Book Review

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C. Boesch

Wild Cultures: A Comparison between Chimpanzee and Human Cultures

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012
290 pp.; GBP 60.00/USD 95.00
ISBN 978-1-107-02537-0

This elegantly written book is a must-read for anyone who teaches or studies ‘what makes us human’. I would love to see anthropologists, psychologists and archaeologists use it to update the understanding of chimpanzee cognition, culture and society in those fields. It is also extremely useful for primatologists interested in chimpanzees, cognition or culture.

By using many short anecdotes of direct observations of chimpanzee and some human behaviour, Boesch engages the reader and strengthens his arguments. The book is one of the most comprehensive comparative reviews of the cultural differences and similarities between chimpanzee populations. Despite the title, it is not just about cultures. Boesch gives a very holistic overview of social life in chimpanzees and how ecology can affect behaviour and traditions.

Boesch starts out explaining some of the history of studies of human and animal culture and of ‘what makes us human’ and different approaches to the concept of culture in different disciplines in chapters 1 and 2. In chapters 3, 4 and 5, he addresses material, social and symbolic culture, respectively. He convincingly shows that material culture and social culture are well established in chimpanzees and that there is even some evidence of basic symbolic culture. In chapter 4 he emphasizes the importance of upbringing in how well individuals (chimpanzee or human) do in particular cognitive tests and in how a population’s material, social and symbolic culture develop. In chapter 7 some amazing information about empathy and responses to death are presented. Chapters 8 and 9 bring it all together.

Boesch uses a fascinating holistic approach to understanding differences in cultures by integrating cooperation, empathy, sharing, teaching, learning, upbringing, ecological stresses (predation and food acquisition) and hunting. The amount of information on human populations is understandably less extensive than the new insights this book provides regarding chimpanzee society. The theoretical framework Boesch develops to explain how the observed differences in cognition and empathy may have their roots in the stresses imposed on populations from predation and the complexity of obtaining food (nut cracking, termite fishing and especially hunting) is refreshing and exciting. He uses this framework to explain the differences between chimpanzees from different wild and captive populations, and humans from different socio-ecological backgrounds. Boesch convincingly shows that we cannot just depend on studies of captive individuals to explore the cognitive capabilities and limitations of a species and that upbringing and learning/teaching methods can greatly affect how well individuals do in various tasks. There are some important reference tables that compare populations and a very interesting theoretical framework in the book and it is certainly well worth reading.

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