

From rarity to abundance: a consequence of value*

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Part 2. Michael Archer. I hope everybody has read “Vanishing Continent” by Bob Beale and Peter Fray. Tim Flannery once told me that when he was writing “The Future Eaters,” he had Bob’s book open in front of him all the time. It’s a measure of the influence Bob has had, and continues to have, on the writings of others.

I was thinking about what Tim Low said about pests, and Bob’s comment about camels. It stirred a memory of a wonderful Mammal Society meeting we had years ago in Alice Springs. The theme of that meeting was pest species and how to control them. The conference dinner in the dry bed of the Todd River was the highlight of the week. When we arrived, there on the barbecue was camel, donkey, goat and everything else that had run wild since its introduction to Australia. I must say, the brumby was quite yummy. And across the banquet table was a big banner that read “If you can’t beat ‘em, eat ‘em.”

I don’t want to belabour the case for sustainably harvesting kangaroos; it’s obviously a controversial issue. But it is clear that the majority of graziers still regard kangaroos to be pests. At the moment, given their presumption that kangaroos are eating the food they would rather see their sheep or cattle eating, they have no interest in doing anything to conserve these kangaroos. But if those same graziers were shown how they could derive a supplementary income from sustainably harvesting kangaroos, their attitudes would probably transform overnight.

To maintain that income, they would have to maintain rather than clear the bush that produced the kangaroos that they had suddenly begun to value. In the course of doing this, they would be conserving many other sometimes endangered species like bettongs, boobooks and beetles that weren’t even on their radar screen of concern one way or another. It all hinges on value, however this is achieved. And there are many ways of achieving value.

Consider the Australian bustard *Ardeotis australis*. In the 19th century, large flocks were regularly seen across a wide area of the continent. It was a very abundant bird. The early colonists soon learned from Aborigines, who sustainably harvested them, that they were in fact quite delicious. Cook was one of the first Europeans to discover this fact. When they were at the mouth of the Mary River, near Hervey Bay, on 23 May, 1770, Joseph Banks records in his diary that they managed to shoot a bustard of 17 1/2 pounds (about 8 kilograms). Banks commented that, “It was as large as a good turkey, and far the best we had eaten since we left England.” Clearly, he found it highly palatable.

It was soon so valued by early explorers that the name “bustard” became a landmark in Queensland with place names like Bustard Head and Bustard Bay. But while the early colonists appreciated bustards, that soon changed. As the land was cleared and replaced by monocultures of introduced grazing species and predatory foxes and

cats spread their claws and teeth across the landscape, bustard numbers fell. They fell even further when, as collateral damage, they were poisoned when rabbit baits were spread through their habitat. As the grazing stock numbers increased, they reduced the ground cover that the bustards needed. As a result, they became listed as threatened by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service. Despite these trials and tribulations, there is still no recovery plan for the species.

While many strategies for conserving the bustard should be put in place, I would suggest that we should not ignore potential gains that could result from a trial of sustainably harvesting surplus individuals in an area managed to maximise their viability. Given that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has recommended that sustainably harvesting wild populations can have very significant conservation outcomes, such as it has in Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe and South Africa, it would seem a reasonable strategy to trial alongside all others that could maximise the likelihood that this species will survive into the future. Sustainable harvesting was the strategy that worked for many thousands of years when practiced by indigenous hunters long before western strategies brought this species to its knees.

Given the colonists’ awareness of the palatability of the bustard, why did Australians begin to lose interest in bustards and refocus instead on importing American turkeys - yet another introduced species that could potentially harm Australia. Why didn’t they build an industry around sustainably harvesting, and in the process conserving, a valued Australian bird? My guess is that native foods were increasingly seen as ‘poor man’s tucker’ and as such were gradually removed from Australia’s cookbooks.

Whatever the reason, the focus is now on the potential conservation value of sustainably harvesting native resources. I discussed the possibility of a controlled trial of harvesting the bustard with Brian Gilligan, the former Director General of New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service. He agreed that if it demonstrated that the bustard’s habitat would be protected rather than cleared, and if bustard numbers rose, the outcome of the trial could demonstrate the value of conservation through sustainable use. It could have the same beneficial outcome for the bustard that sustainable use had on the jungle fowl as outlined by Bob Beale. But, it’s one thing to say that you could sustainably harvest valued bustards; it’s another thing to convince Australians to buy the product, even if they knew that by doing so they were improving the survival prospects for the species. Clearly, we would have to work on both the marketing as well as production ends of the process. What could we say to Australians via advertisements to persuade them to try sustainably-harvested bustards? How about the direct approach: “Forget the turkey; eat the bustard!”

*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).