

Ought We Not to Establish 'Access to Food' As a Species Right?

Subhankar Banerjee

Species are becoming extinct from our earth at an unprecedented rate. We know this. And now a recent comprehensive scientific study by an international research team says, 'Ecosystem effects of biodiversity loss rival climate change and pollution'.¹ With all that in mind, I begin with the supposition that all animals, including humans, want and need to eat to survive. If that indeed is true, then the basic moral question before us would be: ought we not to establish access to food as a species right? Here I am interested in the question, 'ought we not?' rather than the prescription 'we should'.

Posing the issue as a prescription would mean that we had a good understanding of the relationship between access to food and survival, and that consequently we could establish public policies to ensure access to food as a species right. But our understanding of that relationship is limited, it has become more complicated, and the goal a moving target in the human-made climate-ravaged Anthropocene in which we now find ourselves.

Also, we humans are very far from giving any serious rights of survival to non-human communities, especially if giving such rights would conflict with the convenience of our own needs and wants. For example, the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammals Protection Act (MMPA) are often compromised to support industrial development. Shell's drilling ships *Nobel Discoverer* and *Kulluk* have already sailed from Seattle to Arctic Alaska in the hope of beginning exploratory oil drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas – arguably the most dangerous form of drilling, as no one knows how to clean up oil from underneath the ice in the harsh environment of the Arctic. Any major spill from Shell's drilling would certainly compromise the ESA and the MMPA that now protect the estimated 10,000 'endangered' bowhead whales and several thousand 'threatened' polar bears of Alaska's Arctic Ocean.² While the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

1. 'Ecosystem Effects of Biodiversity Loss Rival Climate Change and Pollution: First Comprehensive Effort to Compare Biodiversity Loss to other Human-caused Environmental Changes', National Science Foundation Press Release 12-083, 2 May 2012, online at: http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=124016

2. Subhankar Banerjee, 'BPing the Arctic?', in Subhankar Banerjee, ed, *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*, Seven Stories, New York, 2012

acknowledges, ‘In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence’, the broader ‘access to food as a species right’ is a philosophical question. Which species? What food? What kind of access?

I will share three stories about access to food – two from the Arctic, my ongoing project of twelve years; and one from the desert, a project that I started in 2006 and ended in 2010. I will share a few words before I get to those stories, first about absence and then presence of non-human communities in photography.

In the past few decades there has been an explosion of human portrait photography – photographers taking pictures of themselves or other people to explore many issues of culture. As I write these words in New York City, the Museum of Modern Art has a massive and wonderful Cindy Sherman retrospective and also an exhibition of Taryn Simon; later this summer, the Guggenheim Museum will present a retrospective of Rineke Dijkstra. In 2010, the Walker Art Center presented an exhibition of Alec Soth; in 2008, the Guggenheim presented a massive retrospective of Catherine Opie, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art an exhibition of Philip-Lorca diCorcia. In 2006, the Art Institute of Chicago presented a wonderful group exhibition ‘so the story goes’ with photographs by Tina Barney, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, and Larry Sultan. The 2003 Thomas Struth touring retrospective included his well-known group portraits; and both Thomas Ruff and Fazal Sheikh have produced celebrated portrait series. The list of contemporary human portrait photography seems endless.

What about exhibitions of portraits of animals? That number would be close to zero. In my essay for the 18th Biennale of Sydney catalogue *all our relations*, I wrote about photography’s silence on non-human communities.³ There has been an exception or two from here: Robert Adams – and over there: Jean-Luc Mylayne. In 2010, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid presented Mylayne’s retrospective, ‘Into the Hands of Time’ – four decades of photographs of common birds. And ‘The Place We Live’ – a currently touring retrospective of Robert Adams presented by the Yale University Art Gallery accompanied by a massive three-volume catalogue – shows clearly how Adams’s photography has explored the American West for more than four decades, primarily through the changing relationship of humans to the environment, but also at times through pictures of animals. In a handwritten letter to me, dated 5 July 2008, Adams wrote:

As it happens, this spring as my wife & I walked the beach to enjoy the sight of the birds going north – something we eagerly await each year – I twice photographed Brant (just in b&w, with my old Nikon), & we agreed it would be wonderful to see where they went. Now we have, thanks to your beautiful & important work that wish is answered. It’s wonderful . . . we can even see the young!

There are several aspects of Adams’s note that are worthy of our attention. *Excitement* – ‘we eagerly await each year’. There are others who also eagerly wait, as writer Debbie Miller pointed out;

For centuries, the return of the yellow wagtails [from the Arctic] has signaled the Kelabit [people of Borneo] to plant their rice. The Kelabit calendar revolves around the planting month, known as *Sensulit mad’ting*, meaning the month of the yellow wagtail’s arrival.⁴

3. Subhankar Banerjee, ‘Photography’s Silence of (Non)Human Communities’, in Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, eds, *all our relations*, 18th Biennale of Sydney catalogue, Sydney, June 2012

4. Debbie Miller, ‘Songs from Around the World’, in Stephen Brown, ed, *Arctic Wings: Birds of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, Mountaineers, Seattle, 2006

Curiosity – ‘it would be wonderful to see where they went’ – perhaps we have always wondered: where do they come from, and where do they go? And *interconnectedness* – ‘birds going north’ – of human and nonhuman communities, from here to there.

The photograph Adams refers to – ‘Brant and Snow Geese with Chicks’, which I had taken in July 2006 in the Teshekpuk Lake wetland in the central Alaskan Arctic – represents the largest wetland complex in the entire circumpolar north. But why do the Brant [or Brent] Geese travel all this distance from the Oregon coast to the Arctic for a sojourn that lasts about three months? The primary reason is that access to food in the Arctic is abundant (the birds can feed round the clock beneath the midnight sun); they also nest there and raise their young, then return south before snow begins to fall. But gaining access to food in the far north for these long-distance migrants is becoming harder and harder; Arctic warming and ever-expanding resource extraction projects – for oil, gas, coal and minerals – are having a significant negative impact on the bird habitats of the far north.



Brant and Snow Geese with Chicks, Oil and the Geese, 2006, Teshekpuk Lake wetland, Arctic Alaska, 68 in x 86 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee

SPECIES VULNERABILITY

There is another Oregon migrant – the Pacific Loon – that Bob Adams probably doesn't get to see, as the birds winter offshore in the Pacific Ocean and return north to build their nest in the Arctic tundra, adjacent to large deep lakes, in Alaska, northern Canada and eastern Siberia.

I spent the winter term 2009 as Artist-in-Residence at Dartmouth College. There, with plenty of free time, I dug through my archive and presented a selection of some thirty photos of the loon, spread across three large white walls in my office-studio, creating an immersive



Loon on Nest, Oil and the Caribou, 2002, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, four images from a larger set, each 12 in x 12 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee

space. Each photo shows a Pacific Loon on a nest. I had taken the photos over a two-week period in June 2002, in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. In these bird portraits we do not get much information about their natural history but instead a psychological state of being-in-the-land. The loon sleeps briefly, then wakes up, and rotates its head to look around. I had known that when resting outside its breathing hole on the ice a seal would use a sleeping-waking-looking method to protect itself from polar bears, its predator. I surmise that the loon (besides being curious) was keeping an eye out for predators, like the Arctic fox, that would try to get the eggs – at times the fox wins. Whether it was a clear day with the temperature at about forty degrees Fahrenheit, or a day when snow fell incessantly with temperatures around twenty degrees, the loon sat on the nest and rotated its head. There were breaks too – an exchange, as both male and female bird share nesting duties, giving each other breaks to go and feed. Did my presence impact on the loons' behaviour? Quite possibly, but they did sleep in my presence too.

Loons have done well so far. They are among the oldest surviving species on Earth, having been around for more than twenty million years. However, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website on the Pacific Loon states, 'Spring migration counts in California showed a sharp decline between 1979 and 1996, but these numbers have not been substantiated by surveys of breeding birds'. And the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology webpage on the Pacific Loon states, 'Recent studies are looking into the magnification of chemicals in the loon's body due to pollutants being added to the ecosystem'. Moreover, since oil and gas lie underneath all major Arctic river deltas and the adjoining tundra, development projects to extract those resources only exacerbate the decline of the loons.

Loons critically depend on large deep lakes – both for access to food and as transportation corridors. They are unable to take flight from land and require 'about thirty to fifty meters of open water to take flight, flapping and pattering across the surface'. A nesting pair can either feed (on fish and other aquatic life) in the lake next to the shore on which they are nesting, or take off from the lake to feed in another nearby lake, or in a nearby coastal lagoon. In the Arctic, access to food and large deep lakes are connected for the survival of Pacific Loon. Now imagine this scenario: a loon pair have arrived in the Arctic tundra, but the lake they use for breeding and nesting is dry, and so are the nearby lakes; I would call this a special vulnerability because there is nothing the loons can do to deal with this situation, unlike predation. Arctic lakes are disappearing rapidly due to warming – permafrost is thawing and the water is draining away, leaving the lakes dry. Beyond the tundra there is no more land or lakes, only ocean, all the way to the North Pole. Loons cannot go any further north than they currently go to nest.

RIGHT-TO-FOOD CLAIM

In 2007, in the exhibition 'Weather Report: Art and Climate Change' curated by Lucy R Lippard, I presented for the first time one

large photograph of pregnant caribou migrating over a frozen river and four smaller photographs of Gwich'in hunters butchering caribou on the snow, and wall text, with the intent of making visible the coming together of ecological and human rights issues in the most contentious public land debate in the US. The question of whether to open up the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas development, or to protect it permanently, has been raging in the halls of the US Congress for more than four decades. The central argument presented by the conservationists is that the coastal plain is the core calving area of the Porcupine River caribou herd, and that oil development will have a significant impact on the herd; the caribou have become the poster child of this debate. On the other hand, the Gwich'in Nation – fifteen villages across north-east Alaska and north-west Canada – have argued that oil development in the caribou calving ground is a human rights issue for the Gwich'in. The Gwich'in people have relied on the caribou for food, cultural and spiritual sustenance for many millennia. In his historic testimony to oppose oil development in the caribou calving ground before the US Congress on 7 July 1988, Jonathan Solomon, late Gwich'in activist and founding board member of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, said:

Congress has the power, but no one has the right to deny the Gwich'in our own means of subsistence. This principle is clearly stated in the International Human Rights Covenants, and is recognized by civilized nations everywhere. Make no mistake, this is our life at stake here – the life of a modern hunting culture that is alive and healthy and growing.⁵

To downplay caribou's reliance on the coastal plain, pro-oil politicians have used various means, including gagging federal scientists and manipulating major scientific reports.⁶ Despite repeated attempts by various administrations to open the area, the Arctic Refuge continues to remain free of oil development while the debate continues.

I would suggest that 'access to food as a species right' has been the core of the argument in this ongoing battle. In April and May pregnant female caribou make an extremely long and arduous journey over high mountains and frozen rivers to arrive at the coastal plain by the end of May. They give birth during the first few days in June. But why do the caribou make this difficult journey to the coastal plain? The primary reason is access to food. When caribou arrive at the coastal plain, a type of nutrient-rich cotton grass returns to life after the long winter. The caribou feed on it, build up milk, nurse their calves, and slowly begin their return migration.

The Gwich'in call the caribou calving ground 'Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit' ('The sacred place where life begins'). However, the coastal plain is *not* part of the Gwich'in traditional homeland. Instead, it is the traditional homeland of the Iñupiat. The Gwich'in do not inhabit the coastal plain, they do not go there to hunt, they do not even walk there, and yet they are making a claim for its protection. For all these reasons, I would call this a right-to-food claim; by making this claim they are fighting to protect access to food for human and non-human communities – caribou for the Gwich'in, and cotton grass for the caribou, during calving time.

5. Jonathan Solomon, Sarah James and Trimble Gilbert, 'We'll Fight to Protect the Caribou Calving Ground and Gwich'in Way of Life', in Banerjee, *Arctic Voices*, op cit

6. See Banerjee, 'BPing the Arctic?' op cit, and Pamela A Miller, 'Broken Promises: The Reality of Big Oil in America's Arctic', in Banerjee, *Arctic Voices*, op cit.



Caribou Migration I, Oil and the Caribou, 2002, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, 86 in x 68 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee



Gwich'in Caribou Hunt: Jimmy John, Near Arctic Village, 2007, 18 in x 24 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee

HABITAT LOSS

In 2011, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas presented an exhibition of my desert series, *Where I Live I Hope To Know*. In the Arctic I have been looking at the far-away, in the desert it was the near – for four years I walked in a five-mile radius around the home where I lived. One of the themes I engaged with was the issue of dead piñons – New Mexico’s state tree.

Sadly, as I continued my photography, I began to realize that the old-growth piñon forest in New Mexico is mostly dead due to recent climate change. Between 2001 and 2005, *Ips confusus*, a tiny bark beetle, killed 54.5 million piñons – ninety per cent of the mature piñons in northern New Mexico. When healthy trees become stressed from severe and sustained drought, they become subject to attack: the beetles drill into their bark, lay eggs along the way, and kill their host.⁷

I was not interested in taking portraits of dead trees, however. Instead, through the walks, I wanted to get close, first to cholla cactuses, and then to dead piñons, to understand the often overlooked but complex interconnected ecology of the desert. This engagement eventually led me to the politics of ecology rooted in the local and connected to the global; climate change is killing trees all over the world.⁸

7. Subhankar Banerjee, ‘Where I Live I Hope To Know’, in *Subhankar Banerjee: Where I Live I Hope To Know*, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 2011

8. Craig D Allen, et al, ‘A Global Overview of Drought and Heat-Induced Tree Mortality Reveals Emerging Climate Change Risks for Forests’, in *Forest Ecology and Management*, vol 259, issue 4, February 2010



Scrub Jay in the Midst of Many Dead Piñons, Where I Live I Hope to Know, 2009, New Mexico piñon-juniper woodland, 30 in x 90 in (oblique), photo: Subhankar Banerjee

Here I will share the story of access to food with one particular photo, *Scrub Jay in the Midst of Many Dead Piñons: On My Way to the Powerline*, 2009. Something terrible had happened; so I presented the photo not straight on but from an oblique angle. However, the angle is not forced. I used the natural slope of the hill while taking the photo, keeping the horizon line straight. Several dead piñons lie on the ground, each tree perhaps 500 years old, or older; the junipers are green and alive, and have berries on them; a Scrub Jay rests on a dead branch, while the sun begins to set. Scrub Jays eat piñon nuts which are very rich in protein. Its cousin the Piñon Jay critically depends on piñon nuts for sustenance. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology webpage on the Piñon Jay states:

A highly social bird of the lower mountain slopes of the western United States, the Pinyon Jay is specialized for feeding on pine seeds. Each jay stores thousands of seeds each year, and has such a good memory that it can remember where most of them were hidden. Pinyon Jay social organization is complex, with permanent flocks that may include more than 500 individuals.

Piñon Jays not only eat piñon nuts but also serve a very important role in the regeneration of piñon woods. A typical flock of fifty to 500 birds can cache more than four million piñon seeds in a good year in New Mexico, and uneaten seeds result in new trees. For Native American communities of the desert South-West, the piñon tree has been of immense cultural, spiritual and economic importance for many millennia. The nut is extensively harvested throughout its range. It has been a staple for a long time and continues to be eaten and used in cooking today.

Caching on this massive scale and a strong recall for the later retrieval of nuts from the stored caches are a survival mechanism that the Piñon Jay has mastered; it is necessary since piñon trees produce nuts

only once every four to seven years. Also, the piñon is perhaps the slowest growing tree of the American Southwest – it takes nearly 300 years to mature (other pine trees take about seventy years) and lives up to 1000 years. With the death of more than ninety per cent of mature piñons, what vanished at the same time was access to food – for non-human and human communities. This loss has made the Piñon Jay’s caching–retrieval survival technique useless, and in that sense I would call this a severe habitat loss. I did not see a single Piñon Jay flock during my four years of walking, so I photographed a Scrub Jay instead.

With my Arctic and desert series so far, I have been attempting to build a framework of habitation, resistance-against-destruction and revitalization that I call *land-as-home* – land that provides home and food to our species and all other species with whom we share this earth. By asking ‘ought we not to establish?’, my hope is that we will ask many more questions about ‘access to food as a species right’ that may lead us toward understanding and then fighting for the survival of non-human and human communities, in the rapidly transforming Anthropocene. In 2009, during the UN Climate Change Conference, COP15, I went to Copenhagen with Gwich’in elder and activist Sarah James to present our work in a group exhibition ‘(Re-)Cycles of Paradise’, organized by ARTPORT in partnership with the Global Gender and Climate Alliance.⁹ Our effort was part of Klimaforum09, ‘the global civil society counterpart to the UN conference’. Activists from all over the world were hopeful that something good would come out of COP15, but as the days went by our hope faded away into disappointment, and then a kind of resolve to continue fighting began to take shape. Most importantly COP15 gave birth to the Climate Justice Movement.¹⁰ The following year in April, on the invitation of Bolivian President Evo Morales, the historic gathering World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth took place in Cochabamba, attended by about 30,000 people from over 100 countries. The same year, on 28 July, the UN declared access to clean water and sanitation ‘a fundamental human right’ – 122 nations voted in favour, none against, with forty-one abstentions, including the US and Canada.¹¹ Pablo Solón Romero, then Ambassador of Bolivia to the United Nations, played a crucial role. In June, in something of a surprise move, he had introduced the resolution at the UN General Assembly, forcing a UN vote the following month. While the water campaign resulted in success, the story of the climate change campaign is quite different. The recent Rio+20 UN Summit has made it clear that addressing climate change through the UN process has not only turned into a political farce, but worse, it has successfully been hijacked by the most powerful and destructive corporations under the banner of Green Economy and Sustainability. But the work of activist communities all over the world goes on. Ecophilosopher Vandana Shiva ended her op-ed, ‘The great Rio U-turn’ in *Al Jazeera* with these words:

I treat Rio+20 as a ‘square bracket’ (UN jargon for text that is not agreed upon and often gets deleted). It is not the final step, just a punctuation. Democracy and political processes will decide the real outcome of history and the future of life on Earth. Our collective will and collective actions will determine whether corporations will be successful in

9. Sarah James and Subhankar Banerjee, interview with Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, 8 December 2009, online at: http://www.democracynow.org/2009/12/8/we_are_having_a_hard_time

10. Yates McKee, ‘Of Survival: Climate Change and Uncanny Landscape in the Photography of Subhankar Banerjee’, in Henry Sussman, ed, *Impasses of the Post-Global: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Open Humanities, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 15 May 2012, available online at: <http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/impasses-of-the-post-global.html>

11. ‘In Historic Vote, UN Declares Water a Fundamental Human Right’, *Democracy Now!*, 29 July 2010, online at: http://www.democracynow.org/2010/7/29/in_historic_vote_un_declares_access

12. Vandana Shiva, 'The great Rio U-turn', *Al Jazeera*, 2 July 2012, online at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/06/20126279180725959.html>

privatizing the last drop of water, the last blade of grass, the last acre of land, the last seed – or whether our movements will be able to defend life on Earth, including human life, in its rich diversity, abundance and freedom.¹²

Access to clean water for humans has been recognized. Let us now talk about access to food, for all species, and build on Shiva's call to action.