

The Man-Fauna Relationship in Mesoamerica Before and After the Europeans

M. en C. Raúl Valadez Azúa

The year 1992 is a year for reflection, because whether or not the quincentenary celebration of the arrival of the Europeans to this continent seems justified, one cannot escape thinking about the impact of this event on our land.

As archeology is my area of study, my reflections are directed toward the changes that came about in the relationship between man and animals after 1492, specifically toward what occurred in Mexico once the Spaniards established themselves in this territory.

The comments that I will offer are a result of this inquiry; they are not theories tested through a long process of research, but rather the overall product of observations accumulated over more than eight years of study. I do not wish to classify some as good and others as bad, but rather to compare two modes of life, two ways in which man related to his environment, specifically to the fauna, and to understand what occurred at the moment when these two ideologies came face to face.

The Relationship Between Man and Fauna in Mesoamerica

When Christopher Columbus reached the lands of America for the first time, the indigenous Americans already had discovered these lands many millenia before. In some regions, these peoples developed advanced cultures.

In Mesoamerica, the man-fauna relationship meant much more than hunting and gathering. These cultures were based on an intricate network of mythical and material relationships between man and the local animal species, the result of which was the simultane-

ous exploitation of domesticated and wild resources without diminishing the population of one or the other.

To understand this relationship better, let us examine in greater detail the fauna used by the Mesoamericans for food, shelter, and clothing. First, let us take the domesticated dog and turkey, which provided an important part of the necessary meat, eggs, feathers, and bones (Valadez, in press). These animals were distributed within and around the human settlements; their number came to be large, though limited, and the impact that they had on the surrounding wilderness was relatively small. These judgments are based on the following observations:

- The turkey and the dog are animals of medium size, so their territorial and alimentary requirements are less than those of sheep, horses, bulls, and cows.

- Domesticated turkeys require human care in order to survive; without human support, they are easy prey for predators. Because of this, they could not be allowed to roam free in the forests, as one would do with horses, cattle, goats, and sheep.

- Because dog and man shared many alimentary requirements, the number of dogs could not be allowed to grow very large without causing intense competition between the two species for food. In the case of sheep, goats, cows, and horses, this competition could not exist, since their alimentary requirements are completely different from those of man. Accordingly, a small group of people could take care of a large number of heads of cattle; the only problem was to find places in which the animals could graze (Bokonyi 1988).

The relatively small impact of domesticated fauna on the surrounding wilderness can be explained by the fact that turkeys and dogs never provided all the meat required by humans; wild fauna always remained an important resource. Indeed, in archeological excavations, one finds both wild and domestic fauna, which were used uninterruptedly without the one diminishing the other (Photo 1). Although some investigators see this as proof that domesticated fauna had only a limited value for these cultures, I would interpret it as evidence that the use of domesticated and wild animals was complementary in character, not exclusive.

This circumstance promoted the conservation of wilderness resources and their rational management. I have been unable to determine whether the Mesoamericans came to understand the structure and dynamics of an ecosystem as we conceive of it today. Regardless, they understood that wilderness resources were neither

inexhaustible nor immutable, and that if they wanted to make use of them, it would be necessary to manage them carefully; utilize them, yes, but not destroy them.

To get a sense of this, let us consider the conditions in the Mexican River Basin around the year 1500 A.D. After several centuries of population growth (Sanders et al. 1979), the lower zones, such as Teotihuacan, had been visibly altered, but there still existed enormous areas of forest that sheltered deer, *berrendos* (mottled or spotted deer-like wild mammals found in the Mexican highlands), bears, wolves, panthers, rabbits, squirrels, armadillos, eagles, parrots, parakeets, *trogones* (small birds), etc. (Valadez, in press). Although they utilized the resources of Lake Texcoco, the Mesoamericans would never have considered drying up a portion of the lake in order to facilitate the breeding of turkeys or dogs; this was because the lake was an extremely important source of food, an ecosystem containing perhaps the most animal biomass in the entire region. The sources indicate that aquatic birds gathered there in the millions and that the diversity of edible organisms was astounding (Rojas 1985). Domesticated fauna existed and were utilized, but wild fauna were equally valuable and appreciated.

In addition to economic factors, we must not forget the enormous importance of the fauna in Mesoamerican religions. Each species had its place within the religion, and in most cases the animals were treated with profound respect; they were still hunted, of course, but were seen as dignified beings who shared the same physical territory as man. Monkeys were kept captive, but they were neither killed nor used as food; the men who hunted jaguars were considered brave, but there was also a tradition that allowed the jaguar hunter a maximum of four arrows, after which he had to surrender himself in defeat and death to the paws of the feline; sea turtles were believed to be able to bring rain, and because of this belief, Mayan farmers protected them (Sahagun 1979; Aguilera 1989). There are many other examples showing that Mesoamerican man never disrespected animals; even though hunted, the animals were viewed with respect.

This outline does not seek to associate the level of scientific knowledge of the Mesoamerican culture with that of contemporary science, nor does it pretend to demonstrate that they planned, in a rational sense, the way in which natural resources should be used. Rather, I simply wish to show the reader the principal factors that, in my judgment, determined the way in which the fauna were uti-

lized, and the consequences that this utilization had on the environment, up to the time of first contact between Mesoamericans and Europeans.

The Relationship Between Man and Fauna in Europe

While all this was occurring in Mesoamerica, people in Europe were effecting their own process of man-fauna interaction. Domesticated resources were fairly numerous: dogs, sheep, pigs, goats, horses, cattle, hens, ducks, and geese constituted the main sources of meat in the region. Wild fauna were important, but no more than domesticated fauna, as a result of which there always existed the tendency of either introducing the latter to the wild or, better, converting forests into pastures. Domesticated animals were important enough that wild resources could be sacrificed without any evident danger for man, because each hectare of forest destroyed represented potential pasture land where sheep or cattle could be bred.

A key factor in this process was the alimentary requirements of many of these species. Sheep, cattle, goats, and horses are herbivores, in fact pasturing animals. Thus, people who raised cattle, for example, would sacrifice very little of their own alimentary resources in doing so; in addition, the farmer would be able to convert an ecosystem whose substratum had little usable vegetation (meadowlands and pastures) into a highly exploitable resource (cattle), so the increase of domesticated fauna at the expense of natural ecosystems was always encouraged. In many cases, the forests survived only in inaccessible zones or because of a royal interest in maintaining hunting grounds.

Finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that, for the Europeans, animals were inferior beings who had to submit to human laws and that, whether domesticated or wild, no animal had more rights than those granted to it by the human master.

The Interaction of Man and Fauna in New Spain

In 1991 I had the opportunity to study the skeletal remains of animals recovered from an excavation in the Texcoco region (Garcia 1990). The site had been occupied by indigenous peoples, and the characteristics of the pottery, tools, and dwellings revealed a style of life that was essentially Mesoamerican. Nevertheless, the remains of the fauna showed the presence of sheep, cattle, and horses, together with dogs, turkeys, and wildlife.

The pottery on site revealed that this locale had been inhabited in the middle of the sixteenth century, that is, two or three decades after the conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlán. The traditions of these people do not appear to have been different from those of their ancestors; however, the presence of European domesticated animals is already evident. Doubtless, their characteristics were quite attractive and, within a relatively short period of time, they were considered a more important source of meat than dogs, turkeys, or wildlife (Photo 2).

The acceptance of European domesticated animals and the arrival of Christianity profoundly altered the relationship between man and nature that had existed before the conquest. With the adoption of the European model, the natural ecosystems gradually began to lose their value. This does not mean that wildlife immediately ceased to be part of Mesoamerican life; the chronicles mention that the fauna of Texcoco Lake, for example, continued to be consumed and in some cases maintained their alimentary importance for many centuries (Rojas 1985). However, these wild ecosystems were subjected to the alimentary needs of cattle; instead of looking for a way to improve the viability of the natural environment, a swamp marsh or a forest plain would be destroyed in order to create more pastureland. In accordance with this new model, wildlife could be exploited, but in no case would it be given preference over heads of cattle, and the earlier respect that had been accorded wild fauna was discarded in favor of a purely material interest.

Five centuries of European thought in these lands is a long time; in fact it is so long that we cannot expect to be able to completely resurrect the older Mesoamerican way of life and expel the Spanish portion from our culture. However, this does not exclude the possibility of reflecting on the Mesoamerican part that also lives within each one of us, and trying to recover it for our own benefit; for example, in order to understand the way in which these cultures exploited their wildlife resources and to appreciate the important place that they accorded to them. On a personal level, I believe that it would benefit us enormously to learn to treat with respect the wild animals who live with us on these lands and who were considered so valuable before the contact between Mesoamerica and Europe.

Translated from the Spanish by Katherine Hagedorn

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