Animal Kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in the Indian Princely States.
By Julie E. Hughes. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. 320.
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British India, as Julie E. Hughes reminds us, was dotted with the royal presence of '*maharajas, maharaos, maharawals* and *maharanas*'. These 'Indian princes' ruled over five hundred or more states, which in turn made up approximately two-fifths of British India. Under colonial conditions, however, the actual sovereign abilities of these royals were severely curtailed, with the princes restricted mostly to being mere figureheads in relation to administration and legal authority. This otherwise firm colonial grip, nonetheless, was somewhat loosened through the practice of *Shikar* (hunting) which, as the author compellingly suggests in this masterful monograph, became amongst the 'few means' employed by the princes to affirm and exercise their 'royal influence and assert status'.

Animal Kingdoms opens up for us the rousing and oftentimes transgressive world of 'princely hunting' in which the bloody pursuit of killing animals enabled the Indian royals to arm themselves, simulate battle, adjust relationships with empire, display martial prowess and even metaphorically to stage momentary conquest by subduing the wild – the jungle. Refreshingly though, this monograph is not a tiring catalogue of gory events or a list of instances when an Indian prince cocked a snook at British officialdom over the sprawled carcass of a tiger. Rather, what we have is rigorous scholarship, delicious prose and convincing claims that urge us radically to reconsider the very context and implications of shikar in its colonial setting. As the author persuasively points out, animals, environments and aspirations for demonstrating sovereign actions were combined in creative, idiosyncratic and chancy ways by the princes to negotiate and sometimes unsettle the otherwise overwhelming might of the colonial authorities. Princely hunting, put differently, is revealed as a type of intense and highly mediated political calculation rather than mere description of royal pastime, entertainment, leisure or masculine display.

At heart, however, much of the monograph is aimed at elaborating upon and giving theoretical weight to the idea of what the author terms as 'princely ecology'. This notion is explained as reflecting a certain ideological stance of sorts amongst the Indian royals wherein they did not recognize any 'sharp divisions between human and animal or between the so-called artificial and natural environments' (p. 3). Nature and culture were not held as conceptually distinct domains but instead treated by the princes as semiotically charged admixtures. In terms of operatives this meant that the idea of shikar was intended to interweave the worlds of the wild and settled or the jungle and the garden to sustain royal presence, status and inevitably sovereignty. Consequently, as the author compellingly points out, British hunters and administrators who were steeped in the idea of sportsmanship often failed to grasp the more complex interplay between shikar and iterations of princely sovereignty. These sharp contrasts between the British sense for formal hunting rules as against the hierarchy-ridden 'righteousness of kings' is brought out by the author in absorbing accounts on shikar amongst three prominent Rajput royal houses: a) Maharaja Pratap Singh of Orcha; b) Maharana Fateh Singh of Mewar and c) the Maharaja of Bikaner, Ganga Singh.

Each of the above-mentioned royal houses is given a chapter-length discussion in *Animal Kingdoms*, with the author skillfully connecting seemingly disparate hunting incidents around the larger theme of 'princely ecology'. In the instance of Maharaja Pratap Singh of Orcha, for example, the 'Karkigarh crisis' is revealingly explored to underline the complex nature/culture tensions that shaped the practice of shikar. The crisis, innocently enough, begins as a seemingly inadvertent error by the Public Works Department of the government of the United Provinces, who, in 1905, through an irrigation

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project, appropriated a much 'valued' tiger shooting preserve of the Orcha state. In describing the heated and trying efforts by the Mahahraja to restore his hunting privileges, the author helps us understand the profoundly complicated politics that connected princely sovereignty and shikar with the settled agricultural domains within the maharajas' territory. In effect, monetary compensation for the loss of the tiger preserve could offer no equivalence to nor substitute for the delicate manner in which routines for renewing royal legitimacy were crucially dependent on how shikar sustained the Orcha states' social and political worlds. A similar resonance in terms of the nature-culture admixture is explored in the case of Maharana Fateh Singh of Mewar. The author notes here how the very idea of royal power is critically wrapped up with the environment itself:

> While cultivators' preferred fertile fields and merchants wanted open roads, Rajput sovereigns and nobles needed imposing hills and dense forests alongside their pleasure gardens. (p. 85)

For Maharana Fateh Singh of Mewar, creating brave rajputs – and from which followed the legitimacy for rule – meant that princely hunting required a 'fine balance' of rugged terrains and fecund vegetation to sustain wild game such as boars, tigers and leopards. But Mewari hunting landscapes, its abundant game and shooting methods, as the author suggests, in actual fact also comprised a complex language for royal negotiation and an equally intricate signaling system. The 'admiration' for the dangers of killing wild boar was coded and held different implications than the 'respect' for hunting tigers. While reckless daring for pigsticking wild boars in the lowlands was signified, for Fateh Singh, to settle rank and status amongst the Mewari nobility, bagging tigers through tactical ability was invariably part of his subtle attempts to assert princely superiority in comparison to British officialdom. Put differently, Mewari honor and independence was critically fashioned through Fateh Singh's finely tuned hunting stratagems involving hospitality, political calculation, sportsmanship and environmental exceptionalism.

In the case of Ganga Singh, the Maharaja of Bikaner, hunting, on the other hand, was challenged by several natural handicaps. The state of Bikaner, as is starkly noted, had no tigers, leopards or lions, nor did it even have natural forests that could support other game such as *sambar*, deer or *chital*. In effect, Ganga Singh had to radically transform his arid province to create an altogether new hunting possibility. This pressing effort to achieve status amongst his peers, as the author tells us, caused Ganga Singh to create artificially through river diversion a 'veritable oasis' made up of wetlands. These oftentimes overflowing water bodies were then engineered into habitats for a range of wild birds: snipes, imperial sandgrouse, ducks, bustards and even demoiselle cranes. Bikaner, in effect, through Ganga Singh's inventive abilities was transformed for 'exclusive sport'. And wildfowling as a form of shikar in an 'exceptional manner' was not only aimed to sidestep the need for big game hunting but, in time, was repeatedly sought to be employed in order to fortify Ganga Singh's princely need for influence, status and standing.

Animal Kingdoms is brilliant scholarship at its best and should be considered a very substantial addition to the now mature field of South Asian environmental history. It enables with its themes, concerns and vibrant engagements many different scripts on political ecology and environmental imagination. Above all else, however, this book should be celebrated most for its extraordinary literary quality.

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