

# Eradicating the ugly

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The following is an edited transcript of the paper presented at the 2017 RZS NSW Forum.

There's never been an issue here  
Where everyone agreed  
Aside from needing more cold beer  
At a Friday evening feed  
And any family's gonna fight  
Over how the money's spent  
And God knows there ain't consensus here  
About the environment

But now in modern times  
There is a plague we all can see  
Where the redneck and the greenie  
And the miner all agree  
White fella, black fella, rich and poor  
The immigrant Timorese  
The punter and the banker  
The stockman, the hippie

They brought 'em into Queensland  
And they spread to New South Wales  
They moved on into Kakadu  
And killed the crocodile  
No one could stop the menace  
Of the cane toads running free  
Till they ran into the crazy mob  
In the Eastern Kimberley

The Kimberley's a rugged place  
There ain't too much to do  
'Cept sit around and drink a beer  
And argue family feuds  
But when bush tucker is threatened  
And the goannas become few  
The cowboys here got ornery  
They drank, and thought it through

To rally every Aussie  
Every woman, man and child  
To kill off every cane toad  
Who is decimating the wild  
To unify the country  
From the outback to the ports  
It's gonna take a lot of beer  
And a violent brand new sport

Cane Toad Muster

We'll issue special uniforms

And sell air pellet guns  
For a 100 rounds of ammo  
Who will be the champion?  
Tourism gone wild  
They will come from every land  
From Sydney and Tasmania  
New York, Afghanistan

And the moment when you thought  
This tale could not be more insane  
An invitation comes from Greece  
Cane Toad Muster in the Olympic games  
And let's not forget the children  
They must get in on the fun  
Now every day is Easter  
The toad hunt has begun

Now the moral of this story here  
Is becoming quite clear  
One twisted sports idea  
And a few more rounds of beer  
Can unify a nation  
To fight a plague they fear  
Join the Kimberley Toad Busters  
To protect the Outback, so dear

Cane Toad Muster

Have you got the nerve  
To swerve?

(Cane Toad Muster, from the Great Salish Sea—  
Dana Lyons, Lyons Brothers Music, BMI  
<https://cowswithguns.com/great-salish-sea-lyrics/>)

I want to thank Dana Lyons - some of you will know as the Cows with Guns guy - for framing so many of the issues about nature and environment in Australia in one smart song. Battles between nature and nation take a new twist in environmental management programs that focus on invasive species eradication, particularly when the animal is ugly.

Invasion

Species

Eradication

Each of these words change how we feel -- they are key concepts in the scientific literature and in practical citizen science, but they motivate people differently. The ugly and the unloved really test the question of what belongs in Australia. What should we do about what does not belong? And what does managing the environment do to the people who do it?

So, I start with eradication, but I am actually asking questions about care. Nature's future and our own are equally outcomes of any management practice. Making machismo out of killing toads is only partly about protecting native species. It's also about making heroes of nature's warriors.

Australia's confused ideas about nature and nation are deeply entwined. If we could disentangle patriotism and ideas of national progress from conservation practices we might even enable compassionate conservation. This might even help our own health, caring is good for people. Being in positive relations with nature, what E. O. Wilson calls biophilia (Wilson 1984), may be an essential part of being human. This idea has long been understood by Aboriginal people who belong to country, rather than the other way around.

What does it mean for scientific expertise to come to depend on an extended peer community? To be more than just science. Increasingly, it makes for conservation conversations to include philosophical, ethnological and anthropological scholars. Like, *Deborah Rose*, who writes about how she learns about being in nature from Aboriginal teachers. Like *Donna Haraway*, who argues for more than human conservation that works at the level of a multi-species organism. And like the Estonian *Jakob von Uexküll* and *Kalevi Kull* who argue that the relations with nature should not exclude the possibilities of consciousness among non-human others.

Now, this is biosemiotics - about as complicated a theory as you can get - and *Jakob von Uexküll* has practical ideas from early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that have been used for lizard conservation in Canberra this century (Manning, Lindenmayer and Nix 2004).

These new conservation ideas challenge the scale of the operation. Should one save species? Landscapes? Organisms? Eco-systems with porous edges? It's often the non-scientific extended peer community that funds and assists the operations. The frame of the operation will be determined by practical logistics, not necessarily conservation, science, or ecological principles. It's always the local community, not that there's some scientific experts who have to live with the consequences of any actions.

Now toads have always been regarded negatively in the anglophone world - from Shakespeare ("like the toad, ugly and venomous" - *As you Like It*) to Wind in the Willows. The cane toad muster song brings into focus many of the prejudices that shape approaches to cane toads as they spread steadily across northern Australia: It's the national duty! Toads are clearly bad, and every side of politics agrees, so let's all do our bit.

Making people who don't agree about the environment work together may have advantages for other environmental questions. Making people heroes will add labour to the force, hence competitive heroics, militarism, and machismo. The Friday night twisted sports idea builds community solidarity and a reason to drink together and the ultimate aim is to eradicate. Eradicate the pest. To cleanse the landscape of an undesirable element - to play God with the ecosystem.

The cane toad story is typical of deliberate introductions. It was one of the many designed to meet specific needs of the settler economy. As Eric Rolls put it in the title of his 1969 history of acclimatisation - *They All Ran Wild*. "Wild" here, is out of control. It's completely unlike the freedoms savoured by John Muir and celebrated in the American idea of wilderness. Introductions were for biological control of the settler economy and when they went wrong, they went wild. The good was the western capitalist new economy. The bad was when nature flourished excessively in the way cosmopolitan biota does in an ancient isolated continent where they have no natural predators or competition.

I think the cane toad muster's twisted sports idea builds on the non-natural status of cane toads. It's not the first time that people played with toads. Games make toads into gizmos - they're like Pokémon avatars - not animals. This means how they die is not important, be it in a freezer-bag - or under the wheels of a heavy vehicle.

Toads can be busted any which way. The importance is the muster. The gathering of people to do their national duty and the macho-busting but there is little reflection on the disposal of individual toad bodies. Cane toads are ecosystem wreckers. They invaded a landscape, indeed a nearly continental scale. Busting is about eradicating populations, not individuals. Yet the toad busters respond one toad at a time. As Ian Vicker, an Adelaide River buster put it, "A toad a minute is just doing my bit." [Encounters, radio program]

The most dangerous cane toad is not the lone ugly one that freaked out Julie Bishop (Maiden 2010) but the first ones. The ones that arrive at the frontier and get eaten by native animals unaware of the poison.

Rick Shine, winner of the 2016 Prime Minister's prize for science knows a lot about defending the rights of unfashionable animals. He is Australia's leading snake expert and long-time student of animals of the Top End. His study site at Fogg Dam is an hour's drive south-east of Darwin - a paradise for snakes - and a place he's worked at for more than three decades.

The local Humpty Doo newspaper of the 15 December 2004 headlined "The arrival of the toad". That's Fogg Dam was right on the cane toad's frontier when Shine won a federation fellowship and moved in with his Team Bufo. Shine researched the history of toad invasions, documenting how the rate of spread accelerated over time. In the early years, up to the 1960's or so the toad invasion front advanced fairly slowly he said - about 10 kilometres a year - but then it sped up and kept accelerating and moving at 40 or 60 kilometres per year until the toads made it to Broome on the west coast.

Radio tracking showed how individual toads at the front travelled long distances. Sometimes more than a kilometre each night and do so every night. Shine said, "This is an incredible rate for an amphibian. Cane toads at the Australian Aussie invasion front travel much, much faster and further than any other frogs or toads that have ever been studied elsewhere in the world. The toad damages ecosystems and it drives rapid evolution of its predators for native animals.

Big cane toads were only a danger to animals big enough to eat them, but those animals were not in danger from smaller toads. So, Shine moved the toads that led the way. Instead of a frontier full of big, fat strong toads - the smaller ones or sausages made of the toads replaced the head of the frontier and the big animals who stalked them - they stalked them out, they got an aversive dose of poison and they got sick but didn't die and they learned that toads like this were not food.

Shine speaks gently of all animals, including toads. His nuance to scientific approach is very different from the machismo around toad busting. He supports the work of the busters with science but does not endorse the tone. His website includes a fact sheet "Debunking hero making myths about toads" (<http://www.canetoadsinoz.com/debunkingcanetoadcontrolmyths.html>).

His most powerful insight is that if a female toad can lay 30,000 eggs in a single night, one toad at a time is not going to make a difference. Fecundity has been obviously a common thread through all the papers in this theme edition of Australian Zoologist.

The busters, however, can help the behavioural retraining operation by collecting the cane toads they kill so they could be minced into sausages for the taste aversion program. So perhaps better not squash them under heavy wheels. After all the toads are only dangerous when eaten. Hating toads is a strange case of blaming the victim. Defending Australia's native animals from cane toads by teaching them to recognise that toad is not food also hoses down the hype about protecting native animals from toads. Busting the myth that the toads themselves are the predators. They are after all the prey.

So, killing for conservation is always tricky. Conservation programs can and do upset people. I am going to move briefly to a place called Oostvaardersplassen which is a Dutch rewilding experiment, an engineered island near Amsterdam, where the sensibilities of people have messed up the experiment. The island had cattle, horses and deer introduced as part of an experiment to let nature take its course. Europe has a big program in rewilding. Lorimer 2012

People travelling on trains through the landscape saw starving animals dying slowly and pleaded with park management to kill the animals humanely. So in response to public outcry 90 percent of animals that were identified as destined to die the following winter were euthanased in the weeks leading up to the winter when animals were not breeding. While the deer bodies are still left in situ to provide forages with food, cattle and horses are removed because their bodies offended human viewers.

Nature was neither given the chance to be read into or implore, nor was it unmanaged as this so-called rewilding experiment. Oostvaardersplassen is too small to accommodate the populations of animals that expanded there and watching the natural collapse of populations of loved animals upset the very people who wanted to see wild nature.

Last time I came to this forum we were talking about eating problem animals (Predavec *et al.* 2017) and I have found someone who is advocating that we should be eating cane toads. This is Philip Hayward - also the Gulf Project, in Darwin, is now growing and understanding local produce and they've got recipes for toads on their website. And who would have believed it but Matt Preston from Master Chef and Clyde Bevan, from Friends in Perth, think that maybe eating cane toads could be an "edge" for their restaurants.

## Further reading

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- Klopfer, P.H. 1969. *Habitats and territories*. A study of the use of space by animals. Baric Books, New York - summarises its more traditional 'animal behaviour' context.