The Unceasing Conflict between Native and Exotic Birds in New Zealand

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In February 2018, a bird died on Mana Island, an isle off of the North Island of New Zealand. Such an everyday story would not normally make headlines, but this particular bird had captured the hearts of the islanders. Known affectionately as Nigel, an Australasian gannet, this bird landed on Mana Island in 2013, during which a project was underway in order to attract a gannet colony to this relatively safe offshore island. And gannets did come – or rather, one gannet came. Nigel alone was attracted to the stone gannet replicas meant to invite a whole colony, and he quickly became attached to one of the female replicas. Despite efforts to introduce other gannets over the years, only recently did more come to the island. Tragically, Nigel was unable to connect with them and died a few weeks after their arrival (Roy 2018).

These are the stories that tug at the heartstrings of people worldwide – for who has not felt alone like Nigel at some point? New Zealand is thought to be a place for the wayward and lost to create fresh lives. However, this same refuge has been denied many animals, specifically birds. New Zealand has had a long history of ignoring the exotic in favor of native species, regardless of conservation status and usefulness of the biota to the ecosystems. Why is it that only native birds, such as the gannets, receive special treatment from New Zealand (Ismar 2013)? Paul Star voices the hypocrisy of this notion when he says, “The division of New Zealand into areas of preservation where any exotic presence was regretted and if possible eliminated, and areas of production where dominance by favoured introduced species was if possible maintained, [does] not lie easily with the reality of ecological interconnectedness” (Star 2010: 24). To eliminate the exotic and preserve the native with no concern to their impact on the environment ultimately only harms the country, and the birds deserve better.

As of 2015, 41 species of exotic birds have been naturalized into New Zealand’s ecosystems (Troup 2008). However, this is drastically lower than the full number of species that have attempted to settle in New Zealand. Many others have unfortunately met resistance from humans. Take, for example, the rook. This bird was introduced by settlers in the 1800s, yet it was quickly deemed a pest, leading to attempts at eradicating the populations through poison. By the 1970s, at least 50,000 rooks had been killed, and although not fully extinct, the few rooks that have survived are mostly male and nomadic, meaning this species will likely disappear from New Zealand soon (Porter 2013). From the way they were treated, one would expect these birds to have severely harmed the country. However, while they did impair crops, they were also known for some positive side effects, such as eliminating harmful insects (Porter 2013). Yet because of their status as a pest, they were slated to be eradicated, and now, they are nearly gone from the mainland. Compared to Nigel’s story and the outcry over his death, the rooks, which have been nearly destroyed without a worry, seem fully mistreated.

This case study is not an isolated incident – similar treatment has been applied to many birds that have dispersed to New Zealand. However, it is most ironic when these birds have been introduced by humans themselves. Since their arrival, people have been bringing birds over for a myriad of reasons, such as for biological control, for sentiment, for sport, and for other reasons (Wodzicki 1984: 79). Even birds not brought over by humans were aided by the human population in their settlement in this country, as when Europeans came over, they opened up habitats that were previously unavailable to birds (Wodzicki 1984: 100). Yet when these birds cannot be controlled, humans see no other solution than to eradicate the species completely. They feel justified in doing so because they believe these exotic birds are driving away or competing with the native birds that New Zealanders identify with so completely. However, according to a study on exotic birds, “Interactions between native and exotic species are limited. Only a few introduced species occur in the native forest and there is no indication that these species ‘drive out’ native species” (Wodzicki 1984: 100). If exotic birds are not taking over the habitats or niches of native birds, is it not enough to control them rather than eradicate them?

The relationship between New Zealand’s native and exotic species has always been rocky. However, it should not be difficult to admit that birds, no matter their immigration status, are important to the New Zealand identity. Introduced birds may not need the same conservation efforts that are put towards native species, yet they do not need to be fully eliminated by those who introduced them. As those responsible, we cannot ethically blame the birds. Because humans must be accountable, we need to work to control and protect all species, not just the ones convenient to the New Zealand narrative. Birds will continue to come to New Zealand, and it is our job to protect and conserve the species that come seeking refuge.

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