

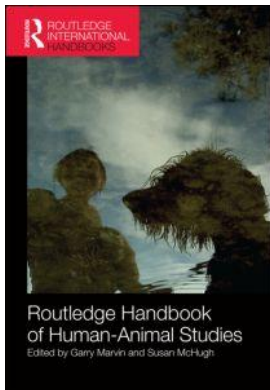
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 22 Apr 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203101995.ch12>

Philip Armstrong, Annie Potts

Published online on: 24 Apr 2014

How to cite :- Philip Armstrong, Annie Potts. 24 Apr 2014, *The emptiness of the wild from: Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 22 Apr 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203101995.ch12>

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The emptiness of the wild

Philip Armstrong and Annie Potts

I
 In January 1770 James Cook's *Endeavour*, the first European vessel to make extended landfall in New Zealand, lay at anchor in Queen Charlotte Sound at the northern tip of the South Island. Joseph Banks, the ship's naturalist (later president of the Royal Society), recorded his impression of a land full of wild vitality:

This morn I was awakd by the singing of the birds ashore from whence we are distant not a quarter of a mile, the numbers of them were certainly very great who seemd to strain their throats with emulation perhaps; their voices were certainly the most melodious wild musick I have ever heard, almost imitating small bells but with the most tuneable silver sound imaginable.

(Banks 1962: 455–6)

Anyone who has ever heard the korimako or New Zealand bellbird (*Anthornis melanura*) will attest to the accuracy of this description. Yet Banks' perception is also shaped by his culture's understanding of wild nature. He locates wildness in the 'very great' numbers of the birds, in the volume of their song (sufficient to wake him across a quarter-mile of water), and in the intensity of their passion (his remark that they 'strain their throats' suggests Banks has observed the way bellbirds puff their feathers, hunch their wings, and tense their whole bodies when they sing). Mingled with this paradigm – which associates wildness with numerical profusion, sensory extravagance, and bodily exuberance – Banks includes another, which imagines nature as a 'melodious [. . .] musick', amenable to 'emulation', to the kind of artistic and mechanical manipulation represented by 'small bells' with their 'tuneable silver sound'. In this way, Banks' response encapsulates the two versions of wildness that were predominant at the end of the eighteenth century. In the first, which would come to be embraced and celebrated by Romanticism, wild nature was the locus of an exorbitant and overwhelming intensity; in the second, which was consistent with Enlightenment rationalism, it was an instrument to be brought into harmony, a mechanism requiring calibration.

These two paradigms, and the management of the relationship between them, have indeed been central to the project of modernity throughout the two and a half centuries since Banks recorded the comments above. New Zealand provides an exemplary case history for observing these wild transactions for two reasons. The first is that the country was colonized by Europe at the very historical moment at which the relationship between Romantic and Enlightenment approaches to wild nature became a definitive cultural force. The second is that the endemic animals of New Zealand presented a biotic community exceptionally amenable to both cultural idealization and material manipulation. Unlike Australia, the islands of New Zealand were not home to any venomous species dangerous to humans, nor to any endemic predator larger than a small raptor. The only endemic terrestrial mammals were a couple of inoffensive bat species, and although a truly formidable avian predator had once occupied the top of the food chain – Haast's eagle (*Harpagornis moorei*) possessed a wingspan of eight and a half feet and had claws the size of a tiger's – it had been extinct for centuries by the time Europeans arrived (Tennyson and Martinson 2006: 62). The conjunction of these two factors – a newly mechanistic European attitude to wild nature and a relatively diffident zoological population – made New Zealand the perfect instrument for the Enlightenment's production of harmonious melody out of nature's wild music.

The human-animal studies approach exemplified here, and followed in the remainder of this chapter, is a twofold one. It involves analysis of the rhetorical and figurative modes by which human-animal relations are represented (in this case, the musical metaphor deployed by Joseph Banks), and the connection of this analysis to consideration of the material practices by which humans and animals actually interact (which in this context include natural historical observation, collection, and documentation, followed by widespread ecosystemic modification in the service of agricultural settlement). This approach has been summarized by Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert who, in the introduction to their paradigm-setting volume *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*, assert the need for human-animal studies 'to give credence to the practices that are folded into the making of representations, and – at the core of the matter – to ask how animals themselves may figure in these practices' (2000: 5). The identification of these (sometimes fine-grained and subtle) interconnections between the representational and the material treatment of animals acts as a powerful analytical tool for revealing what might be called the 'animal unconscious' of a culture's dominant meanings, forms, and practices. After all, human-animal representations and relationships are everywhere around us, all the time – to such an extent that they most often form a taken-for-granted and invisible substrate of our everyday lives. By taking a commonly and often thoughtlessly used notion ('wildness') and paying attention to how it works both representationally and practically within a particular local cultural history (that of Aotearoa New Zealand), this chapter seeks to reveal ideological assumptions and functions that usually go unnoticed and unchallenged within a particular domain of human-animal relations.

II

As the last substantial habitable landmass on the planet to be settled by *Homo sapiens*, the islands in the New Zealand archipelago have been subject to the most rapidly extensive anthropogenic environmental change in recorded history. Of course, this process did not begin with the arrival of the *Endeavour* in the eighteenth century, nor was it initiated by Europeans. In their six or more centuries of inhabitation prior to the arrival of Europeans, the various populations of Māori are thought to have burnt a large proportion – perhaps as much as half – of New Zealand's original forest cover. During that time 30 or 40 native bird species became extinct and the New Zealand fur seal population was severely depleted (Anderson

2002: 20; Andrews 2009: 167–8, 219). Such a pace of ecological change was swift enough, but the first century of European settlement brought a further acceleration.

The country's wild fauna and flora suffered a radical depletion, as virtually all accessible land was transformed into a farm-supply and population-overflow unit for the rapidly industrializing British Empire. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century the remaining endemic fur seals were hunted almost to extinction for fur and oil, and the southern right whales for baleen and oil, to clothe the citizens, lubricate the factories, and illuminate the streets of northern hemisphere cities. By the end of that century, half the remaining native forest had been cut for timber or burnt off (along with the protective fern and scrub cover in areas already deforested by Māori) to make space for pastureland. Eighty-five per cent of New Zealand's wetlands were drained for the same purpose. 'Virtually no terrain, other than the higher mountains, was left untouched by agriculture': today 60 per cent of the total landmass of New Zealand is taken up by farms or production forests (Andrews 2009: 140–1, 210–15, 292). Consequently, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, another 30 or 40 bird species vanished (Tennyson and Martinson 2006: 9). This ecosystemic emptying-out was accompanied by an equally vigorous re-stocking. European settlers flooded the country with new species: 'an astonishing 28,000 plant species', of which the number now established in the wild equals two-thirds of the number of indigenous species; 34 terrestrial mammal species and the same number of bird species; 20 freshwater fish, 3 frogs, 1 reptile, and some 2200 invertebrate species (Andrews 2009: 218–19).

Conservationist voices began to be raised in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and the government set up a few national parks and pest-free island sanctuaries for birdlife in the 1880s and 1890s. The Native Bird Protection Society was formed in 1923 (Nathan 2009). Yet Acclimatization Societies around the country were still hard at work well into the twentieth century, establishing introduced species for recreational, commercial, or nostalgic reasons, and laws were still in place to protect introduced species rather than endemic ones (Park 1999: 192). It wasn't until 1962 that a government first recognized conservation as an issue of significance to the voting public and so established the Nature Conservation Council. Over the next few decades, conservationist ideology grew to become a defining feature of New Zealand political and social life.

One of the turning points in the emergence of conservationism was the sensational rediscovery of a surviving wild population of an endemic bird species that had long been thought extinct. In 1948, Geoffrey Orbell came upon live takahē (*Notornis mantelli*) in an isolated part of Fiordland, in the remote south-west of the South Island. Nor was this the first resurrection of these ungainly, flightless, somewhat dodo-like birds. They initially became known to science during the 1840s when a few bones were accidentally acquired by naturalist Walter Mantell. From the outset the species was assumed extinct – until Mantell purchased the skin of a bird recently killed and eaten by sealers. It was like a resurrection: 'a bird once thought extinct was now authoritatively declared a living species' (Andrews 1986: 147). Despite many attempts to locate more specimens of recently living takahē only three were acquired: one shot by whalers in 1851, the others caught by dogs in 1879 and 1898 (Andrews 1986: 141–9). In the ensuing decades, when no more evidence of live takahē was forthcoming, the scientific establishment concluded that the species was, this time, truly extinct. It was not until 50 years had passed that 'a shrewd, well-informed amateur in the Victorian tradition', Geoffrey Orbell, discovered fresh tracks of the takahē and then found the living birds themselves, in the Murchison Mountains in Fiordland (Young 2004: 140).

Orbell's rediscovery of the takahē provided a highly significant foundational myth for New Zealand conservationism, just when it needed one. 'It inspired what might be called the

Lazarus approach [that] New Zealand scientists have, of necessity, become so expert in: bringing back endangered species from the brink of extinction' (Young 2004: 140). Captive breeding programmes of takahē, pāteke (brown teal, *Anas chloritis*) and whio (blue duck, *Hymenolaimus malacorhynchos*) were all undertaken successfully during the 1960s; today the most high-profile efforts are with kiwi (*Apteryx australis*) and kākāpō (*Strigops habroptilus*). The most miraculous 'Lazarus' achievement of all was the resurrection of the Chatham Islands black robin (*Petroicus traversi*) after the species had declined to the smallest possible viable number – a single breeding pair. Don Merton pioneered an approach that employed parents from other species to incubate eggs from the last remaining fertile female, nicknamed 'Old Blue', who became a national hero for her efforts on behalf of her species (Young 2004: 191).

These stories of species saved from extinction function for New Zealanders as contemporary, secular myths of redemption – as shown by their retelling in the form of uplifting moral fables for children. For example, Mary Taylor's *Old Blue: The Rarest Bird in the World* – which won New Zealand's national book awards in 1994 for the best children's non-fiction title – presented as a 'story of hard work and miracles, and of people who cared enough to help save a little black bird on a group of lonely south-sea islands', allows Don Merton himself to draw out the wider moral of the tale: '[i]f the rarest bird in the world can be rescued, then given human determination and effort, no species need become extinct' (quoted in Taylor 1993).

The resurrection of the takahē, black robin, and others, and the ongoing efforts to rescue from extinction other severely threatened species such as the kiwi and kākāpō, manifest an intense and widespread cultural desire to redress the ecological wrongs of the past. At the same time these endeavours repeat in updated form the paradox that Joseph Banks encapsulated two centuries earlier: a Romantic idealization of wild nature, combined with an Enlightenment dedication to its manipulation and recalibration.

In a recent anthology entitled *Wild at Heart: The Possibility of Wilderness in New Zealand*, award-winning natural-history broadcaster Alison Ballance demonstrates the durability of this twofold approach when she describes her journey into wilderness in the company of 'kiwi hunter Jane'. Describing their arrival in the Murchison Mountains – the same remote region in which Orbell rediscovered the takahē – Ballance writes that she feels 'a great sense of being in the "wild", of truly being a visitor to another world. This sense became stronger as Jane and I began to drop down the steep mountainside. [. . .] At one point I heard her call back to me, "I feel I might be the first person to have ever set foot here"' (Ballance 2011: 85). Ballance recounts this experience to exemplify the 'three cornerstones' that she considers foundational to the 'best, purest wilderness experience': first, the sense of 'a place that is in some way physically inspiring' and that 'gives a sense of being untouched by human hand'; second, 'a natural ecosystem that has resilience, which is populated by creatures that are meant to be there, and that works, more or less, as it has done for thousands of years'; and third, the evocation of 'wonder, discovery, joy, fulfilment, and that sense of possibly being the first person to experience it' (Ballance 2011: 87). The paradox arises, of course, when we are reminded that the reason these two women are there is to change the harness attaching a radio transmitter to one of Jane's study kiwis – part of the increasingly desperate national conservation effort to save New Zealand's totem bird from extinction. Ballance holds the 'wild' kiwi while Jane readjusts the bird's electronics. 'I had never seen a kiwi that close, let alone held one', she writes, adding that 'it was with a great sense of privilege that I grasped its incredibly muscular legs in one hand and gently cradled its head with the other, while Jane went about her task' (Ballance 2011: 85).

Ballance is fully aware of the contradiction central to her appreciation of the 'wild'; she emphasizes it as she describes the rest of her journey with Jane, which involves checking the regularly placed wooden stoat traps designed to protect the kiwi and takahē from introduced

predator species, and when she concludes that '[w]e have upset the balance of nature so much that we can no longer stand back and assume that large tracts of forest are a safe haven for wildlife' (Ballance 2011: 86). According to this view, New Zealand's wild animality is now so encompassed and pervaded by human influence that it is only by means of heavy-handed intervention that a sense of untouched wildness can be recreated: humans have an obligation to empty the ecosystem of introduced wild species and replenish it with endemics.

Of course this belief relies also on the assumption that human environmental managers know what is best for wild nature – that they possess, in regard to their constant tuning of nature's melodious wild music, a kind of biological perfect pitch. Certainly, the instruments at their disposal have come a long way since Banks' tuneable silver bells. A recent item on the TV news described the development, by the Wildlife Management and Conservation Centre at Lincoln University, of touchpad technology designed 'to enable species recognition within traps'. Dr Helen Blackie described the concept as follows: 'You've got a small plate in these systems; an animal runs over the system; it's able to say "hey that's a rat, that's a mouse, that's a kiwi or a weta", and so we're able to adapt these systems to act accordingly' (Pugh 2011).¹ Such endeavours typify the ironies of a political ecology that, in the words of Bruno Latour, claim 'to protect nature and shelter it from [hu]mankind', even as they actually involve expanding humans' intrusion into nature 'in a finer, more intimate fashion and with a still more invasive scientific apparatus' (Latour 2004: 20).

The urban-accessible equivalents of Ballance's encounter with the wild in the remote mountains of Fiordland are provided by wildlife sanctuaries and nature preserves. Driven by the same secular myth, that of the resurrection of lost ecologies and species, sanctuaries are prelapsarian gardens embodying one of the most powerful cultural narratives in New Zealand's contemporary national self-fashioning. As such they offer a very potent emotional experience for visitors. One example is the island of Tiritiri Matangi in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, which can be reached in 40 minutes by catamaran ferry from Auckland City. Disembarking, visitors make their way from the jetty and climb hills clad in regenerating native bush. Pathways and boardwalks lead through stands of regenerating native trees: māhoe (whiteywood, *Melicactus ramiflorus*), pōhutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsans*), pūriri (*Vitex lucens*), and many others, clearly labelled with their Māori, Latin, and English names. Birdsong is everywhere: the chimes of the korimako and tūī (parson bird, *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*), the chitter of pīwakawaka (fantail, *Rhipidura placabilis*), the chatter of kākārīki (red-crowned parakeet, *Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae*), the penetrating cheep of tīeke (saddleback, *Philesturnus carunculatus*). Here, then, are many of the rarest and most elusive of New Zealand's decimated endemics, audibly abundant, visibly thriving. Even the unskilled birdwatcher can spot 20 different species within a couple of hours.

The real enchantment of this small island, though, lies in the birds' fearlessness. Even the most retiring of species – and New Zealand's forest birds tend to be very cryptic and timid – go about their business unafraid, flying or hopping to within a metre of their rapt human observers. To the bird-loving visitor who knows the litany of New Zealand's extinct and endangered native species, these encounters evoke an Eden-like past where humans and the avian natives of this land are united in benevolent harmony and mutual interest – a melodious wild musick indeed. Reaching the summit at the island's southern tip, the visitor also experiences the high point of this enchantment. At the foot of a storybook lighthouse stands a visitors' centre in which volunteers from the Friends of Tiritiri Matangi serve hot and cold drinks. But no matter how thirsty they are, visitors stop in their tracks and reach for their cameras before entering the café. Because there, waiting for them on the lawn surrounding the visitors' centre, are three or four takahē. Unmistakable in their turquoise plumage, the big

birds pick their way among the picnic tables and chairs, checking the grass for crumbs, going from one group of excited visitors to the next. So it is that, by virtue of a 40-minute voyage on a jet-propelled catamaran and a 15-minute walk up a manicured pathway, any visitor to Tiritiri Matangi can re-enact for him- or herself the most famous 'return from extinction' story of New Zealand's history.

At the same time, and very deliberately and explicitly, New Zealand wildlife sanctuaries are designed to tell another story. On the voyage to the island, during the welcome talk by the Department of Conservation Guide upon landfall, and at every stage via information boards and displays, the visitor is repeatedly instructed about the primary means by which this sanctuary was created and is maintained: pest control. As Alison Ballance discovered even in the 'wilderness' of the Murchison Mountains, the heroism of New Zealand's 'Lazarus conservation' derives more often from extermination of wild animals than from anything else.

This story is even more visible and vocal in Zealandia, the mainland sanctuary in the nation's capital city, Wellington. Upheld as the epitome of conservation in action, 'recognized worldwide as a benchmark in urban ecological restoration' (*Karori Sanctuary* 2007), the sanctuary consists of 225 hectares of regenerating native bush and wetlands protected by an 8.6 km predator-deterrent fence. The area inside the fence is populated by native birds, fish, insects, and reptiles. Zealandia professes a '500-year vision to restore [the] valley as closely as possible to its pre-human state' (*Zealandia* 2010). Upon entry visitors are plunged not into the serenity of an environment devoid of human interference, but into a technologically no-holds-barred warfare against introduced species. The route from the gatehouse to the sanctuary is lined with a sequence of signs and contraptions educating the visitor about possums, stoats, rats, and wild cats, and the various ingenious means by which they may be killed. The odour of a decaying mammal, killed in a trap and now on display, may follow the visitor for several metres along the path. The smell and sight of death is not only apparent at the entrance of Zealandia; every five to ten metres along the pathways possum bait stations have been set. These are highly visible and while warning notices are given as to the purpose and potential danger to humans of these traps, many a visitor cannot help but peek to see if an animal has been caught. For international guests this must seem a strange phenomenon – a kind of contemporary version of the Garden of Eden after the Fall, from which Adam and Eve and their descendants were barred access by an angel with a flaming sword.

As well as demonstrating – indeed embracing – the paradox of an intact wild dependent on the most pervasive, carceral, and lethal of human interventions, sanctuaries like Tiritiri Matangi and Zealandia exemplify the 'trouble with wilderness' famously outlined by William Cronon in his essay of that title (1995). For Cronon, both environmental studies and environmental politics are badly served by their continuing investment in a particular notion of 'wilderness' as the purest, most authentic, and most valuable form of 'Nature'. Cronon's essay traces the development of this concept of wilderness, which he regards as both artificial and tendentious, via biblical, Romantic, and touristic traditions, and then identifies some ways in which 'wilderness thinking' can inhibit environmental thought and action.

Representing the apotheosis of nature as that which is free from and untainted by the human stain, this notion of wilderness reinforces, and even celebrates, modern humans' alienation from the rest of the world. At the same time, seeming to provide a vacation – literally in the case of wilderness tourism – from the irremediable 'culturedness' of modern and especially urban existence, wilderness allows us to 'evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead' (Cronon 1995: 11): being 'green' can mean holidaying for a couple of weeks in a wilderness reserve but ignoring possible improvements to the urban or suburban environments in which we spend the other 50 weeks of our year. In New Zealand, it can mean

enjoying a visit to Zealandia and admiring the ingenuity and vigilance of our heroic pest-controllers, while failing to question the everyday habits most detrimental to our wild-life and wild ecologies: for example, the production of meat and dairy and other agricultural products, which squeezes areas of native biodiversity into the rockiest and most remote corners of the country (or into offshore islands or walled reservations), while it contaminates waterways and contributes the largest proportion of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions.

III

Self-evidently, New Zealand's wildlife sanctuaries perform not only an ecological but also a cultural function. As well as providing safe places for the regeneration of endemic species, they are designed to express a dominant cultural rhetoric about what wildness means in this country. The severity of the distinction between those species given sanctuary within the fence and those banished to the other side of it, or killed and displayed in the entranceway, establishes for the visitor a categorical opposition between properly wild animals and improperly wild ones. In order to retain the motivating Romantic ideal of the term *wild*, however, a synonym with different connotations is required for those species whose wildness makes them 'pests'. The term *feral* performs this function. In New Zealand, then, feral animals are those whose wildness carries a taint of degradation: foreignness, invasiveness, over-fertility, lapsed domestication, ill-conceived or inadvertent introduction. The echoes of xenophobic and racist prejudice against human immigrants might seem clear enough – but for the ironic fact that all the vilified feral species in New Zealand were released here, often intentionally, by Pākehā (white) settlers. Indeed, as is so often the case with antipathy to human immigrants, the vilification of feral species performs a necessary redirection of blame, in this case away from the anthropogenic causes of depleted biodiversity and towards animal ones.²

Nowhere is this effect more apparent than in New Zealanders' attitude to the brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*). This species was first successfully introduced from Australia to New Zealand in 1858. While some were imported to New Zealand as 'cuddly, if thorny, pets' (Druett 1983: 188), the main reason was to establish a profitable possum fur industry in the new colony (Warburton *et al.* 2000: 251–61). This venture was wholeheartedly supported by successive governments: hundreds of separate liberations were made by government agencies and Acclimatization Societies between 1895 and the early 1920s. The Auckland Acclimatization Society argued during this time that 'we shall be doing a great service to the country in stocking these large areas with this valuable and harmless animal' (cited in Druett 1983: 188). For a period in the early 1900s possums even enjoyed protected status under the Animals' Protection Act (McDowall 1994). Released possums flourished in both the native and exotic forests of New Zealand, feeding on young leaves and shoots of trees and reproducing exponentially in the absence of their natural predators (Clout and Ericksen 2000: 1–9). It wasn't until 1922, following much debate and after concerted pressure on the government from farmers, that the Department of Internal Affairs declined further requests to release possums, although illegal releases continued into the 1940s (Druett 1983).

The turning of public, and official, opinion against the possum coincided with the rise of the 'Lazarus' conservationist ideology described above. In 1956 possums were classified as 'noxious animals', and in the same year the government initiated research on possum control. Following this change in status, anti-possum rhetoric intensified in New Zealand. This was only in part due to the general growth of environmentalist feelings from the 1960s onwards; it was more specifically the result of a concerted propaganda campaign mounted in the 1980s by government agencies (Druett 1983). One of the most pervasive results of this campaign was

the widespread assimilation of the xenophobic attitude to feral animals mentioned above. Since the 1980s possums in New Zealand have been almost universally associated with notions of invasion and with military tropes related to defence and attack. The former Minister for the Environment, Simon Upton, states in his foreword to *The Brushtail Possum*, a landmark volume covering biological and social science perspectives on possums in New Zealand:

‘Know thy enemy.’ Sun Tzu’s timeless injunction in the *Art of War* applies as well to New Zealanders facing the brushtail possum as it did to Chinese against invading hordes in the sixth century BC. The possum has been a spectacularly cunning and successful enemy.
(quoted in Montague 2000: ix)

Department of Conservation spokesperson Herb Christophers uses the same register to defend the use of the controversial poison 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate) as a vital weapon against possums: ‘It’s critical to our fight to eradicate pests. There may be moral issues over the use of toxins to manage pests, but you don’t suddenly stop fighting a war because someone doesn’t like guns’ (quoted in Marks 2006). The assimilation of both xenophobic and militaristic terminology into popular cultural representations of the feral wild can be observed in an episode of the highly popular local documentary series *Wild About New Zealand* (Bruce 2000). ‘Kiwi bushman’ Grant Latimer, who presents the show, is deer-hunting with a friend, Roger, through the Ruahine forests in the North Island of New Zealand:

Trouble is [this forest] is also home to hundreds of thousands of possums who like to gather in one tree at a time and nibble it to death. I mean, *look at this* – a once mighty totara tree reduced to a dead skeleton by *POSSUMS!* You’d think possums would have more sense than to chew out their own food source, wouldn’t you? But then possums have really small brains. And they’re Australian, aren’t they? (He laughs.) [. . .] They may look like cute little teddy bears, but they’re *not!* They’re pests! They’ve got teeth as sharp as razors and these claws can give you a nasty scratch. And they carry tuberculosis that can get into our cattle herds.

The next day the pair sets off deer-hunting and comes across a possum-control officer from the Department of Conservation setting poison baits. Despite the DoC officer’s comment that possum numbers are low in that part of the Ruahine ranges, Latimer proceeds to tell the viewer:

Hard to believe there are so many possums in the bush. There are *millions* in fact. Especially in the daytime – they’re hiding in the dens. But if you know where to find them, they’re there alright. We’re just going to take a wee look over here.

Recalling the clichéd cooking show moment in which the chef declares ‘and here’s one I prepared earlier’, Latimer walks a short distance to a part of the bush where a possum is conveniently found sniffing the leaves on the ground in the daylight (although of course possums are nocturnal). Grabbing the possum, who screams as he tries to escape, Latimer says: ‘You can tell by their attitude that not all possums play dead when cornered. They’ll have a crack at you if they can.’ The possum is shown quietening down as he attempts to get a footing on the branches of a shrub; he then looks directly at Latimer, who states: ‘I think I’ll call this one Stu.’ The scene shifts back to the hut in the bush where we witness Latimer cooking over an open fire; he tries some of the food from his pot: ‘Hmmm and not a bad stew it is either.’

The scene-setting, prop-placement and scripting of this programme demonstrates the ongoing need to define the kind of wildness represented by possums as feral – promiscuous, rapacious, foreign, diseased, and appallingly fertile – even in cases where possums might be displaying none of those characteristics.

At the same time it obscures a further contradiction, which is the never-admitted investment of New Zealanders in keeping possum numbers *high enough*. For just as possums were originally introduced to create a fur industry they now provide opportunities for big profits – and not just for the pest-control and poison industries. Possum carcasses harvested through hunting, trapping, or poisoning may be transformed into clothing, accessories, home apparel, and food (mainly pet food, although some possum meat is sent to Asian markets for human consumption). Clothing and accessories made from possum fur (or using other possum-derived materials) are hot fashion in New Zealand at present, and particularly sought after by the ecologically concerned middle class. Because of the status of possums as pests, possum fur can be marketed as a solution to the problem posed by live possums; those who choose to purchase and wear it are depicted as environmentally friendly and loyal to their country. In this way, the contradiction between the desire for eradication of the possum and desire to exploit its continued existence is papered over.

In its advertising campaign, the up-market national fashion label Untouched World™ quotes Cameron Silver, a world-renowned fashion reviewer, who describes the company's product line as 'the definitive modern luxury casual brand for the active and conscious globe-trotter' (*Untouched World™ Winter Catalogue* 2006: 1). The mission statement for this business asserts that 'Untouched World™ finds its whole philosophy summarized in a symbol representing a Māori Kite, the emblem of an ideal relationship between man [*sic*] and nature' (*Untouched World™ Winter Catalogue* 2006: 89). Of course, the ideal relationship envisaged here between humans and nature relies upon, and cannot help but perpetuate, a complex history of very non-ideal human modifications to nature. These modifications include the original introduction of possums to New Zealand and their ongoing slaughter using a range of problematic methods, from lethal traps to guns to 1080 and other poisons. Avoiding all mention of these issues, pervaded instead by terms such as 'serene', 'unique', and 'natural', and assisted by imagery of spectacular New Zealand beaches or alpine scenery, Untouched World™'s promotional material insists that the company is organic, ecological, and GE-free. This appeal to environmentally conscious consumers is coupled with the recycling of possum fur in combination with merino wool to produce a 'luxuriously soft and durable' knitwear collection unique to Untouched World™ known as Merinomink.

In an article appearing in the *Independent*, Auckland designer Teresa Angliss (engaged at the time in making a bedspread from 66 possum skins) explained her allegiance to the possum fur industry in New Zealand: 'I call it eco-fur [. . .] I wouldn't work with anything endangered, it would be against my conscience. But this is a national pest, so it's really appealing. I'm exploiting a commercial demand to help contain an environmental disaster' (Marks 2006). In the same article the reader is also informed that anywhere else in the world 'designers who work with fur earn the wrath of animal rights activists. But in New Zealand, they are considered national heroes. Indeed, environmentalists and wildlife campaigners' (Marks 2006). On the website of the *New Zealand National Geographic*, in a news article titled 'Making Possums Pay', we are told that 'possum is becoming the fur *de rigueur*, the designer fibre'; during L'Oreal New Zealand Fashion Week in 2002, 6 of the 50 featured designers used possum fur in their creations, either as trims or borders, or, in one case, for a full-length coat (Cary 2003). Here is the full measure of the potency of the diligently cultivated distinction between wildness and ferality: it can produce an ethical exemption that allows fashion-loving

consumers not only to leave behind the taint of slaughtered seal pups and embrace fur garments again, but also to proclaim themselves environmentalists and patriots in the process.

IV

Untouched World's™ fabrics and designs, and its corporate self-fashioning, showcase the emergence of a powerfully marketable taste for certain kinds of wildness. This same taste regime can be seen at work in the gastronomic domain, where it is exemplified by the phenomenon of wildfoods. Nowhere in New Zealand is the lability and adaptability of the contemporary wild more in evidence than at the Wildfoods Festival, held annually in Hokitika, a small town on the South Island's rural West Coast.³

Every year since 1990, on the second Saturday of March, 10 to 20,000 locals and visitors have gathered in Hokitika's Cass Square to chew with varying enthusiasm on spit-roasted steaks of chamois, wild pig, venison, and tar; on 'moa' burgers (actually made of ostrich meat) and emu kebabs; on sheep's testicles, wasp caviar, muttonbird, whitebait, and dozens of other slices of 'the wild'. But the strongest flavour is that of a certain brand of local identity: as Westland District Mayor John Drylie notes in the festival brochure, 'this weekend reflects the logo of our district: "Westland: For the Wild at Heart"' (Hokitika Wildfoods Festival 2001a). Like the festival itself, this notion of wildness cleverly – albeit superficially and temporarily – papers over the longstanding antagonism between the two main subcultures that now constitute the West Coast population: an older rural and small-town working class of miners, farmers, timber workers, hunters, and fisher-people versus a newer population of nature-loving conservationists from other parts of the country or the world. The festival allows these two groups to meet amicably and celebrate the consumption of wildfoods – particularly the hunted meat of introduced animals whose wild populations are blamed for the destruction of local ecosystems. In this way the festival suggests that the wild can be served, and served up, in a single process.

Of course, the festival has national and global functions too, representing as it does a lucrative market-branding of the Coast as a destination for foodies and eco-travellers; it advances taste tourism as an environmentally safe alternative industry to both mining and forestry. A glance at the list of stallholders in the festival brochure demonstrates that the wild is being processed in different ways for this variety of audiences and markets. As mentioned above, the term 'wild' designates in the first place a regional identity proud of its opposition to urban over-cultivation and in the second place a taste for consuming those introduced animals whose wildness is believed to constitute the most critical threat to the local environment. Third, the notion of wildfoods implies a strong emphasis on the meats of game and marine animals – wild pig, venison, tahr, chamois, eel, muttonbird, whitebait – supposedly freshly hunted or caught 'in the wild', as opposed to meats derived from farmed stock or purchased via retailers. Fourth, and paradoxically, 'wild' is used to describe the non-traditional (in New Zealand) meats of species that are recognizably native to (or 'wild' in) other locations, which have become part of an increasingly globalized trade and have been imported for farming here over recent decades: emu, ostrich, and wallaby, for example. Fifth, and crucially to the branding and marketing of the festival, 'wild' refers to foods that constitute a radical challenge to conventional canons of taste (at least those of townies): wasp caviar, mountain oysters, huhu grubs, pickled punga, and even – most notoriously – bull's or horse's semen.⁴

As food anthropologists have argued, the distinction between 'everyday foods' and 'festive foods' helps to manage change within cultural diets: an event such as the Wildfoods Festival

offers a transitional space within which consumers can experiment with emergent tastes and challenge the boundaries of received or dominant ones, foreshadowing wider-scale shifts in society at large (Lupton 1996: 127). Accordingly, those foodstuffs that are ‘wild’ in the sense of being adventurous or potentially disgusting, while they are not the items most likely to be incorporated into diets on a regular basis, mark this ‘festive’ function and anticipate larger cultural transformations. At the same time, the experience of wildness-as-adventurousness also holds together the other sometimes contradictory forms of wildness, and manages interplay between them.

One form of widespread taste transformation celebrated and enabled by the festival applies not just to wildfoods, but to any foods that can be associated with a more primitive and thus authentic past form of production. Hence, for example, the taste for ‘peasant cuisine’, whereby products once solely associated with a rural, provincial, and working-class way of life are processed, repackaged, and marketed to consumers who until relatively recently had no taste for them: in particular to the urban middle-class amateur food expert or ‘foodie’ (Bell and Valentine 1997). As part of this trend, the increasing appeal of wildfoods can be measured by their spread, since the Hokitika Festival began in 1990, out of the wilds and into suburban homes and inner-city restaurants. Since 1998 New Zealand’s *Cuisine* magazine, designed to appeal to the elite food consumer, has promoted an urban ‘Wildfoods Challenge’ in which chefs from elite *haute cuisine* restaurants in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch compete to produce the best dish encompassing wildfood (defined as ‘non-farm produced’) (Crimp 2000: 113–20). In 2011 Television New Zealand broadcast eight episodes of *Monteith’s Wildfoods Challenge* in which two chefs travelled around the country meeting restaurateurs who competed to produce a winning dish ‘using wild foods sourced from within 100 kilometres of their restaurant’ and thereby to reveal ‘the inspiration that makes a dish what it is – the soil and the surroundings where it all began. Inspired by the land’ (TVNZ 2011).

This same reprocessing of a supposedly primordial nature for consumption by a middle-class urban market characterizes media coverage of the Hokitika Festival itself. The stay-at-home urban foodie, for example, tuning into Radio New Zealand National’s ‘Saturday Morning’ programme – whose main audience base comprises the city bourgeoisie – could vicariously sample the wild flavours on offer via an interview by John Campbell (in the studio in Auckland) and Wayne Mowat (broadcasting from Hokitika) with Colin Cutler, an Aucklander who arrived in Hokitika during the 1990s to open a game restaurant, seeking to ‘turn the wildfood into a commercial business’. Their discussion concerned precisely those ‘distinctions’ which embody the habitus of the urban middle-class foodie. They first evaluated the ‘difference in taste between eating wild boar and eating farmed pork’ and then insisted that ‘the flavours can differ from pig to pig, depending on what they’ve actually lived on in the wild’. Savouring their finely developed tastes for the wild in this way, these radio gourmets then laid claim to the more established aspects of the elite palate by discussing which wine would best complement the meat. Finally, current concerns with healthy eating were combined with a purported reconnection to primitive authenticity: Cutler asserted that in game meats ‘the fat content is far far lower [than in farmed meats], and of course it’s all organic, there’s no human process there except for the catching of it’ (Campbell 2001).

In fact, the wild meats at the festival hardly come unmediated from bush and stream onto the plate or the palate – and neither to those served in Cutler’s restaurant or in the venues taking part in the Wildfoods Challenge. Indeed, wildfoods are no less subject than farmed meats to procedures of selection and no less liable to chemical and biological contamination. As one festival stallholder described, hunters supplying the festival have to be careful to take the animals from areas ‘away from the TB areas and 1080’ (Campbell 2001); and as the festival

website pointed out, possum – a favourite in previous years' festivals – was in 2001 prohibited by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) due to the impossibility of guaranteeing that the animals would be unaffected by the Department of Conservation's saturation use of 1080 in the region (Hokitika Wildfoods Festival 2001b). Another stallholder described the processes by which his wild meats were obtained: the deer had been 'harvested' from a range of locations around the country (mostly in Marlborough, a region 400 kilometres or 250 miles to the north-east, but none on the West Coast itself); moreover, again under MAF regulations, the meat had to come through 'licensed premises', for example, retail outlets such as South Island Gourmet in Christchurch, New Zealand's second-largest city, located on the opposite coast (Campbell 2001). This is the same route followed by game meats on their way from the wild to the kitchens of urban restaurants.

The foodie fashion for wildfoods is far from unique to New Zealand. Britain's Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's popular books and TV series represent the UK's best-known instance, while in Australia, cook Sandra Harris testifies that '[w]hat used to be called "bush tucker" has become sophisticated native cuisine and suddenly it's all the rage' (quoted in Morton and Smith 1999: 156). In one sense, obviously, the passion for wildfoods belongs to the generalized Romantic nostalgia for a more immediate relation to nature that has emerged globally over the past few decades, as a reaction against technologization and urbanization, and the accompanying development of intensified farming practices. More specifically, though, wildfoods represent the most sanguinary aspect of a related cultural phenomenon, which has come to be called 'the new carnivorism'. This curiously hybrid taste regime draws on two rather different structures of feeling: on one hand, it partakes of the new ethical orthodoxy of the environmental, organic, and free range movements, while on the other, it joins the backlash against the perceived 'political correctness' of vegetarianism and animal rights. Characterized by the scornful dismissal of ethical objections to the killing of animals for food, new carnivorism instead celebrates, and indeed publicly enacts and broadcasts, the hunting, killing, butchering, cooking, and consumption of animals. As Jovian Parry points out, this new taste regime's supposedly refreshing matter-of-factness about the origins of meat is carefully constructed to showcase certain ideologies and tastes – in particular the organic, environmentalist, and humane sensibility of their adherents – by way of contrast with older-fashioned, 'invisible' forms of industrial meat production. In the process a kind of extra value is added to the meat, since consumers can 'demonstrate their sophisticated and discriminating tastes while simultaneously purporting to marry virtue with pleasure' (Parry 2009: 47).

Self-evidently, the taste for wildfoods caters to this increasingly visible and vocal disposition. Attendees at the Hokitika Festival are encouraged to eat whatever most resembles the *living* animal rather than the usual kinds of meat that have been euphemistically renamed to conceal their origins. The stalls are decorated with the heads, horns, skins, and assorted other offcuts of the dead animals whose meats are being purveyed; the remainder of the animal is right in front of the consumer, often in the form of a carcass on a spit. Yet as suggested above, this relish for reinstating the connection between the edible substance and the living animal involves some rather complex cultural processing, including the sourcing and preparation of supposedly wild local 'game' via an urban gourmet meats franchise, the careful filtering of products to avoid contamination from the kinds of pesticide with which the local 'wilderness' is saturated, and the introduction of exotic 'wild' commodities from overseas. As Parry remarks, the 'search for origin and authenticity' through which the new carnivorism seeks to add to the value of its meat 'is undercut by the selectivity and superficiality of the knowledge offered' (Parry 2009: 43). Seen in this way, the new carnivorism becomes 'a heady brew of certain ignorances and certain constructed knowledges' (Bell and Valentine 1997: 192).

V

Saved from extinction, served through eradication, served up in restaurants: the vicissitudes of wildness and many of its functions are vividly exemplified by its history in New Zealand following the arrival of Europeans. In particular, this history illustrates the way wildness becomes, under modernity, simultaneously the emptiest and the fullest of the classifications we apply to nonhuman animals. Where industrial capitalism depleted the wild in order to refill it according to its own requirements, environmentally inflected consumerism produces a wild that is both replete of meaning (the most sublime, spiritually intense, essential, and pure of natural domains) and utterly empty (a consumer brand whose meanings are always up for grabs). And so the contemporary wild is nothing and everything at once; it is no more and no less than a vividly imagined site in which to play out human–animal relations in all their ideological and material variability.

Notes

- 1 The name ‘weta’ is given to various species of endemic cricket-like insects, a number of which are endangered.
- 2 This section draws on Potts (2009).
- 3 This section draws on Armstrong and Potts (2004).
- 4 ‘Mountain oysters’ is a rural euphemism for sheep’s testicles; huhu grubs are the larval stage of the endemic longhorn huhu beetle (*Prionoplus reticularis*), a traditional Māori foodstuff; punga is the endemic silver fern (*Cyathea dealbata*).

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