

The Promises of Pests: Wildlife in Agricultural Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the place of pest species in agricultural landscapes in Australia. Drawing on historical, ethnographic and philosophical research, we consider the very particular—reductive, utilitarian, monological—ways of understanding and valuing landscapes that lead to some animals being classified as pests. We propose that paying attention to pests might offer a productive way into challenging these logics and opening up more creative and inclusive agricultural possibilities.

Key words: pest, agriculture, Australia, conservation, biodiversity, history, social dimensions.

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In our research, both in historical archives and in interviews and conversations with a wide range of people, we have often been captivated by the lives and deaths of the charismatic ‘pests’ that insinuate themselves into agricultural systems. Although these are not generally the animals that we’re trying to rear in these environments, they are nonetheless profoundly and mortally caught up in farming ventures (sometimes eaten, sometimes not). As a result, again and again, they have become a big part of what is most controversial about animals in food production.

This paper explores what peskiness might reveal about Australian agriculture; about its assumptions and values, but also about what else might be possible and in fact necessary in this Anthropocene era.¹ Our thoughts here are necessarily preliminary – an opening, an invitation, rather than a detailed thesis – but it is precisely this kind of an opening, like mice gnawing into a sack of grain, that we take pests to be ideally suited to creating.

As numerous scholars have described, agriculture has tended to be understood as a threshold activity in the

¹ The Anthropocene is a proposed new geological epoch marked by ‘humanity’ – or rather, some of humanity – having taken up a significant role in the shaping of the Earth’s bio-geo-chemical systems. According to this logic we have now left the relative stability of the Holocene and plunged ourselves, and the planet, into a new time in which, in the words of Will Steffen et al. “The Earth is rapidly moving into a less biologically diverse, less forested, much warmer, and probably wetter and stormier state” (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007, 614).

western world, taking place at the borderlands between nature and culture (Saltzman, Head, and Stenseke 2011; Rickards 2015; Cronon 1995). From this perspective, cultivated fields are seen to exist in a liminal space between wild lands and urban sprawl, where culture in the form of civilizing human activity meets and tames nature. This understanding arises out of a dualistic approach to the world in which humanity and our activities are seen to exist somehow outside of nature proper (Cronon 1995). From this perspective agriculture converts wild nature into culture, or at least tries to. This storyline is, of course, bound up with other threshold narratives, in particular the deeply problematic human origin story in which agriculture is taken to mark the birth of “civilized” human society, the point at which human activities began to be qualitatively different to those of other animals as we set ourselves outside of and above “wild nature”. In Europe, and some other parts of the world with deeper, or perhaps just more recognisable, agricultural histories, farming is often more readily reconciled with ‘nature’ and integrated into conservation efforts than it is in Australia and other settler lands. Here, agriculture is instead frequently understood as largely separate from, and in recent decades a threat to, natural landscapes and native biodiversity (Saltzman, Head, and Stenseke 2011).

So, it perhaps makes sense that in Australia farm lands are usually imagined and produced as sharply demarcated spaces dedicated exclusively to crops and livestock. A firm boundary exists here between ‘proper’ residents of the farm and wild, illegitimate, interlopers. This does not mean that *no* wild animals are welcome on the farm, but ‘hospitality’

(van Dooren, 2016) is generally conditional on their conformity with the dominant vision of the farming project.

Some wild animals are seen to benefit farming, from pollinating insects to insect-eating birds. These “farmers’ friends” are frequently allowed to remain or even encouraged. Just who counts as a friend though is a complex and shifting business. In the archives we have seen the same logic play out again and again in Australian history. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Queensland, many farmers supported the bounty on Torresian crows *Corvus orru* and other agricultural pests, while others argued that crows should be left alone on the grounds that they helped to control an even more significant pest, sheep blowfly *Lucilia cuprina*. While each position might have had very different consequences for crows (and flies), both positions were fundamentally grounded in the same logic: those animals with an overall negative impact on farmers’ projects were not to be tolerated, certainly not on the farm and often nowhere in the broader landscape. Deborah Bird Rose has called this a “monological” vision. She notes that the “monological self sees itself surrounded by resources that promote the self. Anything else is an obstacle, and obstacles are to be transformed into use or eradicated” (Rose 2008, p. 52).

‘Pest’ is the name given to the particular subset of unwelcome wildlife that is singled out for active management, rendered particularly visible by the harm they are seen to cause: from dingoes *Canis lupus* on sheep stations and various ducks in rice fields, to flying-foxes (*Pteropus* spp.) in orchards, emus *Dromaius novaehollandiae* in the wheat belts and ‘plagues’ of Australian locusts *Chortoicetes terminifera* in cereal crops. In a sense, all wild animals on farms threaten the enactment of a firm border between nature and culture. But it is pests that most significantly challenge and upset this imagined reality. Unable to be ignored, they make their uncomfortable presence felt and demand response – of one sort or another. That response is, very often, lethal, taking forms including large-scale poisoning, shooting and electrocution. In short, (attempted) ‘eradication’.

In responding to pests in these ways, farmers might be understood to be responding not only to a—perceived or actual—threat to their livelihoods, but also to an ontological threat: a threat to a modernist worldview, to a particular set of categories for understanding and ordering the world. Put simply, pests threaten projects of mastery by refusing to *fit*, refusing to be ordered into a singular vision. It is important to note that the mastery at stake here is never *actual*. As Val Plumwood taught us, mastery is an understanding, an attitude, in which one feels *entitled* to order the world—to the extent that it is possible—to suit one’s designs and purposes (Plumwood 1993).

From this perspective the label ‘pest’ is itself a key part of the problem. In labelling another as a pest we reassert the dominance of the master’s project by defining another solely in relation to that project. The emu or flying-fox as an animal with its own projects, perhaps as a pollinator or seed disperser, or as any of thousands of other things, disappears and we are left with the singular fact of their ‘not fitting’ and needing to be ‘controlled.’ As one of us has explored elsewhere, this kind of labeling—pest, vermin, feral, and so on—often does a powerful political and ethical work, ‘legitimizing’ and perhaps even requiring the killing of animals in contexts that are often *unnecessary* (even within the specific confines of conservation or agricultural goals) and in *inhumane ways* that would be deemed ethically unacceptable for ‘non-pests’ (van Dooren 2011).

But paying attention to pests also holds promises. We’d like to propose that ‘the pest’ might be a productive category, a *monstrous* figure, for rethinking agricultural possibilities. Donna Haraway has used the term ‘monster’ to refer to transgressive creatures that haunt conceptual borderlands, problematizing the supposed purity of categories like ‘nature’ and ‘culture.’ In this way monsters reveal the inability of our dualistic imaginings to reshape the world in any absolute or final way. But they also remind us that peskiness exists in the eye of the beholder. Animals are only ‘pests’ from within the context of particular projects and their conceptual schemes; like the ‘weeds’ that Anna Tsing documents growing up in the ‘gaps’ between powerful projects of classification and ordering (Tsing 2005). Paying attention to pests is one way of highlighting, and perhaps questioning, these modes of ordering and inhabiting the world. In this way, as Haraway argues, monstrous figures are good to ‘think with’ both because they unsettle assumptions and because in doing so they point toward other possibilities for life. The term monster, she reminds us, shares a common root with ‘demonstrate’: “monsters signify” (Haraway 1992).

The kind of pest-centric rethinking we are proposing here is becoming increasingly vital in this Anthropocene era. Having blundered into a new geological epoch must remind us that we are not in control of earth systems: no matter how ambitious our visions may be. At the same time, as Anthropocene processes increasingly threaten human wellbeing and the conservation of biodiversity, it reminds us that mastery is a dangerous illusion for everyone involved. As Plumwood argued, mastery is characterised by a position of isolation and denied dependency in which the master fails to value others both in their own right and for their vital roles in making the master’s life possible. From this perspective, an attitude of entitled mastery might be understood as a key cause of our Anthropocene predicament. As Claire Colebrook has succinctly put it: “Is not the notion that the earth is our place precisely what has blinded us to the ravages of our mode of life?” (Colebrook 2012, 189).

It is in this context, that we would like to suggest that humble, expendable pests might offer signposts toward other kinds of possibilities, disrupting the monological vision that grounds mastery. Pests do this in two fundamental ways: by reminding us that, firstly, who is welcome and who is not are not fixed and permanent; and secondly, that the borders of farms do not begin and end at the gate.

Taking up the first of these points, the social and historical specificity of the pest points to the fact that there are other ways of ordering life and other ways of farming. Both today and in the past, many Australian farmers have embraced alternative possibilities, experimenting with other modes of production and cohabitation, including welcoming species that others call pests. For example, recent efforts to encourage wildlife in farm dams, in order that these water sources can be both habitat and storage, as well as cooperation between rice farmers and conservationists to make room for the now endangered Australasian Bittern *Botaurus poiciloptilus*, in paddies. As one of us has explored in detail, some rice farmers have for decades also made attempts to live with ducks in the wider landscape. Since the 1920s, special open seasons have been declared on ducks in rice growing areas in NSW as they have widely been seen to reduce yields. However, some farmers have accepted these birds as part of the farm, at the same time working to minimise damage through changing their farming practices (O’Gorman 2014).

Although far from guaranteed, these kinds of practices have the potential to open up space for a broader set of values and priorities on agricultural land, challenging assumptions about who belongs and who doesn’t. In so doing, these projects unsettle the assumption that comes with the label ‘pest’: namely, that the problem lies solely with these animals who must be changed or eradicated, and that farmers themselves might not change their projects or their practices to open up room for the discovery of better ways of both farming and living with others.

At the same time, pests problematize the borders of the farm itself. As these same ducks are attracted to rice fields, in the absence of, or perhaps in preference to, more ‘conventional’ wetlands, they remind us that what happens on farms is thoroughly connected to larger environmental dynamics: in this case, the diversion of substantial quantities of water in much of inland Australia from rivers and wetlands into irrigation projects (O’Gorman 2012), a diversion that is itself powerfully reinforced by the monological vision that sees all water not put to such use as ‘wasted’.

But alongside these ecological relationships farms are, of course, webbed into social, economic and technical

systems that similarly shape their operations and possibilities. The freedom and flexibility of farmers to experiment with other modes of agriculture are often restricted by these larger dynamics. In our vision of the provocations of the pest, they must also remind us that sustainable farming requires attention to the broader contexts that structure not only who counts as a pest, but who will be able to contest those categorisations by imagining and enacting alternative futures. The economic imperatives of farming can often limit farmers’ freedom and willingness to experiment. Modes of accommodating ‘pests’ and other forms of on-farm conservation are often driven by these imperatives. As one farmer on the edge of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area noted: “I’m not green to be in the red.” At the same time, a polarisation between urban ‘greenies’ and farmers in Australia—with deep roots, politically and historically—has often limited the social acceptance within farming communities of conservation values.

Ultimately, what we are proposing here is not a ‘love in’ with pests; nor that farmers ought to just get better at tolerating the loss of their livelihoods. Rather, the object of our criticism is a particular vision of mastery and entitlement that is dominant within large sectors of Australian agriculture and its associated industries. Rejecting this logic, we’re proposing that paying attention to pests might be one way into opening up a more creative, socially and historically grounded, dialogue about other ways of valuing and inhabiting agricultural landscapes. Such a project only makes sense if the term ‘pest’ is understood not to describe a category of living beings, but rather to mark an opening into an ongoing questioning of the larger systems—philosophical, ecological, economic, cultural—that render some forms of life pestiferous in the first place. The welfare of ‘pest animals’, killed in their millions, is part of what concerns us, but there is something else significant at stake here. Responding differently to pests is also about learning to inhabit landscapes differently: about questioning the sense of entitlement that asks others to do all the work of fitting in with pre-given farming approaches. And so, it is about asking how farming might be done in more connected ways, as something other than a (failed) project of mastery.

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