

Rethinking the Failure of Waste Infrastructures with Jackals

Ognjen Kojanić

Golden jackals have lived on the territory of modern-day Serbia for centuries, if not longer, but their population has boomed since the beginning of the 1980s (Penezić and Ćirović 2015).¹ As the jackal population has expanded, human–jackal encounters have become more common, and local media even [carry stories](#) of jackals attacking pets in backyards. Media accounts of human–jackal encounters typically focus on the failure of citizens to dispose of their trash properly, creating small-scale ‘wild garbage dumps’ (*divlje deponije*) that attract the animals. This article offers a critical approach to these anthropocentric media accounts of jackals, which invoke an undifferentiated human subject responsible for the jackals’ proliferation. Based on conversations with local environmental activists, it considers the failures of the large-scale waste infrastructure created by industrial and state actors, and proposes a rethinking of the complexity of multispecies encounters in a damaged peri-urban environment.

¹ The same phenomenon has been observed elsewhere in the Balkans (Tănăsescu and Constantinescu 2019).

“Predators around Belgrade”²

“Our relationship to nature is responsible to a great extent for the fact that there are so many jackals.” So explained the head of the Museum of Natural History in Belgrade on RTS, the national broadcaster, in 2019: “We have open landfills and garbage dumps in which we dispose of organic waste, so the jackal finds a large amount of food... We have known for a long time that our garbage dumps are not fenced.” In response, other media outlets published their own stories on the topic under sensationalist headlines. *Telegraf warned* that “Jackals are encircling cities: They rule in places without wolves or hunters, and where wild garbage dumps proliferate.” *Djole Dog went with* “Jackals in Belgrade: An example of man’s irresponsibility toward nature.”

² This is the title of a 2019 article about jackals that ran in *Novosti*.

Pančevački Rit, where many encounters with jackals have taken place, is an area on the northern bank of the River Danube. This “patchy Anthropocen[ic]” landscape (Tsing et al. 2019) has been shaped through drastic infrastructural transformation in the twentieth century: approximately ninety kilometers of dikes were constructed to protect the floodplain from seasonal inundation, a series of canals was dug to regulate the groundwater level and several pumps were installed to remove excess water. This area used to be primarily agricultural but has been urbanizing rapidly. According to the 2011 census, it was inhabited by approximately sixty thousand people; that number had doubled since 1981 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2014).

The waste from Pančevački Rit is supposed to be discarded at a sanitary dump located on the city’s southern fringe – just one in a city of more than a million inhabitants – yet that waste infrastructure is often described as failing (Star 1999). The implication of the explanation offered by head of the Museum of Natural History and other biologists is that the presence of jackals in Pančevački Rit was inextricably tied to the failures of existing waste infrastructures; a surfeit of food represented by the organic matter improperly disposed of by humans allowed the jackals’ proliferation. Similar examples of animals’ interaction with waste are highlighted in scholarship on urban ecologies (Doherty 2019). To the extent that jackals are feeding on organic matter from small-scale garbage dumps, one could see them as contributing to reducing the amount of waste. However, jackals are not appreciated in Serbia; in fact, occasional attacks on pets or small livestock make many people afraid. Hunters are permitted to shoot them year-round, and are even encouraged to do so in local campaigns.

A rare example of appreciation for jackals was presented by Tijana,³ a popular educator focused on urban ecosystems whom I interviewed in early 2022. She praised these animals’ ingenuity and called them “a functional part of the system” that nevertheless remains largely invisible to the majority of the population. “The jackal’s role as a decomposer is unbelievable. One could write poetry devoted to jackals in cities.” Tijana lamented the fact that people are afraid of this species. “They have been here the whole time and they are doing their job,” she remarked. Similarly, the biologist interviewed by RTS pushed back against the idea that jackals should be exterminated, saying that they are “hygienists on duty” (*dežurni sanitarci*).⁴ Although other media reprinted this statement, the bulk of the coverage preferred to focus on wild garbage dumps.

³ I use pseudonyms to refer to my interlocutors.

⁴ His answers were informed by the work of other biologists who studied jackals (see Penezić and Čirović 2015; Čirović, Penezić and Krofel 2016).

Not All Wild Garbage Dumps Are Created Equal

Wild garbage dumps are an object of prime concern in Serbian environmentalist vernacular, yet the category is amorphous. Officially, wild garbage dumps are defined in the Serbian Law on Waste Management as public spaces where “various kinds of waste are disposed of in an uncontrolled manner” (*nekontrolisano odložene razne vrste otpada*), and which do not fulfil the conditions defined by the regulations on waste disposal (Batrićević 2017: 109–10). Any large amount of litter that is disposed of outside the official municipal waste system can fall into this category, but there are important differences in kind and volume. Most commonly, they take the form of individual households’ trash, which can occur for several reasons. For instance, citizens might dispose of their waste improperly when trash collection happens infrequently and garbage receptacles overflow, or because arranging the collection of bulky material is onerous or pricy. In any case, media reports blame individuals rather than systemic factors. In media interviews, the head of the museum and other biologists referred to a study by Penezić and Čirović (2015) on jackal diet in Serbia, which shows that it mainly consists of offal left on the roadside after the slaughtering of domestic animals and from hunting game. Media reports, however, did not dwell on these specifics, but rather talked about wild garbage dumps in general.

Mirko, a member of an environmental organization focused in particular on questions of pollution, told me in the summer of 2021 about confronting big industrial polluters in Pančevački Rit. A frozen food producer, for instance, created multiple dumps by disposing of surplus biomass mixed with the liquids used to clean vats. This biomass

← *A mix of biomass and acids used for cleaning industrial vats dumped into fields by a local frozen food producer.*
Photo: EKO Pančevački Rit, 2017.

→ *A company that processed slaughterhouse waste went bankrupt and left behind almost two hundred tons of bones.*
Photo: EKO Pančevački Rit, 2019.



attracted animals, some of which allegedly died after feeding there. Another dump was revealed after the bankruptcy of a company that had processed slaughterhouse waste. “When you shuffle it around,” Mirko recounted disgustedly, “underneath half a meter of those dry bones on the top, you find bones with sinew, skin, parts of meat.” Dumps like this attract rats, jackals and other carrion-eaters.

Sandra is a member of a different environmental association leading the struggle against the Belgrade city government’s plans to convert the area around Bara Reva, or Reva Pond, into an industrial zone. During our conversation in 2021, she emphasized the beauty of the area: “We literally have exotic birds, the nature is gorgeous, and everything is close to [the center of] Belgrade.” The plans included a landfill for disposing of construction debris. She was baffled that the city government had “decided to put all the worst things in the most beautiful area.”

Construction debris landfill that was supposed to cover Reva Pond and the surrounding forest.
Photo: Bela Čaplja 1165, 2022.



Mirko’s efforts to remove the two dumps were eventually successful. It took a considerable amount of public pressure for state authorities to withdraw their tacit approval and help clean up the dumps. The Bara Reva landfill ultimately covered thirty hectares of the bog and its surrounding forest before Sandra and other activists blocked further landfilling. The official planning document still proposes the disposal of construction debris in this area, despite massive public outcry. In all of these cases, there are no

official assessments of environmental damage, although such harm is conspicuously present.

Wild Animals and Wild Garbage Dumps

Biologists who discussed the booming jackal population did not mention large-scale dumps created by industrial polluters or the government's plans to establish them. Instead, they focused on the behavior of individuals. The media further linked the biologists' statements with the widespread concern about wild garbage dumps. The wider framing of the problem thus hid more than it revealed about ecological damage in this rapidly urbanizing area. Through claims that "we are not behaving responsibly toward nature," an undifferentiated subject appeared responsible for the jackals' appearance. The complexity of changing animal behavior was reduced to a single cause: littering. Scientific analyses referenced by the biologists do show the importance of offal in jackals' diet, but those studies were not conducted in Pančevački Rit. While there are small unsanitary dumps created by individuals, it is questionable whether jackals would find offal in those locations like they could in other, more rural parts of Serbia where animal slaughter at home is more common.

In addition to being disposed of in official municipal landfills, the ever-growing amount of waste Belgraders create may in fact need to be managed by more-than-human efforts – perhaps as part of a multispecies infrastructure of waste (Morita 2017). This is not to say that individually created wild garbage dumps, where animals can perform an instrumental role, are necessarily better than industrial-scale ones and should be promoted. Instead, it is a recognition that there is a qualitative difference between offal on the side of the road that jackals can consume and the large-scale dumps that Mirko and Sandra were fighting. The latter are far more detrimental to the wider environment, and confronting them requires a critique of systemic failures of waste infrastructures rather than of individuals. Awareness of these differences and the emerging relationship between humans and jackals can ground a different relationship to waste and the infrastructures through which it is managed.

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