
A Feel for the Numbers: the Data and Discourse of Mark/Recapture Studies

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Abstract

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Paper abstract:

Since the nineteen-seventies, wildlife biologists and environmental activists have converged on the Delaware Bay, in the northeastern U.S., to study a migratory shorebird called the "red knot." Ecologically linked with the spawning cycle of the horseshoe crab, the population of this bird has declined precipitously in recent decades with the advent of a horseshoe crab fishery on the east coast. Attempts to halt this decline have hinged on the numerical and statistical data gleaned from tracking shorebirds, and the the red knot political controversy has helped to generate one of the largest "mark-recapture" wildlife studies in the world. This paper places Delaware Bay shorebird studies in the larger historical context of twentieth-century bird-banding as a scientific practice and a direct, sensorial relationship between human and nonhuman nature. Since the turn of the twentieth century, wildlife biologists in Britain and the U.S. have promoted "banding" (or "ringing") amongst professional and amateur ornithologists as an important source of data on the populations and movements of migratory birds. The practice of capturing, marking, recording, and releasing these animals has indeed generated volumes of data, but these quintessentially bureaucratic wildlife management practices have also instantiated relationships with nonhuman nature that go beyond the numbers to include sensory experience, phenomenological attachments, and ethical imaginaries. Touch, technologically mediated 'sight', and intuitive data manipulation have come to dominate the practices and epistemological commitments of wildlife biology, and this history provides a wealth of potentially productive metaphors and methods for environmental ethics and policy.

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