New Zealand’s Poaching Problem – Past and Present

Poaching is a dangerous activity, yet not only in the ways one might think. This act is not just dangerous for the animals that are hunted; rather, poaching has side effects on humans and the environment as well. If one species goes extinct or is endangered because of poaching, this upsets the balance, leaving other species over or underrepresented in the ecosystem. Ecosystems are sensitive, and the decline of one species can intensely affect others. Of course, this problem is at its worst when it does lead to extinctions. While this may seem like a problem of the future, the act of poaching has already led to extinctions in some areas, such as the white rhino (“Why is Poaching…” 2013). Poaching also influences the economy in certain areas, and if people decide to boycott a place that is affected by poachers, this means other economic sectors will suffer (Estrada 2015). Yet how is this relevant in New Zealand? The Department of Conservation released a statement commenting on this problem, ensuring the people that this does occur and saying that, “Poaching in marine reserves and breaching whitebait regulations remain the most common form of offending … ‘But we also see regular wilful killing of protected species, illegal land encroachment, timber theft and the organised smuggling of wildlife and endangered species’” (Wiig 2017). New Zealand cannot ignore this pressing issue. Thus, we will look at two case studies that exemplify the ways poaching has influenced the biota within this country, a place that cares deeply about its native animals, and we will examine the approaches undertaken to stop this problem in its tracks.

Imagine coming across a pair of birds, clearly mates, with impressive, curved beaks and iridescent feathers. Is your first instinct to shoot these birds? It certainly was for Walter Buller, a hunter active during the 1800s. He was known to hunt hundreds of these huia, a now extinct species native to New Zealand, and send them back to Britain (Szabo 1993). The birds were prized in New Zealand and elsewhere for their aforementioned feathers and odd beaks (Szabo 2013). What makes this action especially upsetting is that these birds are sacred to Māori people and were starting to decline in this time period. In fact, it only took five or six years of intense hunting for people to notice the absence of huia on the North Island, which is their main territory (Szabo 1993). Some people wanted to protect these birds, and measures were put into place, but many were not enforced or were exploited. Bird sanctuaries were set up for huia, yet these birds never arrived at the sanctuaries. In fact, the last known pair was meant for a sanctuary in New Zealand but instead was sent to England by Walter Buller. In 1901, huia were thought to be irretrievably gone and were not mentioned on protected species lists any longer. And finally in 1903, they were protected under law but their feathers were not, proving to be a loophole for hunters and poachers (Szabo 1993). Because people realized there were so few huia left, they decided to hunt them for the remaining valuable beaks and feathers. It is said that, “Having identified the bird as an avian wonder of the world, [naturalists] set about harvesting them in large numbers for overseas museums and collectors. Where the men of science led, unscrupulous traders followed” (Szabo 1993). It was possible to save this bird, but instead we led it to its downfall and allowed poachers and collectors the right to deprive the world of the huia forever.

However, the huia case took place in the early 1900s. New Zealand has definitely upped its environmental security and has passed stricter laws against poaching. Yet that does not always stop determined poachers and smugglers. This time, the focus has shifted from land animals to marine life. It is simply harder to patrol the entire ocean, and there is the idea that poaching from New Zealand’s waters is easier than poaching the protected animals on its shores. This time, the target is pāua, also known as abalone shells. These sea snails are native to New Zealand and are hunted for both their flesh and their shiny decorative shells (Coote 2018). They can be found along the coastlines, with Wellington as a main source of collection – so much so that it has even been called the “pāua poaching capital of the world” (“Air Force…” 2016). However, legal size limits are set on pāua so that they are able to reach maturity and allow time for breeding. Also, to ensure that fishers do not take over the maximum sustainable yield, each fisherman can take up to ten pāua of each species per day (“Pāua” 2017). However, recent busts by fishery officers in New Zealand have found bags full of up to one hundred pāua, well over the legal catch limits. Also, marine reserves are not free from poachers, either. One specific case occurred in 2014 in which a Picton reserve found evidence that pāua were being stripped from the sides of the reserve. It is believed that “illegal taking of paua appears to be a significant factor in paua abundance increasing only slowly inside the marine reserve since it was created in 1993” (Grant 2014). Despite penalties, such as up to three months in jail and fines of up to $10,000 for fishing in reserves, people are still breaking the rules. Some do not respect the protected status put on the pāua, even those in clearly marked marine reserve areas that are heavily monitored. Sea life are an indicator of overall health in a nation so marine-centered, like New Zealand, and it has been found that there is “a correspondence between our regional estimates of illegal and unreported fishing and the number of depleted stocks in those regions” with the conclusion that in the early 2000s, about 15% of New Zealand stocks were overexploited because of illegal fishing (Agnew 2009). As such, pāua poaching proves to be an even bigger issue to New Zealand than citizens could imagine.

In a country so focused on conservation and preservation of species, it only makes sense that citizens would speak up on these issues. There has been a lot of unrest from the populace in regards to poaching, especially from farmers, fishers, and others who witness these issues firsthand. Many feel as though the government is not doing enough to warn off offenders. In regards to the first case of pāua poaching, simply by checking divers’ bags do fishery officers believe they have “delivered an unmistakable warning to serious offenders” (“Air Force…” 2016). Other websites say that they are increasing security and ask those out on the water to report on any suspicious activity that they see. Yet it seems like the only tangible measure taken so far to stop this issue is the addition of a phone number on their website through which citizens can report poaching crimes. This method ignores the larger picture of poaching. It is known that lizards and bats are directly threatened by poaching, which is leading to their decline. Rare animals in particular, like lizards, are threatened, and pregnant female lizards are often targets for poachers (Hancock 2017). One would think that New Zealand would have groups specifically dedicated to catching these poachers because they are a known threat. Such a group did exist, called the Wildlife Enforcement Group, but it was untimely disbanded in 2012. The group was successful at what it did, and many are confused as to why the group has not been replaced in any way (Hancock 2017). Of course, poachers and smugglers are taking advantage of this lack of law enforcement. The last person caught smuggling lizards out of New Zealand was persecuted in 2012, meaning since the disbandment of the group, there have likely been many more animals unknowingly poached from the country (Hancock 2017). Poachers are also becoming bolder because of the lack of punishments, despite threats otherwise: farmers see poachers on their land regularly, yet they are often only caught by chance, often they are only fined a small fine even after repeat offenses, which is not a good deterrent (Watson 2015). The people are not happy with the current situation, and nothing is truly being done right now to solve the problem. Poaching cannot be ignored within New Zealand, so more steps need to be taken. The reestablishment of a group similar to the Wildlife Enforcement Group is past due. Rare and endangered animals within New Zealand deserve protection from poachers just as they deserve the conservation efforts already put forward to save their species.

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