Bears, Birds, and Human Hubris: Imagining Bears in the Andes

Thomas Regele

In 1782 the bald eagle was specifically chosen as the national symbol of the United States at the Second Continental Congress. The eagle was assumed to be an appropriate image to represent our fledgling nation, and the bird’s admirable attributes were again extolled in 2004 in the American Bald Eagle Recovery and National Emblem Commemorative Coin Act of 2004, which lists reasons for preserving the bald eagle:

1. The bald eagle is the greatest visible symbol of the spirit of freedom and democracy in the world.
2. The bald eagle is unique to North America and represents the American values and attributes of freedom, courage, strength, spirit, loyalty, justice, equality, democracy, quality, and excellence.
3. The bald eagle’s image and symbolism have influenced American art, music, history, literature, commerce, and culture since the founding of our Nation (American Bald Eagle Recovery Act of 2004, 108–486, 118).

While the graceful bald eagle was deemed the image that best reflected our rising nation, this raptor soon proved to be a scavenger—even a nuisance—and was killed like any other “pest” to the point of near extinction. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the eagle was killed because these great birds occasionally preyed on small domestic animals (young sheep, newborn calves, and so on). Eagles were shot for their feathers, and also “in an effort to eliminate a perceived threat” to animal agricultural profits (U.S. FWS 1). In Alaska, the Territorial Legislature placed a bounty on eagles in 1917 on behalf of fisherman, again to eliminate a perceived threat to human profits based on the erroneous idea that eagles compete with fishermen for salmon, claims that were eventually discredited. Nonetheless, the bounty remained until 1953, when Alaska became a state, at which time these eagles were taken in under the protected canopy of the federal Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940. Between 1917 and 1953 more than 120,000 eagles were killed in Alaska on behalf of the fishing industry (Bald Eagle. Species Profile). In 1973, the bald eagle received further protection under the nation’s Endangered Species Act (Endangered Species Act of 1973—16 USC 1531–1544).
What changed between early U.S. celebration of the bald eagle and the near extinction of the same bird? Certainly not the eagle, nor the bird’s role in North-American ecosystems. What shifted was our perception of the eagle, and consequently the bird’s cultural role in the U.S.

In many ways the turning fate of the Andean bear (also known as oso frontal­ino, oso andino, oso de anteojos, el salvaje, jucumari, and mashiramo) parallels the plight of the American bald eagle, except that the future of the Andean (or spectacled) bear remains tenuous. This essay explores the underlying motives and processes by which an icon—the Andean bear in this case—becomes an unwanted pest perilously close to eradication.

**Andean Bears in the Indigenous Worldview**

The Andean bear has been central to the cultures of various peoples of South America for centuries. The Andean bear has great religious and historical importance: “In any society, there are particular ways of envisioning the surrounding reality ... [A]nimals and plants have played an important role in the thoughts of the Andean inhabitants” (Torres).

This is certainly true for the Andean bear in South America. The bear is sometimes viewed as a threat, a sacrificial victim, “kin” to humans, or in the case of the Yukpas in Colombia, as embodying the protective spirit of Mashiramo, and in fact they have named the bear Mashiramo in their native language. The bear’s connection to strength and virility is widespread: Pre-Inca tribes worshipped the bear, as did the Tomebamba in Ecuador, and there are ceremonial sites and textual references demonstrating the bear’s sacred nature among numerous indigenous peoples throughout Peru (Paisley 250). In a legend from the U’wa culture in Columbia, the bear is regarded as an “older brother” who watches over the people, and thus, it is forbidden to kill the bear, who is understood to be the favorite son of Sira, the creator (Torres). The Inca understood the Andean bear to be a link between Earth and gods. In parts of Peru, evil people—“condemned souls” (bosses who exploited natives, corrupt priests, the incestuous, those disrespectful towards their parents)—“may only gain access to the afterlife if they have been killed by the bear” (Torres). Quechua beliefs, despite the infusion of Christianity (sincretismo), hold bears to be mediators “between the upper world (the gods) and the inferior world (human),” and to signify salvation for souls—even if these souls belong to people who “committed a mortal sin” (Torres). Within the Quechua worldview, the bear remains an agent of redemption. The bear is also believed to be endowed with the ability to “maintain order when chaos emerges” and is viewed as humanity’s benefactor in chaotic times (Torres).