

Foreword

Close encounters of a different kind

I am constantly intrigued by the attitudes of people to wild animals. Partly this comes about because I think most people are ignorant of the wildlife they share their lives with and see or hear only the most conspicuous animals, mostly large, noisy birds, about which they may have strong feelings, but cannot name. This level of ignorance is not restricted to the common citizen, but is rife among those of us who profess concern for wildlife, as well as those who devote their lives to the study, management and conservation of native fauna. Otherwise why would we, as a society, be so indifferent to the fate of myriad species of insects and small brown birds, while opposing the sustainable harvest of kangaroos and ducks and expending huge resources and emotional energy on stopping the Japanese from harvesting a few Minke Whales when that species is at no risk of extinction and it might even be beneficial to other species of whales, which Minke's compete with for food and which are threatened.

The attitudes I refer to are well reflected by the subjects of the papers presented at this Forum of the Royal Zoological Society of NSW: Koalas, possums, kangaroos, bandicoots, flying foxes, dolphins, sea lions, whales, eagles, magpies, dingoes, cats, roadkills, tourism, and zoos, all with a strong urban emphasis. Even the roadkill issue was all about vertebrates, mostly mammals, as is almost all wildlife tourism, including zoos, aquariums and marine wildlife parks. A list of wildlife from almost any national park or nature reserve across the continent is usually a list of the common and most conspicuous birds and mammals a visitor might see when walking or driving at mid-day, although the more dangerous or fearsome looking reptiles might earn a mention. It is rare indeed to see any mention of the smaller and less conspicuous vertebrates, much less anything about invertebrates, despite invertebrates comprising 99 % of Australia's biodiversity (see Majer *et al.* 1994; Ponder and Lunney 1999).

You could spend a day at a Forum such as this and go away thinking the only encounters between people and wildlife were when out driving, going to the zoo or on a whale watching tour, dealing with a Brushtail Possum that had taken a liking to your roof space, preventing your cat from eating all the birds in your backyard, or fending off the local terrorist masquerading as a magpie. Encounters with wildlife are, or should be, much more than this, but the papers presented are probably a fair reflection of community attitudes towards and interactions with wild animals and are the ones that attract the attention of the media. They are contentious issues, but there are far more important and much more contentious issues when it comes to dealing with the interactions between people and wildlife than whale watching and road kills. I am sure the Forum organizers had their reasons, or perhaps no papers were offered, but hunting, fishing, harvesting

kangaroos, and control of feral animals, especially the use of 1080 poison, are very contentious issues involving the interactions of wild animals and people. Wild animal control is not limited to alien or exotic species, but involves many native animals, including macropods, parrots, corvids, gulls, cormorants and Koala.

The significant point about each of the issues I have just listed is that they are important management and conservation tools the use of which is restricted or prevented by vocal, sometimes violent, community opposition. The harvesting of wildlife, whether as a commercial or recreational activity, is a useful tool in the regulation of animal populations. For example, where the removal of natural predators, such as Dingoes and Aboriginal people, has allowed populations to increase to pest proportions control through harvesting is a preferred management option. Here I define 'pest' as a species at risk of damaging its own habitat or the habitat of other species and make no distinction between exotic and native species. Not only does the harvesting of animals provide the wildlife biologist with a useful management tool, it can be an important source of revenue for conservation through licenses and taxes. In North America, money raised from duck hunters commencing in the 1930s enabled the creation and management of a vast network of wildlife refuges, which benefited many more species than ducks alone. I have always lamented the absence of a strong hunting and fishing lobby in Australia and the conservation funds for land acquisition and habitat management that might otherwise have been raised.

The opposition to the commercial and recreation take of wild native animals and the control of feral species is primarily an emotional response to the death and presumed suffering of individual animals. However, conservation and wildlife management are only rarely concerned with the survival of individuals, and then only with highly endangered species whose long-term survival is problematic anyway. Instead, conservation and management is concerned with the survival of the species and the communities or habitats in which they live. As humans disturb the natural landscape and enable some species to increase at the expense of others, control (management) is necessary, as with Koalas on Kangaroo Island and kangaroos across most of the Australian continent. Where control is limited or prevented by an uninformed and emotional public, the consequences are habitat degradation and increased suffering and death of individuals from a wide range of species which culminate in the loss of biodiversity and the creation of dysfunctional ecosystems. I missed debate on these issues at the Forum where the issues were primarily about the encounters of a few people and individual animals.

We are an urban society and not educated in the ways of the bush or native animals. Just yesterday I had to

rescue a young man, who looked like he'd make a flash Rugby League center, from a Blue-tongue Lizard he'd uncovered when moving some wood on my neighbour's property. Even with me holding it firmly, he refused to touch it and kept a respectful distance. Not only has our society lost touch with nature, but fear and awe have replaced familiarity and understanding. Emotion has replaced knowledge and reason.

I doubt earlier generations were ever educated about wild animals or nature in the formal sense of the meaning of education. And, it wasn't that there were more wild animals about or that people were surrounded by natural environments, because most were not. I suspect the real difference, and the problem that needs to be overcome, is that people grew up living and playing in a more active, outdoor world. Today, we cocoon ourselves and our children in a world of provided entertainment and chaperoned, highly organized and regulated activities. Nature reigned before television and Saturday football practice, but has now been relegated to the entertainment industry alongside Big Brother and Countdown.

Do not misunderstand me. Earlier generations may have had more contact with nature and been more familiar with wild animals, and therefore less fearful, but most attention was still on the large and conspicuous and very few people could have called themselves 'naturalists' or 'bush-wise' in any meaning of those words. Early generations were pretty ignorant about wildlife and the importance of global ecosystems to achieving a sustainable human enterprise. Just as in the 21st Century, the needs and wants of people have always been considered more important than the needs of other species. It is just that as more of us have become urban dwellers and nature has retreated in the face of intensive agriculture and expanding human populations, there is even less contact with nature and more abiding ignorance. Not only are we ignorant of the wild animals that still occur around us, we have lost all knowledge of the animals that shared the lives of our grand parents and great grand parents only a few decades ago.

When it comes to wild animals in the 21st Century, the Key Words are large, cute, fierce, messy, noisy, nuisance, pretty, with a few deep breaths of excitement thrown in to cover the mighty Humpback Whale breaching a few hundred metres from the carefully regulated whale-watching boat. Oh yes, I momentarily forgot, wildlife is also about making money. For all this we can thank Walt Disney and David Attenborough, not to mention the Harry Butlers and Steve Irwins of television land. Close encounters have been reduced to the Silver Screen and the odd possum in the roof or the swoop of a magpie defending its nest. This is not how I see wildlife nor the way I would like others to see wild animals. Wildlife should be more than a spectacle or a problem or a money making opportunity. Close encounters should not just be about problems or managing the interactions between a person and an animal, which is what this Forum emphasized.

Wild animals share my daily life. This is not because I am an ecologist who studies wildlife, but because I enjoy them and make them part of my life. For me, every day

is a close encounter with native animals, whether it is the bats I watch emerge each evening or the magpie carolling at my kitchen door for a handout, wild animals are always close. I admit that not all my encounters with wild animals are enjoyable. I am forced to net my citrus, tomatoes, chilies, bananas and guavas to stop the Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and King Parrots eating more than their share. Black Rats continually invade my attic and white ants do their best to consume my wood pile. However, I have no desire to sanitize my life and live in a wildlife free zone. To the contrary, I continually seek ways to encourage the wild animals around me. Despite a childhood in the wilds of New York City, I enjoy close encounters. Now that is contentious!

I know my involvement with wild animals is contentious, because if I take out my binoculars and write down what I see or hear a bird doing, I need a licence and an approval from an Ethics Committee with a cast of thousands. I find it strange that we have developed a conservation ethic which impedes the progress of research intended to benefit native fauna and prevents the efficient control of ferals, but ignores the mass loss of biodiversity and deaths of tens of millions of animals from land clearing for agriculture, water diversions and urban expansion; all the while chest-beating politicians and Greenpeace berate the Japanese for killing a few whales.

In his paper, Arthur White asked a poignant question 'With limited exposure to the natural world will future generations still be prepared to defend global ecosystems?' Ignoring the fact that Arthur's generation or that of his grand parents didn't do a particularly good job at defending global ecosystems despite more contact with nature, we need to face the reality that the further people are distanced from wild animals and the natural world, the harder it is to convince them and governments to limit the exploitation of resources or spend tax dollars on nature conservation so that other species may survive. Sharing and caring are not inborn human attributes; they develop only through familiarity and understanding. If people do not grow up with wild animals, they will fear them as my potential Rugby League center feared the Blue-tongue. This is no different from the fear we have of people who are different from us. Under these circumstances, close encounters become problems to be managed or tourist opportunities to be exploited for commercial gain; watching whales and sea lions is the same as a day at the museum or a guided tour of a foreign city.

It may not be what the organizers of the Forum intended or how the speakers saw their individual contributions, but I came away from the day saddened to see how far we have moved from caring about wildlife and just how anthropocentric our conservation managers have become. Everything is about people and, while there were words about managing people to protect wild animals, it was really all about managing animals for the benefit of people and commercial opportunity. As the world's food supply tightens and millions more go hungry each day, there is little said about the need to reduce the number of people. Instead, the mantra is all

about the need to increase food production; in other words, to divert still more of the world's resources away from other species to people. This is just a different version of the 'roadkill/cat/possum-in-the-roof/magpie' 'problem'. If killing native wildlife on roads is a problem and a 'contentious issue', then why isn't the answer in better driver training and awareness, reduced speed in sensitive areas and at night, and enforcement, as well as finding ways for animals to cross roads safely. If cats kill wildlife, why are they allowed to roam free at any time of the day? Indeed, why allow cats or dogs at all in areas with native wildlife? The answer, of course, is simple;

people and their desires are more important than wild animals and their needs. This is the contentious issue in the encounters of wild animals and people. How do you make people care and therefore willing to share with others, and other species? It would make a good, but very contentious Forum.

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References

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