



## Anthropogenic Overdevelopment and Ecological Apocalypse in Richard Adams' Watership Down

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
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| <p><b>Received:</b> 2026-04-07<br/> <b>Revised:</b> 2026-05-19<br/> <b>Accepted:</b> 2026-06-30</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/> <i>Ecocide, Rabbits,<br/> Environmental<br/> Destruction, Franz<br/> Broschimmer, Wildlife</i></p> <p><b>DOI:</b><br/> 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11121</p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b><br/> Nanda Resya Afrizal<br/> resya2704@students.unnes.ac.i<br/> d<br/> Sastra Inggris<br/> Universitas Negeri Semarang</p> | <p><i>Watership Down by Richard Adams depicts a rabbit community confronted with ecological damage caused by human intrusion. While the work is commonly understood as an adventure or animal story, this study focuses on its representation of ecocide and its implications for rabbit survival. Drawing on Franz Broschimmer's theory of ecocide, the study investigates how human overdevelopment disturbs rabbit habitat, displaces groups, threatens social harmony, and makes animals more vulnerable. The study uses a qualitative approach, doing a close textual analysis of chosen events in the novel to trace the impact of environmental damage on rabbit life. The findings show that anthropogenic environmental damage causes habitat destruction, displacement, societal breakdown, and mass loss. According to the study, the novel portrays ecocide as both an ecological and ethical dilemma. It contributes to ecocriticism and environmental humanities by providing a literary examination of the link between human expansion, ecological collapse, and nonhuman survival.</i></p> |

### 1. Introduction

Rabbits are herbivorous mammals that eat grasses, herbs, and plant materials for food. They thrive in open terrains such as grasslands, meadows, tundra, and agricultural areas, adapting well to a variety of environments (Earths Endangered,

2017). Many rabbits species are currently under protection issue, with the European brown rabbits facing considerable population losses due to habitat pressures, according to IUCN assessments (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2008). Human activities such as agricultural intensification, urbanization, and infrastructural growth disrupt rabbits' natural habitats. "Forest conversion for plantations and settlements threatens the habitat and population of animals in the wild," especially rabbits that rely on vast meadows (Supardi, 2021).

Anthropocentric developments have had a significant impact on animals, especially wild rabbits, through agricultural expansion and urbanization, resulting in severe habitat fragmentation that disrupts eating and reproduction (Briggs, 2020; Bölinger, 2022). This human-centered prioritizing turns natural grasslands into monocultures, limiting landscape variation, which is crucial for rabbit survival, whereas urban development separates populations. These acts reflect Sandleford Warren's destruction in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, transforming an imaginative story into a cautionary tale about the ecological implications of development and the importance of habitat protection (Lester, 2023).

In this research, the researcher discussed Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down*, focusing on the environmental destruction described in the novel. This research discusses the novel using Franz Broschimmer's ecocide notion, which defines ecocide as a human activity that leads to a catastrophic loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation. The story illustrates humanity's detrimental role, highlighting habitat loss and ecological deterioration. By investigating these factors, this study hopes to explain how *Watership Down* reflects greater environmental concerns and promotes a more harmonious living with nature.

This study highlights three major research problems. First, it looks at how the narrator in Richard Adams' *Watership Down* portrays environmental challenges. Second, it looks at the specific human activities presented in the novel that represent ecocide and evaluates how they affect rabbit groups. Third, it examines how the novel's depiction of human-caused ecocide against wildlife can raise awareness of the importance of protecting the natural environment.

The objectives of this study are consistent with the research problems presented above. The purpose of this study is to examine *Watership Down's* representation of deforestation through Franz J. Broschimmer's Ecocide Theory. Furthermore, it aims to explain how human deforestation in the novel exemplifies ecocide against wildlife, and to illustrate specific human behaviors that have a serious physical and psychological impact on rabbit groups.

This research was made to contribute to theoretical understanding, a broad view of the issues, and examine what happens in the real world based on what happens in the novel. On a theoretical level, the study addresses a comprehensive analysis of the connection between Franz Broschimmer's theory about Ecocide and environmental destruction, particularly within Richard Adams' *Watership Down*. This enhances the broader discourse on eco-literature by providing a unique perspective that bridges cultural nuances and literary symbolism. Moreover, by

connecting eco-genocide with literature, we can deepen our understanding of how literature nourishes and shapes people's understanding towards ecological disturbances. From our view of the issues, the research will give us a broad picture of what is happening in the literary work, such as the destruction of nature, and relate it to what happens in the real world. The ecocritical reading approach employed in the study can increase environmental awareness, offering multiple ways to stop human despoiling acts that can affect so many living beings.

Franz J. Broswimmer's concept of ecocide provides the main theoretical framework for this study. Ecocide refers to large-scale environmental destruction caused by human activity, including the degradation of ecosystems, the loss of biodiversity, and the disruption of conditions necessary for nonhuman survival. In *Watership Down*, this theory is applied to examine how human expansion leads to habitat destruction, displacement, social collapse, and species vulnerability among the rabbits. The conceptual framework of this study follows a chain of cause and effect: human development destroys the natural habitat, habitat loss forces displacement, displacement weakens social stability, and social instability increases the risk of death and ecological collapse. Through this framework, the novel is interpreted as a literary representation of ecocide and a critique of anthropocentric destruction.

Recent scholarship on *Watership Down* has examined the novel from ecocritical and animal-studies perspectives. Marstal (2022) argues that the novel encourages readers to rethink their relationship with nature through an ecocritical lens and to reconceive the meaning of nature from a nonhuman perspective. This study is relevant to the present research because it shows that *Watership Down* is not only an animal story but also a text that raises ecological awareness and invites readers to reflect on the human-nature relationship.

Kynaston (2020) offers another important contribution by analyzing animality and anthropomorphism in *Watership Down*. The study concludes that the novel retains its rabbits as animals despite their human-like qualities and successfully fosters human-animal empathy while highlighting the power imbalance between humans and animals. This perspective is useful for understanding how Adams represents rabbits as vulnerable nonhuman beings with their own experiences and limitations.

Although these two studies provide strong foundations for reading *Watership Down* through ecocriticism and animal studies, they do not specifically examine the novel through Broswimmer's ecocide theory. In particular, they do not fully explain how human expansion in the novel functions as a form of environmental destruction that leads to habitat loss, displacement, social collapse, and species vulnerability among the rabbits. Therefore, this study builds on their insights while offering a different focus, namely the representation of ecocide in *Watership Down*.

This research focuses on environmental destruction aspects in *Watership Down* and the impact on some characters in the novel who are affected physically

and psychologically by the environmental degradation (Ghorpade, 2026). The researcher analyzed the novel through the lens of Ecocide Theory by Franz Broswimmer, which focuses on environmental destruction that causes mass deaths of the inhabitants in affected areas, such as wildlife.

## 2. Method

This study uses a qualitative research design to examine environmental destruction and its effects on wildlife in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*. A qualitative approach is suitable because this research focuses on interpreting the text, particularly how the novel presents human-caused damage to nature. The main concern of this study is the destruction of Sandleford Warren as a form of ecocide caused by humans' over-development.

The subject of this research is Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972). The primary data are taken from words, sentences, and descriptions in the novel that show environmental destruction, such as bulldozing, gassing, and snares, as well as their effects on rabbit groups. The secondary data are taken from journal articles, ecocriticism books, and Broswimmer's *Ecocide: A Short History of the Mass Extinction of Species* (Broswimmer, 2002), which are used to support and strengthen the analysis.

The data were collected through a close reading of the novel. The researcher read the text carefully, identified important quotations related to human destruction and wildlife suffering, and categorized the data. The selected data were also arranged to more easily identify and organize the ecocide elements for study. This helped the researcher focus on the novel's most relevant parts.

The data were analyzed using Broswimmer's ecocide theory. After the data were grouped, they were interpreted to show how human development harms rabbits' life and habitats. The analysis explains that the destruction of Sandleford Warren is not only habitat loss, but also a form of violence against the rabbit community and its ecosystem.

## 3. Result and Discussion

This chapter presents the results and discussion of the study of environmental destruction in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, particularly the destruction of Sandleford Warren as an act of ecocide. The findings are organized around selected passages from the novel that depict human-caused damage to wildlife and its environment. These expressions are classified into several themes, including the environmental issues the narrator portrays in *Watership Down*, the displacement of rabbit groups, and human domination over nature. Each theme is discussed in separate subheadings that explain the textual evidence, the meaning of the expressions, and their relation to ecocritical ideas and Broswimmer's theory of ecocide. Through this organization, the chapter shows how the novel represents the destruction of nature and its impact on rabbit survival and social life.

***Environmental Issues in Watership Down***

In Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, the narrator effectively conveys environmental concerns through the rabbits' visceral, ground-level perspective, transforming everyday human progress into devastating existential threats. The tale begins with Fiver's horrific prophetic vision of Sandleford Warren's destruction, in which enormous bulldozers throw "stones through the air" like catapult ammunition, burying countless living rabbits beneath falling ground while workmen install billboards advertising "excellent building land." This rapid destruction of the old burrows defines human development as the story's main antagonist, transforming a vibrant rabbit civilization into building rubble overnight (Charles & Ma, 2020). According to Broswimmer's ecocide theory, this scenario might be seen as the destruction of a habitat system, rather than just the loss of physical space. Ecocide is clear in the way human expansion undermines the ecological conditions that support life, particularly when land is seen as a resource to be consumed rather than as a living environment to be protected (Bandopadhyay, 2024).

"They said: THIS IDEALLY SITUATED ESTATE, COMPRISING SIX ACRES OF EXCELLENT BUILDING LAND, IS TO BE DEVELOPED WITH HIGH CLASS MODERN RESIDENCES BY SUTCH AND MARTIN, LIMITED, OF NEWBURY, BERKS." (*Watership Down*, 1972, p.10)

The narrator heightens environmental fear by highlighting the rabbits' keen senses of human destruction at Sandleford Warren. Bulldozers roar like giant monsters, ripping up green fields and deep burrows with loud crashes and dust clouds everywhere. Thick diesel smoke from the machines chokes the clean air, making it hard for rabbits to breathe as they run in panic. Heavy concrete slabs smash their old homes flat, turning safe tunnels into ruins. Surveyors' stakes mark the land for new houses, while big signs promise "high-class homes for sale soon." Humans act as faceless destroyers who see progress in building, but to rabbits, this means total loss of their world and way of life. This supports Broswimmer's theory that ecocide is a structural process tied to modern development, in which technical power and land conversion accelerate environmental damage. In that sense, the bulldozers in the novel are more than just construction tools; they represent the spread of a human system that converts populated ecosystems into sacrificial zones.

Through rabbit-centered focalization, the narrator reveals the cascading ripple effects of destroyed ecosystems. Cowslip Warren seems peaceful with no predators, but humans use snares for farming there. Efrafa's harsh rule grows near concrete structures. Plowed fields force rabbits to flee. These examples show environmental damage as the novel's main conflict, with human progress destroying where human progress destroying wildlife habitats like a powerful force (Hussein Ahmed Abdelfattah, 2025). Broswimmer's ecocide theory explains why these impacts extend beyond a single town or species: when a habitat is

harmed, the ecological network that sustains survival begins to crumble. The novel thus depicts ecocide not just as apparent destruction, but also as a chain reaction of displacement, fragility, and social breakdown among nonhuman societies.

### ***Humans' Action as Ecocide in Watership and Its Impact on Rabbit Depletion***

In Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down*, the degradation of Sandleford Warren clearly illustrates ecocide through human home expansion. Humans identify the place as "excellent building land," allowing the bulldozers to destroy fields and burrows with complete disregard for wildlife. Surveyors pound stakes into the ground, and concrete foundations bury old tunnels, destroying a vibrant ecology in days. Recent real-world parallels, such as the 2022 UK government approval of 1,000 homes on Sandleford Park farmland despite protests, echo this fiction-turned-reality.

Bulldozing is the primary ecocide practice at Sandleford. Towering machines roar across the terrain, mercilessly tearing grass, dirt, and rabbit trails. Bad-smelling diesel smoke fills the air, blocking the rabbits' sharp noses, which they need to smell danger. Construction workers pour dense concrete slabs for home foundations, transforming productive burrows into barren waste. Big signs advertise "luxury homes for sale soon," while ignoring all the damage beneath. In Broswimmer's terms, this kind of destruction illustrates ecocide as the deliberate annihilation of an ecosystem's life-supporting conditions, where development is prioritized over the survival of nonhuman communities. The bulldozers thus function not merely as construction tools, but as symbols of industrial power. A 2024 council clearance for comparable construction at the novel's inspiration place highlights the continued threat to such habitats. This supports Broswimmer's theory that ecocide is a repeating structural trend in modern land usage and growth, rather than a single historical occurrence. The picture also exemplifies that Broswimmer criticizes, in which land is seen as an exploitable commodity rather than a shared environment that supports different types of life.

"There was a kind of hissing noise and-and-well, I know you must find this difficult to understand, but **the air began to turn bad**. For some reason I got a strong scent of this stuff that came out of the bramble things, even though I was some way off: and I couldn't see or think." (*Watership Down*, 1972, p.141)

"Before that happened," said Holly, "a great *hrududu* came into the field from the lane. It wasn't the one men came in. It was very noisy and it was yellow-as yellow as charlock: and in front there was a great silver, shining thing that it held in its huge front paws. I don't know how to describe it to you. It looked like Inlé, but it was broad and not so bright. And this thing-how I can tell you-is tore the fields to bits. It destroyed the field." (*Watership Down*, 1972, p.143)

The word "hrududu" refers to a large motor vehicle, or a big car, that the rabbits do not understand in human terms. In this scene, the hrududu destroys the



fields by ripping up the ground and damaging the area where the rabbits live. This shows that human-made machines can destroy nature easily, leaving the rabbits without a safe home.

These human actions harm rabbit populations, causing widespread panic and death. Fiver's terrifying visions of "fields awash with blood" go unheeded until the earth shakes violently. Scores of rabbits suffocate or die in cave-ins, while those who fled scatter in terror. The warren's order collapses—warriors like Holly suffer serious wounds while fleeing, and females struggle among the chaos. This point is heading us to ecocide, as shown in 2021-2022 efforts against the "wall of concrete" encircling ancient trees near Sandleford.

The harsh results force a tough journey that almost destroys the surviving rabbits. This forces rabbits apart, breaking their bonds and spirit, just like how ecocide turns wildlife into refugees. Richard Adams fought the Sandleford Park building plans until 2016, saying it would mean "the beginning of the end" for the countryside.

In short, Sandleford's destruction shows humans as distant giants to the rabbits. Their "progress" brings nice suburbs for people but a total disaster for animals, perfectly showing ecocide as careless ignoring of nature (Adams 1972, ch. 1). The rabbits' sharp senses feel every shake and bad smell, making the fear worse (Marstal, 2022).

### ***Animality and the Critique of Human Progress***

Humans' ecocide against wildlife in *Watership Down*, particularly the destruction of Sandleford Warren, significantly raises awareness of the critical need to protect the natural environment. Richard Adams' portrayal of the rabbit terror through human home expansion makes readers feel the sorrow of habitat loss up close. This story transforms distant environmental concerns into personal calls to action.

### ***Empathy From the Rabbits' Viewpoint***

Richard Adams portrays the bulldozers smashing down Sandleford burrows from the rabbits' tense perspective, allowing readers to experience direct fear and sorrow firsthand. Fiver's visions of blood-soaked fields and the ground shaking under gigantic machinery evoke strong emotion, leading viewers to see wildlife as families facing fate rather than as background. Diesel smoke chokes their sensitive noses, concrete engulfs their old burrows, and survey stakes mark their demise—details that hit hard because rabbits detect every threat people neglect (Mullen, 2023).

This animal perspective shocks us into questioning why "progress" destroys houses mercilessly. Readers connect emotionally, imagining their own world collapsing and feeling a protective instinct toward all of nature.

### *Human's Cold Indifference Exposed*

At Sandleford, humans treat rabbits as useless while turning six acres of green fields into "excellent building land" for luxurious homes. Workers create foundations and place signs for "high-class residences" directly over mass graves of wildlife, showing that humans do not care at all about life. This lack of care matches the real destruction of nature, where building projects destroy animal homes every day (Grandi, 2024).

People see the same problem today—cities expanding and devouring forests, farms demolished for housing, which upsets them and drives them to safeguard wild areas now, before all disappears. The book shows how humans choose their own comfort over living together with nature, pushing us to fight this kind of destruction today (Brown, 2024).

### *Lessons from Rabbit "Animality"*

The rabbits live by "animality," a simple code: respect all life, take only what you need, stay alert to nature's balance. Richard Adams presents rabbit society as guided by practices that value survival, balance, and respect for the soil, which critics refer to as animality. The rabbits' routines show a small-scale ethical system that prioritizes the group's needs and the health of their environment. This way of living is the opposite of how humans act in the book: people choose quick profit and building things over protecting animals and their homes. pushing readers to reconsider human priorities in favor of a more restrained, respectful connection with nature (Adams, 1972; Rahem 2025).

That "animality" serves a practical conservation purpose: Rabbits eat only what they need, move to different spots to feed, and keep their burrows intact so future baby rabbits can live there. These actions represent sustainable resource use rather than exploitation, demonstrating that long-term group survival depends on limitations and mutual care. Ecocritical scholars claim that Adams employs these details to teach readers a land ethic—the idea that humans should manage land with consideration for other species and ecological balance (Grandi, 2021b; Rahem, 2025)

### *Real-World Echoes and Global Impact*

Sandleford's connections between fiction and reality give the story immediate ability to encourage action. The 2022 approval to build on land associated with Watership Down, as well as later local government proposals for housing on old downlands, demonstrate that the book's warnings are more than just stories; they reflect genuine environmental risks. These technological advances transform the shock of Sandleford's destruction into public anger, as people recognize the same pattern of habitat loss playing out in real life (Nuri, 2020). According to Brosimmer, this reaction is essential because ecocide is more than just physical destruction; it is also about making environmental loss public as a social and political issue. In other words, the novel uses ecological destruction as a kind of



public accountability.

People often move from feeling upset to taking action. Readers who are bothered by Adams' story join local protests, donate to wildlife groups, and urge councils to stop harmful building projects. Community campaigns inspired by the book show that stories can turn caring into real efforts to protect important places. (Kynaston, 2020)

At the same time, *Watership Down* reaches beyond local conflict and invites readers to rethink their relationship with nature through an ecocritical lens (Marstal, 2022). The novel's detailed portrayal of the natural world and its anthropomorphized perspective encourage empathy for nonhuman characters, challenge anthropocentric worldviews, and prompt readers to appreciate the interconnectedness of living beings (Marstal, 2022). In addition, ecocritical commentary on the novel links its environmental message to ecological destruction and development, showing how the book frames human activity as a threat to nature (Charles & Ma, 2020). Together, these readings suggest that habitat protection in *Watership Down* is presented as part of a broader ecological responsibility. Brosimmer's theory strengthens this reading by showing that habitat protection is more than just a conservation preference, but a response to the long-term implications of human expansion, resource strain, and ecological replacement.

Richard Adams opposed nearby land development in real life, showing how stories and real actions can support each other. The novel's growing popularity demonstrates that storytelling may encourage people to care about nature and take action. One strong narrative can spark campaigns, influence public opinion, and even help shape future animal protection policies (Grandi, 2021).

### **Research Implications**

The findings of this study show that *Watership Down* represents environmental destruction as a form of ecocide that affects both rabbit survival and social life. This indicates that literary texts can reveal how human expansion produces ecological violence and nonhuman suffering. The novel also demonstrates that environmental degradation is not only a physical issue but an ethical one, because it disrupts the conditions that support life.

This study suggests that future research may examine *Watership Down* from other ecocritical perspectives, such as animal studies, ecofeminism, or ecophobia, to produce a broader understanding of its environmental message. Further studies may also compare the novel with other literary works that portray habitat destruction, displacement, and species vulnerability. In this way, *Watership Down* contributes to environmental humanities by showing how literature can foster ecological awareness and critical reflection on human responsibility toward nature.

Overall, this study shows that *Watership Down* represents environmental destruction as a form of ecocide that threatens both the physical survival and social

stability of the rabbit community. Through the destruction of Sandleford Warren, Richard Adams presents human expansion as a force that disrupts habitat, displaces animals, and weakens the ecological balance that supports life. The novel therefore functions not only as a story of rabbit survival, but also as a literary warning about the ethical consequences of human domination over nature. Future research may expand this study by applying other ecocritical perspectives, such as animal studies, ecofeminism, or ecophobia, or by comparing *Watership Down* with other literary works that portray habitat loss and environmental violence. In this way, the novel contributes to ecocriticism and environmental humanities by showing how literature can deepen awareness of ecological responsibility and nonhuman survival.

#### 4. Conclusion

This analysis reveals that *Watership Down* displays environmental deterioration as a severe threat to both animal existence and ecological balance. According to this research, *Watership Down* displays environmental deterioration as a severe threat to both animal existence and ecological balance. The story portrays how development may bring exile, terror, and survival battles for animals through the forced migration of rabbits, the loss of their habitat, and the use of human devices such as the hrududu. The research also reveals that Richard Adams depicts nature as a living area that is inseparable from the bunnies' identity and life, rather than just a backdrop. From an ecocritical standpoint, the novel depicts the repercussions of human dominance over the environment and argues that habitat loss should be viewed as an ecological and ethical issue (Chapman, 1978).

However, because this study is limited to a textual analysis of specific events and themes in *Watership Down*, the conclusions should not be applied to all types of environmental literature or representations of animal suffering. The analysis primarily focuses on ecocritical interpretation without delving deeply into other viable methods, such as historical, psychological, or reader-response perspectives.

For further studies, researchers can expand this topic by comparing *Watership Down* with other literary works that deal with environmental destruction, animal displacement, or habitat loss. Future research may also apply different theoretical frameworks, such as ecophobia, ecofeminism, or animal studies, to produce a broader understanding of the novel's ecological message. In addition, studies could examine how readers respond to the novel's environmental themes, especially in relation to conservation awareness and human responsibility toward nature.

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