

Animal Kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in the Indian Princely States
by Julie E. Hughes.
Harvard University Press 2013.

Any traveller to India or Nepal knows full well that s/he will see faded black and white photographs in hotels and elsewhere showing the aftermath of a hunt: though the specifics may vary the essence is always the same – a pukka sahib in a solar topi, several beaters, an elephant or two, and on the ground the corpses of several (usually several) tigers.

Such evidence suggests to the ill-informed that the hunting of big game in the Indian subcontinent was reserved to the Raj and its officials and officers, yet the reality is much more complex and interesting.

In *Animal Kingdoms*, Professor Julie E Hughes of Vassar College presents that bigger picture, and demonstrates not only the depth of the hunting culture in princely India but also the ways in which it was developed and re-directed by the Maharajahs' encounter with their colonial masters.

Hughes' meticulous research is set out in seven chapters: Introduction: A Leopard in the Garden; Princely Sport and Good Tiger Grounds; Exceptional Game in Powerful Places; Martial Past and Combative Presents; Threatened Kingdoms of Dwindling Beasts; Conclusion: Leaving the Garden.

The fascinating picture that emerges is a complex interplay of many factors and yields some surprises. Hughes demonstrates how the curtailing of the range of their inherited roles drove the Rajahs into channelling their martial energies into hunting, building upon centuries of engagement with the land and its forests, and all the creatures living within them. The rulers knew better than their colonial masters about maintaining the balance of nature, particularly between the hunted and the hunter, and could be seen as the first consciously to engage with the concept of conservation and protection of habitat.

Tiger or leopard hunts, wild boar or deer shikars, all required a profound sense of awareness and respect for the animals who inhabited the wild places, and while a Maharajah may have felt his manhood and importance enhanced by the killing of a magnificent Bengal tiger, Hughes makes clear that they brought to the hunt a different approach to the British whose idea seems to have been that kills had to be in large quantity rather than accepting the quality of fewer animals.

Those like myself who care passionately for tigers find the very idea of killing such a magnificent animal for 'sport' morally and practically repugnant, but Julie Hughes' journey into the heart and soul of hunting as practised by the Maharajahs demonstrates that many of them cared as much if not more than any modern conservationist for their land and the animals it supported, and did whatever they could to preserve the balance of the ecosystem they had inherited from their ancestors.

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