

From rarity to abundance: a consequence of value*

Michael Archer and Bob Beale

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Part 1. Bob Beale. If you don't know me, I'm a bit of a ratbag journalist who floats around scientific circles. I happen to work with Mike Archer at the University of New South Wales at the moment and we wrote a book together called "Going Native", which was published last year.

I know this is a zoology forum, but I'm going to cheat a bit and talk mainly about plants and not animals. That helps me to hide the fact that I'm not a zoologist and I'm not a botanist either; but this way I figure I stand less chance of being exposed for my complete and utter lack of scientific credentials. But I do know a bit about the communication of ideas and I want to talk about why that's important, at least laterally, in the context of this event.

We don't have much time, so I'll wade straight in. I'll start on an animal theme and, rather than try to define the core concept of this presentation, which is called From Rarity To Abundance: A Consequence of Value, I'm going to use as an exemplar the domestic chicken.

Thousands of years ago, it was the red jungle fowl scratching away in the forests of what is probably now Vietnam and Thailand. We have no way of knowing how abundant it was then but, by golly, its human-engineered descendants are pretty damned plentiful now. According to one estimate - and I suspect this is unverifiable - chickens are now probably the world's most populous birds, with a population of over eight billion. That, of course, is more than there are humans, so perhaps it's chickens who are the pests.

This particular jungle fowl must have had a lot going for it at the time so far as people were concerned. Again, we don't know the detail, but by back-casting you can reasonably surmise that: it was amenable to domestication; it was relatively meaty; and it tasted good. I mean, everything tastes like chicken. Its reproductive biology inclined it to become a prodigious and reliable layer of large, delicious and nutritious eggs. It travelled well. It was easy to keep close by. Finally, it was none too fussy about its diet. And if I might cite no less an authority than the comedian Mel Brooks: "Chickens eat crap."

Suffice to say that, because of all these attributes, word got around and people just about everywhere came to value the chicken. Because of that perception of value, chickens are just about everywhere today. It's not rocket science; it's self-evident. But I ask you this: if it is so bleeding obvious, why hasn't this lesson been more assiduously applied to the conservation of rare species and the management of pests? It's a lesson that's been learned over and over again throughout human history and is essentially very simple. What people truly value, they conserve. What they don't,

they squander. But we have to factor in one more crucial piece of data here, and that is that the greatest discovery of the last century was the discovery of human ignorance. You can't value what you don't know.

Consider this. Tomorrow, on the opposite side of this beautiful harbour, Sotheby's will be bringing down the hammer on almost 300 Wollemi pines, the first of this species to be offered for public sale since their discovery a decade ago. According to the glossy catalogue, this is the Collector's Edition with capital C, capital E, with indicative prices of thousands of dollars for each young tree. (The auction subsequently netted more than A\$1 million.)

In an opinion article yesterday in the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) I gave a bit of stick to the slick marketing exercise surrounding this event. Don't get me wrong; I'm as cheery as the next person that this long lost tree had survived out there in the Blue Mountains. I'm happy, too, that its future now seems assured because thousands more young Wollemi pines have been cloned and are being fattened for market.

In the SMH letters page today, you will see a rousing response from Tim Entwisle, the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, proudly defending the sale of this rare and special tree as the means of its salvation. Fair enough, too. But he rather missed the point of my piece. I went on to note that within cooee of the auction are the last surviving remnants of the original native trees that grew in Sydney Cove and Farm Cove at the time of the arrival of the First Fleet. Less than 20 individual trees remain and they are dying off like old war veterans, their ranks thinning year by year. I would guess that 99.9 per cent of Sydneysiders don't even know they're there. There is no signage to speak of. No heritage trail. No brochures. No maps to single them out and certainly no glamour auctions.

There are other examples as well of rare and important iconic Australian trees that are all but ignored. I love the Wollemi pine conservation strategy but one swallow doesn't make a summer.

On the pest side, one flourishing exotic environmental weed, St John's Wort, is now being brought under control in Western Australia in part by an active commercial harvesting program to supply it for the health food industry. Yet other weeds run rampant, because they have no commercial or practical use, or because leaving them unchecked doesn't pose a perceived problem to humans. They make a value judgment.

*Michael Archer and Bob Beale jointly presented this paper. It is in two parts. The first is by Beale, the second by Archer. Both parts are edited versions of the transcripts of their spoken presentations. (eds).

Of course, value is a matter of perception and it's well to remember that it wears many hats. The Wollemi pine is not valued as a source of timber, medicine, fruit or anything practical like that. Its special cache is in its story and the romance surrounding its discovery. That's what translates into commercial value. The marketing pitch for the potted pine offers people a tangible chance to share in a historic discovery, to feel good about helping to conserve it.

I contend that what's been done for that species could so easily be done for the old native trees of Sydney and many others besides. For pest species, I point out that someone found a value for our wild camels and they went from being shits of the desert to a nice little export earner. Yes, I did say "shits".

Whatever the species - whether abundant or rare, fair or fowl - it's worth looking much harder than we do now at whether it has its own potential value that is capable of being harnessed to assist in its management. It's a marketing fundamental that you must answer the question lingering in every customer's head: "What's in it for me?" In other words: "Why should I value this?"

Odd for scientists, perhaps, to think in terms of market research and not field research. But if you can find ways to make people value the beastie you're trying to manage or conserve the battle will be half won. If it can be done with such obvious success for a tree that has no practical use that we know of, or for a noisy squabbling bird that eats crap, well, I reckon if you put your mind to it, you can do that for just about anything.

References:

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