

Humans and Bears

Svetoslava Toncheva *Humans and Bears: Politics and Coexistence Models*. Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov, 2022, 178 p.2022
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Svetoslava Toncheva's monograph *Humans and Bears: Politics and Coexistence Models* falls within the field of several anthropologies. On the one hand, it is influenced by the posthuman turn in social sciences and humanities and therefore engages with the anthropology known as multispecies anthropology, labelled with definitions such as posthuman, extrahuman or more-than-human. This anthropology seeks to transcend both the anthropocentric perspective and the nature–culture divide, as well as view both human and non-human species as actors who *jointly* participate in political, economic and

social processes. On the other hand, the book is an example of engaged anthropology, an anthropology that not only deals with issues that excite or trouble (parts of) our society, such as policies and practices of biodiversity conservation and encounters between humans and large carnivores, in this case, but also attempts to provide models that could be useful for solving these problems.

Coexistence is the key word both in the title and in the whole monograph. The author strives to answer the question of how successful coexistence between human and non-human species could be achieved, with brown bears in particular. In order to provide answers, Svetoslava Toncheva presents two case studies from two small areas in the Rhodopi mountains in southern Bulgaria that allow for a comparison to be made. In the collection of empirical materials, and in their analysis, she relies on the approaches of multispecies ethnography, selecting those that appear fruitful for the purposes of her research, adaptively combining them into an approach of her own, which she calls ethnography of

multispecies encounters. To reveal the human attitudes and practices she applies classical ethnographic methods, placing an accent on human knowledge and experience related to brown bears, whilst to understand the knowledge and behaviour of brown bears she relies on long-term observations and research by an ecologist and expert on brown bears, for whom bears are, so to say, an ecotourism resource. Local ecological knowledge is analysed as differentiated for the various groups among local communities as defined by characteristics such as age, gender, occupation and activity (children, women, hunters). In doing so, the author demonstrates that knowledge is not homogeneous and unified for the general population in a single village. Toncheva's observations and reflections on the relationship between local ecological knowledge and practical experience, and how these influence perceptions of wild animals, are also worth the reader's attention. Actor-network theory serves as a framework for the interpretation of relationships and interactions between humans and bears, with the latter assigned the role of a relevant actant. The analysis of human–bear interactions provides valid reasons for the division of the inhabited space into three categories: “intimate” space inhabited by humans, “intimate” space inhabited by bears, and an intermediate coexistence space, periodically and cyclically used by both species. Similar distinction makes it possible to understand that conflict between humans and bears mainly occurs when one species crosses the boundary into the intimate space of the *other*.

The two case studies provide divergent results. In the first case, human–bear coexistence can be identified as rather harmonious or adaptive (where people and bears adapt to each other's presence), while in the second conflict is apparent. These differences are not only a result of the differentiated knowledge and experience, and boundary crossing, but also of the economic benefits or losses of coexistence. In the first case, sustainable ecotourism based on bear observation and tracking of bear signs brings some financial benefit to a small part of the local community. In the other case, the income is only related to compensation payments in cases of bear induced damage (destroyed beehives, dead livestock, etc.). These payments, however, appear insufficient and related to complex and lengthy procedures. This contributes to the formation and maintenance of negative attitudes towards bears. The empirical material and Toncheva's reflections demonstrate that the protection model of wild species through compensatory payments, widely applied in Europe and around the world, can hardly be viewed as successful.

Which conservation model would be successful is actually a question that preoccupies the author for most of the book. She reviews the main conservation models throughout the history of nature protection, most of which appear to be based on the culture–nature dichotomy, which has prevailed over the centuries in philosophy, natural sciences and politics. It is for this reason that these models are being criticised. Based on her ideas regarding coexistence and her observations on the cohabitation practices of humans and brown bears, Svetoslava Toncheva argues in favour of the novel approach elaborated by Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher in 2019, i.e. that of convivial conservation.

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