

The killing of the Magic Pudding Chef and the consequences for conservation

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ABSTRACT

This short essay comes from a presentation at the “Killing for Conservation” symposium organised by RZSNSW late in 2017. It uses the conceit of a literary killing and its fall-out to examine broader issues around the topic of killing for conservation, and conservation more generally. The essay takes its title from an Australian children’s classic, *The Magic Pudding*. Although less fashionable in twenty-first century Australia, and while there can be many arguments about the author’s intent in writing the story, and the views he promotes through it (Eipper 1999), it is essentially about the phenomenology of the central actor, Albert, the magic pudding.

A brief precis of the story (Lindsay 1918) is as follows:

The story is of Bunyip Bluegum the koala, pushed out of home and deciding to see the world, taking only a walking stick. Quite soon he gets hungry and by happenstance meets Bill Barnacle the sailor and Sam Sawnoff the penguin who are eating a pudding – Albert. Albert was a bad-tempered, ill-mannered pudding; but however much you ate, Albert the pudding regenerated at once. By rotating Albert, you could also change flavour, from steak-and-kidney to apple-pie.

Since Albert’s only pleasure is being eaten, he insists that Bill and Sam invite Bunyip to join them. Glossing over details, Bill explains to Bunyip how he and Sam were once shipwrecked with a ship’s cook on an iceberg where the cook created the pudding which they now own. In fact, as Bill and Sam starved on the iceberg, the chef became fatter each day, and one night they discovered the cook eating Albert. Although “shrouded in mystery” they were so enraged they rushed at the corpulent cook, who being round, and the ice slippery, rolled off the iceberg and was killed in the freezing waters – hence the title of this paper.

Eventually Bill, Sam and Albert returned to Australia, where they had to constantly defend Albert from being stolen by a range of different pudding thieves. Several (temporarily successful) occurrences of pudding thievery occur, the last unsuccessful once finishing in an affray, leading to the Albert being charged with disorderly conduct and taken to court. In court, the judge and the usher are distracted (playing cards), while trying to adjudicate on this matter. They are also eating the defendant, lubricated by generous swigs of port, and, unsurprisingly, cannot come to any decisions. Further chaos ensues until the pudding owners grab Albert from the dock and make a getaway safely to a quiet place. There they settle down for the rest of their lives, keeping the Pudding carefully fenced in to avoid being thieved or escaping.

Key words: Conservation; welfare; threatened species; rewilding; renewal ecology; politics; policy; good Anthropocene.

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Introduction

This story of the Magic Pudding is a great metaphor for the current environmental situation globally. Properly functioning ecosystems are the equivalent of the pudding. Understanding ecosystems, the science of ecology (including conservation biology), is the chef’s secret recipe. While we know part of the secret, we still don’t know it all. The owners and the numerous pudding thieves are representatives of society at large. Our legal systems and processes created to deal with, and adjudicate on, problems of biodiversity loss and change, ecosystem dysfunction and poor human use of natural resources, (at best indifferent, usually complicit, and always too late) are represented in the story by the inadequate court system.

The pudding owners were really hoping to influence the thieves and law but they’re quite willing to circumvent it if necessary. Such is the behaviour of civil society at large. And the biggest problem is civil society’s view that the natural world is indeed a magic pudding, that can be cut repeatedly, with no restriction. This has been turned in popular parlance to “magic pudding economics” (Smith 2014). Society’s views on issues related to ecology, biodiversity, and conservation biology, including the possibility and desirability of killing for conservation, are covered extensively in other papers in this volume.

Irrespective of the arguments of conservative geologists,

it appears we are now in a new era – the Anthropocene (Ellis 2015). This era is characterised by an increasing population of *Homo sapiens*, increasing global change, and rapid homogenisation of both biological and cultural diversity. Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of this homogenisation is the loss of languages and species in areas where both were formerly highly diverse (IPBES 2018). These realities of the Anthropocene result in the situation conservation faces today, where the main foci for action are establishment of protected areas and recovering threatened or endangered species (Bridgewater 2016). That killing and change are part of biodiversity conservation appears anathema to many conservation biologists. That view flows through to non-government organisations (NGOs) dealing with conservation, many of which are also influenced by, and concerned with, animal welfare issues.

Conservation and welfare

Conflation of welfare and conservation causes considerable confusion in civil society. This can be attributed to the excessive focus on species protection (not conservation) from the scientific and conservation NGO communities and civil society at large that doesn't necessarily reconcile with animal welfare. Creating artificial links between species welfare, species conservation, species protection, and landscape scale conservation, serves only to produce confused and confusing messages. Protection and conservation are by no means the same thing, but these words are used often interchangeably not only by the NGO community but also government, and even within the science community.

For example, in the New South Wales, ACT and Victorian alpine national parks there continue to be calls for a cull of brumbies to save the alpine wetlands from trampling and other damage effects. In 2000 the NSW Parks Agency organised a cull, which resulted in over 600 horses being culled. As a result, animal welfare advocates (who were against the culling, period) lined up with traditional bush communities who were arguing they wanted the brumbies to remain for cultural reasons. On the other side, conservationists supported the cull. These political disputations caused a moratorium on aerial culling in NSW. For a public unused to deliberate animal culling in a national park setting, reaction was one of outrage and some conservationists remain reserved about such culling (Adams 2017). This issue is a classic “killing for conservation” situation, but also the subject of much heated discussion and debate as it is also a clash of values. The key issue is the “cultural heritage” that brumbies have for some of society opposes the actual and perceived damage to some of the alpine ecosystems, especially the natural heritage of alpine wetlands.

In this exemplar there are three key actors: Government (New South Wales), animal welfare NGOs, and conservation NGOs. Conservation-focussed NGOs seem

more effective in ensuring ecologically-based results but, even so, they're often left striving to be heard and they have a difficult, sometimes even diffident, relationship with the scientific community. Animal welfare focussed NGOs are often more effective in profile fundraising than conservation NGOs, but both operate through raising community awareness – and possibly guilt. This tension between NGOs focused on animal welfare or conservation is a clear example of the killing for conservation arguments.

Such arguments over the status of high-profile (flagship) species *e.g.* whales, koalas, and kangaroos (and for balance, badgers in the UK) over the years have proved this point repeatedly. MacLaren and colleagues (2006) noted:

Ultimately welfare science must be able to provide biologists with tools and predicative power to be able to plan successful conservation interventions. They say we judge that conservationists have a duty to evaluate whether the animal welfare implications of their work are outweighed by conservation benefits.

Many authors in this volume identify a range of exemplars of that dilemma.

Can better science help?

This paper provides a metaphoric interpretation of the magic pudding story, the chef is keeper of ecological, or conservation, science. Taking the pudding recipe as ecological science, the chef, in creating the perfect pudding (knowledge base) was ahead of where conservation science is today. To make that metaphorical magic pudding he understood the need to bring together a range of ingredients, in our case knowledge from social sciences, ecological sciences and indigenous and local understandings. This is a formula that practitioners in each of those areas have yet to discover. It's one that we are exploring increasingly as we come into this 21st century, with the term “boundary spanners” (Turner *et al.* 2016) increasingly used for practitioners who are prepared to cross one or more disciplinary boundaries. Understanding how to promote those interactions between different world views is paramount to help manage *e.g.* threatening processes, vulnerable ecosystems and, if necessary, when, how and where to kill for conservation. The reasons such interactions are difficult is because each of those areas is highly silo-ed, and certainly many working in the ecological sciences are suspicious of indigenous and local knowledge and *vice versa*.

In truth, the scientific community is largely befuddled and depressed (Morton 2017). Morton (2017) writes about the state of Australian ecology as:

.....the predominance of gloom can cause ecologists to flirt with exaggeration and with misanthropy, and perversely it can cause them to strive to prevent ecological change –

Here the key phrase is “strive to prevent ecological change”. Morton (2017) continues;

.....even though the discipline is rooted in the reality of flux.

Most profoundly, it causes many citizens to switch off: gloom has limited capacity to motivate, whereas hope is the elixir of action.

Scientists and conservation managers are often overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems which face them from cumulative mismanagement of our landscapes and ecosystems. But the response from the scientific community needs to more than simply proselytising about more actions needed on threatened species and the need for more, bigger protected areas. Better conservation can result from a reversal of Morton’s depressive ecologist syndrome, with ecologists engaging in a more positive way with government and offering advice and comment to younger cohorts of ecologists, with whom the responsibility of attitudinal change now and into the future lies. In such ways the ecological and conservation science community can help policy development, and emerging law, work more effectively and faster.

We need to rediscover ecology as a holistic integrating science, not a reductionist science; and we need to dispense with philately. By philately I mean we must stop collecting facts and ideas without any idea of what to do with our collection. It is not necessary to know how many species are endangered or threatened – if fact it’s very difficult to gain such an understanding, although genomic data are increasingly complementing species data but not always in a clearly helpful way. We do need know what real problems and find ways to deal with them. Both problems – and their solutions – are only resolvable at landscape scale. Just counting species and watching them fade off into the distance is not in itself helpful, although that seems the main aim of IUCN Red Listings and the Convention on trade in endangered species of wild flora and fauna (CITES) appendices. In Australia, Threatened Species lists associated with state and federal legislation have more positive actions, yet their full effectiveness in achieving better conservation in the wild is also questionable.

The politics of killing for conservation

Now to threatened species and killing. Governments, influenced particularly by science and conservation organisations (including IUCN) at global and national level, give species primacy for conservation action. Yet endangered species Acts, threatened species Acts, if they ever were, are no longer the most effective way of dealing with threatening (sometimes termed endangerment) processes. Threatened species are a *symptom* of management failures of many kinds and at many levels in the landscapes and the seascapes of Australia, and many

other countries. Threatened species therefore should not be treated as an issue in themselves. Focusing too much on them means we’re missing the chance to promote a more holistic, effective, and creative paradigm for nature conservation.

Targeted killing can certainly help some threatened species but killing without proper context is not a plan for conservation. A key challenge is managing global change; which in many instances is collateral killing. There already has been collateral killing from not just climate change but other forms of global change. The biocultural context of species – understanding where species fit in our own value frameworks – can also lead to directed killing. Rewilding could be included in this biocultural context. The typical form of rewilding is to reintroduce large carnivores that in turn kill herbivores that may be out of balance in the ecosystem. In that sense, rewilding is killing for conservation, but at a human distance – a morally “safer” position for many conservationists. Rewilding should not, however, be seen as “giving back” – it is another way of promoting potentially irreversible change in our ecosystems, at a time when global change is creating the templates for new ecosystems.

Species loss and change and the development of novel ecosystems is again, targeted killing. Clashing conservation values or priorities with delivery of ecosystem services is yet another way killing can occur for conservation. Ecologists, especially economic ecologists, have mistakenly given the political world the understanding that we need ecosystem services (e.g. Costanza *et al.* 2014) and we need to ensure that they continue for human well-being (MA 2003). That results, however, in a range of accidental and collateral killings because no-one really understands what ecosystem services are and the scientific community is continually reinventing the ecosystem services concept, evidenced by the appearance in 2012 of a Journal dealing solely with this issue (Braat 2012). A more recent construct, broadening the paradigm, is a consideration of relational values (Chan *et al.* 2017) and Natures Contributions to People (Diaz *et al.* 2018). The latter concept has been used for the first time in a range of assessments undertaken by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services – IPBES (IPBES 2018).

In a similar vein, Bowman *et al.* (2017) have introduced the term Renewal Ecology which they characterise as the science essential for creating and managing ecosystems to maximise both biodiversity and human wellbeing in the face of rapid environmental change. While they don’t mention killing *per se*, it would seem implicit in their framing several of several of the themes of renewal ecology. This renewal ecology concept is an interesting one, which is at the intersection of several of the new paradigms being developed and tested in ecology and conservation biology, all recognising (if not explicitly) that people are part of nature, not apart from it.

As part of their concept of renewal ecology, nature conservation can be seen to be not just about genes, species, or ecosystems. It's about how we, as a species, continue to interact with the rest of the species on the planet. MacDonald *et al.* (2006) note "Once the emphasis was on protection, now it's integration." Again, it's this integration that conservation biology and ecological science, within a political framing, must develop if they are to remain relevant to human survival in this century and beyond.

Conclusion

As the pudding owners discovered, legal frameworks are incapable of swift response, and often take more in time and resources than they give back. We need to understand how national laws, governmental processes, and policy work together and we need to use much more effectively the science-policy interface.

Firstly, we need to reframe the debate by bringing all the actors together in an integrated way. Such integration is often not well-received by the legal sector as laws are basically inflexible. Protected Area legislation is the exemplar here: while it can provide sanctions against a range of human activities it is powerless to stop the relentless march of global change. A different but equally effective process to achieve effective conservation would be to use policy instruments, as they are more flexible and can achieve results more effectively and more quickly. In the context of the subject of this special issue, we do indeed need killing as part of conservation's armoury. Postponing killing operations necessary for achieving targeted results for conservation management usually makes things worse. Issues in some National Parks with expanding kangaroo populations causing negative impacts

on vegetation in the face of extended periods of drought are a clear demonstration of this issue (e.g. Department of Conservation and Environment, Victoria. 1990).

Killing for conservation must then be part of what is increasingly being described as a good Anthropocene (Kunns 2017). It's a choice we can make between a good Anthropocene and a bad Anthropocene, but even killing for conservation will not remove the need for control through strong management objectives unless circumstances are exceptional. Using another storybook character, the Cheshire Cat in Carroll (1865) might say, "I'm feral and I've changed your ecosystems forever." Which means shooting all the cats will not necessarily solve the key problem for many threatened native species because the feral cat populations themselves have already instigated changes in ecosystem process, stability, and longevity – in other words, resilience.

Finally, another Cheshire Cat reference from Carroll (1865):

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" said Alice. "Well, that depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the cat, rapidly disappearing. "I don't much care where," said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the cat. "As long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation. "You're sure to do that," said the cat, "if only you walk long enough."

Walking forward together as the multi-stranded civil society we are, sharing, and acting on, the knowledge that comes from different worldviews in this Anthropocene in which we live, is the only way we can all live happily ever after – and eat as much pudding as we want.

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