and waterscapes, introducing new land-use systems, but many were (and still are) unsustainable and unsuited to local climates and environments. Monocultural agriculture, for example, depletes soil nutrients, reduces biodiversity, and makes ecosystems more vulnerable to global climate change. Colonial authorities often prioritized export crops over local food security, increasing food insecurity and increasing the risk of famine. In the name of colonial progress, civilization, and productivity, vast swathes of endemic forests were cleared, wetlands were drained, and land was cleared to create farms, plantations, towns, and cities. Natural resources, including timber, spices, and minerals, were extracted from colonies and exported to fuel the lifestyles and economic development of colonial powers, with colonialism and capitalism intertwined with environmental change.

Colonialism also had a profound impact on the natural history of dogs, influencing their breeds, social role and often even survival in many parts of the world as we will see below.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The idea that ‘legitimate’ dogs must belong to a breed based on appearance and conformation to physical standards comes from mid-19th century Britain, including the upper-class fox-hunting kennels and the working- and middle-class penchant for ‘dog fancy’ shows. Dog shows and the creation of the Kennel Club in 1873 provided the arenas and infrastructure for dog breeds to be displayed and their lineages recorded. Kennel clubs and dog shows spread across Europe and North America, positioning breedless street dogs as lesser dogs of unsavoury and degenerate appearance and lineage. Colonialism spread breed ideologies to Africa and Asia. In colonial India, the British imported ‘pure-breed’ dogs, establishing Kennel clubs and dog shows that allowed British and local elites to mingle; although some Indian dogs were entered into competitions, they were dominated by British and European breeds.

Yet dogs existed before breeds, and most dogs living on this planet today cannot be understood in terms of breed. These are the dogs we call free-living dogs. Other names that have stuck include ‘stray’, ‘tramp’ and ‘cur’. These terms positioned free-living dogs as degraded and disgusting, creatures who should be killed. In India, a country with one of the world’s largest street-dog populations, these dynamics have played out in vivid and illuminating ways. Labelled ‘pariahs’ by the British, street dogs were viewed and treated as outcast in the colonial period. The terms etymology lay in Paraiyar, the former name of a caste-oppressed community from southern India who drummed at weddings, funerals and other occasions, alongside performing other menial tasks (drum in Tamil is *parai*). The British nonetheless disdained the Paraiyars’ supposed immorality, drunkenness and brutishness, and used the term ‘pariah’ to refer to outcasts, human and nonhuman alike. In the British imagination, ‘pariah’ dogs represented the decline and decadence of India. Deemed worthless, ‘pariah’ dogs became targets

of violence when British soldiers stationed in India amused themselves by shooting them (Srinivasan & Pearson, 2023).

European activity in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries established a dynamic and frequently tragic landscape in which Europeans disrupted the political, economic, and social authority of resident Native groups and later of enslaved African people brought to the region. Europeans used racial and social distinctions between themselves and Indigenous and African peoples to create cultural and legal barriers, intentionally increasing this separation (Campbell 1994). These boundaries had profound impacts on early Indigenous-European relationships and set the stage for future resentment and recurring conflicts. European social divisions and the quest to establish white authority and superiority in the Americas were widespread, likely affecting other closely associated species, especially dogs (Derr, 2004; Foote, 2022; Thomas et al., 2024). Europeans and Native Americans considered their dogs important companions, and both cultures used them similarly (Quinlan, 2021). Dogs were maintained independently by each society as loyal companions, workers, and symbols of identity. Indigenous peoples buried dogs as dedication offerings (Hill, 2000), employed dogs as hunters (Roberts, 2017) and pack animals (Eiselt, 2022; Welker & Dunham, 2019), and used dog fur for clothing and other textiles (Lin et al., 2023). European colonial powers, including the Spanish, British, and French, regularly brought European dogs to their colonies in the Americas to aid them in everyday tasks, such as herding livestock, and hunting wild animals; to mark social status; and to attack Native Americans (Derr, 2004). In later periods, white settlers used aggressive dogs to punish insubordination as a way to maintain the institution of slavery (Parry & Yingling, 2020). Dogs, paradoxically, connected and created tensions between European and indigenous cultures that reflected the complicated and rapidly changing social landscapes during this period. White settlers took a keen interest in the native dogs they encountered and frequently recorded their physical and behavioral characteristics (Barbour, 1986; Derr, 2004). Colonial settlers often described native dogs as mongrels or

mutts to emphasize a perceived lack of apparent breeds and thus limited native control over these animals (Barton, 1803; Kerckmar, 2016; Thomas et al., 2024).

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the Indigenous Coast Salish peoples of the Pacific Northwest had traditionally maintained a breed of long-haired dog for the purpose of harvesting their hair, or wool, for textile fibers. Along with alpacas and llamas, these woolly dogs are one of only a few known animals intentionally bred for their fleece in all of the Americas. Prior to the arrival of colonialist, there were several types of dogs in the Pacific Northwest: larger “village” dogs and hunting dogs and smaller woolly dogs, kept separately to prevent interbreeding. Woolly dogs were a little larger than the modern American Eskimo dog breed and had curled tails, pricked ears and a pointed foxlike face. Instead of barking, they howled. Traditionally, only high-status Coast Salish women were allowed to keep woolly dogs, and a woman’s individual wealth could be measured by how many she had. Blankets woven of dog hair, often mixed with hair from mountain goats and waterfowl or plant fibers, were important trade and gift items. But the practice of keeping woolly dogs and weaving textiles made from woolly dog yarn declined throughout the 19th century, and the dogs were considered extinct by the beginning of the 20th century (Lin et al., 2023). Repressive government policies tried to control and subdue Indigenous cultural practices and Coast Salish people say they would never have willingly parted with their beloved canine friends. The simple economic explanation ignores the massive role colonialism played in the demise of the woolly dogs. Today, the only confirmed woolly dog specimen is “Mutton” whose pelt has been housed in the Smithsonian’s collection since his death in 1859. In life, this “Indian dog” was the companion of George Gibbs, a naturalist working on the Northwest Boundary Survey expedition to map out British Columbia and the American Pacific Northwest. In death, Mutton offered the opportunity to learn more about woolly dog ancestry, selection and management. Mutton is the latest dog we are aware of with that much precolonial dog ancestry. European colonization was devastating to Indigenous people in North America. The fact that Mutton carries as

much Indigenous dog DNA as he does is a testament to the care that Coast Salish people took to keep the woolly dog tradition alive (Lin et al., 2023).

The Karpathian dog was a native species in Karpathos, an island in Greece, which has been exterminated during the last century for several reasons. Unfortunately, very little is known about this dog. The only iconographic source is a photo of the 80s by the French François Le Diascorn. All the elderly hunters interviewed reported that the Karpathian endemic dog was of medium size, with small ears, a medium length semicircular tail, and a black or brown color. The Karpathian dog was surely highly specialized in hare hunting and certainly had a very unlucky history. During the Italian occupation of the Aegean Islands from 1912 to 1945, in 1923 the Italian government imposed a census of these hunting dogs and imposed a heavy tax on their owners. By prohibiting hunting for the natives of Karpathos, the Italian government made it possible the detainment of the owners of these dogs for illegal detention. These taxes and rules imposed by the Italian government forced many hunters to get rid of their precious and beloved dogs, releasing into the mountains or killing them. Furthermore, in 1954 the gendarmerie of Karpathos proceeded to exterminate the surviving dogs and the then head of the hunters’ association, Nikos Nikolaidis, raised reasonable questions about the unjustified killing and asked for the publication of the reasons that led to the executions. No official answer was given, only many years later it was said that the reason was due to canine rabies (Grano, 2020).

In the 1890s and 1900s in the Transkei, South Africa, colonial relations were severely strained as Cape colonial officials attempted to constrain African men’s hunting activities by systematically poisoning and shooting their dogs. For colonial foresters, such efforts were part of a larger strategy to protect flora and fauna by controlling African environmental activities and mobility more thoroughly. Yet on the ground in many areas, state-sponsored dog-killing was drawn into more complex understandings of, and popular frustrations with, transformations in local landscapes and livelihoods during this period. In several communities, rumors and stories

proliferated, connecting the killing of dogs to other official attempts to poison and bewitch Africans, their animals and their landscapes. Such stories were ways for people to express deeper concerns over the spreading influence of colonial power in their daily practices and its toll on local communities' health and welfare (Tropp, 2002).

The stories reported so far about some dog populations living in various parts of the world are just a few examples of how colonialism has greatly affected the lives, social conditions, and sometimes the survival of some dog breeds around the world.

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