

Still many miles from Babylon: a response to Harry Recher

"And I brought you into a plentiful country, to enjoy the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land and made mine heritage an abomination."

Jeremiah 2:7 (Anon. 1611).

Jeremiah was nearly put to the sword for being gloomy. As it happened, however, he was also right. When Recher and Lim (1990) predicted widespread extinctions in the Australian fauna they too seemed unnecessarily gloomy. However, the evidence building up from around the country that is documented by Harry in his paper suggests that he too is on target to be right. But there the analogy ends. Though Babylon is fast approaching, there are strong signs that we may yet repent. Harry thinks we are too late. I am more optimistic. Unlike for mammals, for birds it is not too late; all but one mainland Australian bird species are still extant.

First I should say that the trends certainly support Harry's disquiet. The Action Plan for Australian Birds is currently being reviewed by Gabriel Crowley and myself for Birds Australia. Currently we recognize 1 044 endemic species or subspecies breeding in mainland Australia, Tasmania or adjacent continental islands. Of these 15.9% are either extinct (0.4%), endangered (1.9%), vulnerable (5.2%), lower risk (near threatened) (7.4%) or lower risk (conservation dependent) (0.1%) using the criteria currently agreed by the IUCN. Because definitions have evolved to cover the very concerns Harry and others have been raising, it is difficult to compare between assessments. Nevertheless, applying the modern criteria to the taxa listed as extinct, threatened or of "special concern" in Garnett (1992), there has been an increase of about 1.5% in the number of threatened taxa since 1992. Many of these include taxa that fall within the criterion Lower Risk (near threatened) using the definition of Maxwell *et al.* (1996, P. 10) in the Marsupial Action Plan. Their definition of Lower Risk (near threatened) includes any taxa that have contracted from half their range since the arrival of Europeans or have declined in abundance over half their range in the same period. This should address Harry's concerns about the past emphasis in official lists on absolute abundance and extent of distribution. As the review of the Bird Action Plan continues through 1999 (comments are welcome at

<http://www.tasweb.com.au/recovery/index.htm>), I suspect data will become available for many more taxa that will justify their inclusion under that category of threat. For others new data may alleviate that concern. As Harry says, however, the increase recognizes a new understanding of decline rather than a rapid change in numbers. The decline is chronic rather than acute and, like many chronic diseases, tends to be managed rather than cured.

Certainly a great many are "ecologically extinct" over huge areas of agricultural land, and until the technology develops to render agriculture obsolete, will remain so. However, while the almost full complement of taxa still exists, there is the potential for resurrection. Ecological extinction is after all also a natural process — it is just a matter of scale. Just as Baker (1977) discovered that migration can be defined as any movement from one place to another, however small or large, so ecological extinction can range from days to centuries. Migrants are "extinct" from their breeding ranges in winter, Ground Parrots can be "extinct" from a heathland for years after a fire and the Noisy Scrub-bird has been extinct on the Darling Scarp for well over a century, until what appears to have been a successful reintroduction over the last few years (A. H. Burbidge, pers. comm.).

And, in my optimism, I see the Noisy Scrub-bird as a symbol of hope for birds as a whole. Though the work has been confined to a single species, through it, as with many other single species projects, whole communities have been conserved. Similarly the Malleefowl has spawned battalions of malleefowls across the country, giving political strength to arguments to save the habitat. The future of old growth forest is borne on the backs of owls.

But owls would have carried little weight when Harry was watching honeyeaters in the 1960s. Given the attitude to the natural world prevalent during the first 200 years after Captain Cook arrived, even Harry cannot deny that there has been a revolution in thinking. The concerns of what was originally

an elite are genuinely becoming the business of government. And now, under the brave experiment of the Natural Heritage Trust, the control of environmental funding is moving beyond government agencies into the community. While clearing continues in places, it is increasingly being seen as an anachronism. And the emphasis on conservation management is indeed moving beyond the park boundaries, just as Harry hopes. In Queensland, and probably in other states, a posse of environmental extension officers have been sent in pursuit of landholders and property planners. On Cape York Peninsula property plans will embed in law the interests of pastoral, indigenous and environmental interests. Underpinning these plans, both politically and financially, is conservation.

Many species will become less common before their declines are reversed. However,

I firmly believe that the very real energy, resources and good will being invested in conservation is slowly turning a long tide of environmental destruction.

REFERENCES

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