

# CUDDLY KOALAS, BEAUTIFUL BRUMBIES, EXOTIC OLIVES: Fighting for Media Selection in the Attention Economy

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## **Abstract**

*Darwinian selection may not be dead, but there is a new kid on the block, one that, at least for scientists and conservationists, must seem perverse, fickle and frustrating. Certainly it works on timescales that seem mercurial compared to the geologic ‘punctuated equilibria’ of natural selection. This new kid is ‘media selection’. When I refer to media selection I really mean the social factors that come into play when complex, global, highly mediated, hybridised, fashion-savvy consumer societies enter the debates—as they often must—surrounding conservation and land management decisions. These social factors obviously impact on the outcomes that might otherwise ensue if biodiversity imperatives were somehow left only to ‘the experts’.*

*This paper summarises and contrasts the unfolding of three discourses of current conservation concern and media interest in South Australia:*

- 1) The management of ‘feral koalas’ in Flinders Chase on Kangaroo Island;*
- 2) The culling of wild horses in Coffin Bay National Park; and*
- 3) The spread of the European olive as both environmental weed and marker of cultural sophistication.*

*The contradictory media coverage of these issues, and the divergent public and government responses to them, suggest that management decisions taken on a ‘biodiversity science only’ basis—especially when they involve charismatic megafauna and flora—are going to be increasingly difficult to pull off in the future. There seems to be an inherent contradiction between the drivers of biogeographic diversity (time, isolation, distance, unique characteristics of site) and the realities of a ‘weedy’ mobile, affluent and increasingly hybridised global society where decisions are mediated by spectacular images and consumer desire.*

## **‘Koala Wars’: Australian charismatic fauna as ‘winners’**

Kangaroo Island, not far from Adelaide, was the focus of several early twentieth-century efforts to reserve large areas for conservation. As a result it has retained a considerable percentage of its native vegetation. Between 1923–25 a handful of koalas were translocated from the bushfire-devastated French Island, near Melbourne, to what later became the Flinders Chase National Park on Kangaroo Island’s western tip (Martin 1997, p. 80). Although there is no historical evidence of koala populations on Kangaroo Island, the forests at its western end contain manna gum, a favourite koala food. Thus a small and genetically-limited group of animals were released into a ‘koala naïve’ environment with abundant food and essentially no predators.

At this time the koala was already a much-loved national symbol of ‘Australian-ness’, thanks in no small part to the popularity of the fictional worlds of May Gibbs’ *Gumnut Babies* and

Normal Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding*, both first published in 1918. The increasing pervasiveness of media and the rise of global tourism after World War II helped catapult the koala into the psyche of the international community as a charismatic icon, equal in potency to the kangaroo. Flinders Chase effectively became an animal 'theme park' almost as much as a National Park, and a vital component of South Australia's tourism industry.

For decades the artificiality of this situation was ignored, and the koalas bred freely. However, by the 1990s it was clear from the large numbers of koalas and the stands of dead manna gums that the animals were destroying their food supply, doing wider ecological damage to the island in the process (Martin 1997, p. 80). To land managers interested in the biological integrity of the National Park, the situation was far from 'natural'. It would require (further) human intervention.

In response to these concerns, in 1996 the Koala Management Task-Force of the then Liberal Conservation Minister David Wotton recommended that koalas at the worst affected sites on the island be 'humanely culled' (shot). This rapidly became a hot multinational media story, and it has been so ever since.

I've separated some of the main strands of this unfolding story as they have weaved through public discourse:

- 1) The slow realisation (Flannery 1994, p. 212) that koala numbers had been quite low at European settlement, presumably because indigenous people exerted continual hunting pressure on them. It was only after the cessation of Aboriginal hunting in the nineteenth century that koala numbers rose to the point that hunting for pelts by settlers became viable.
- 2) The fact that large numbers of koalas were taken in the fur trade until the early twentieth century. This is still the focus for community desires to 'right the historical wrong'.
- 3) The fragmentation of koala habitat due to clearing and urban expansion in the twentieth century. In some areas koalas are now extinct, while in other areas, especially on islands, they exist in greater numbers than the environment can sustain. Kangaroo Island and French Island in Victoria have precisely the kind of populations that tend to be highly visible and politically sensitive.
- 4) All this resulted in well-meaning relocations from a few Victorian koala populations in the 1920s that took little account of sub-specific differences between koala populations, the lack of existing predators at relocation sites, and the small size of the translocated gene pool.
- 5) The continuing rise of the koala as the symbol *par excellence* not just of Australian-ness, but of 'anthropomorphic cuteness' due to its baby-like facial proportions and 'dopey' habits—characteristics used to good effect in images, films, books, cartoons and cuddly toys. The commodification of this symbolic value by the media, the animal welfare lobby and the tourist industry has resulted in the koala becoming a 'media star' and 'animal ambassador'—especially in Japan (Lee 1997).
- 6) The 'scientific' recommendation that the koalas be culled, based on an understanding that the Kangaroo Island ecosystem was fundamentally 'out of balance'. The koalas, although native to Australia, were effectively introduced weeds there. Free from predation and diseases that afflict mainland populations, they were breeding in an unsustainable manner.

The negative press that the task-force recommendation generated resulted in the South Australian Government ignoring those recommendations in 1997 and implementing a more 'humane' (i.e. less damaging from a public relations point of view), but costlier and less effective campaign of koala sterilisation and relocation (in effect a relocation of already relocated koalas!) to several sites on the South Australian mainland.

So, we already have a complex web of meaning-making surrounding koalas. Into this come the seemingly objective truth-claims of science, arguing for pre-eminent status. However the truth-claims of the task-force, resting as they presumably did on 'the best available science', are still limited and made contingent by:

- 1) The reality that scientific discourse is normally couched in specialist language and skill-sets and is relayed within privileged communities, so the general public is not familiar with its rhetoric. Spokespeople for science are often poor communicators of specialist knowledge to a general audience, and their treatment by journalists is often less than enthusiastic. Additionally, in highlighting debate about koalas, even the scientific community privileges this one organism over a range of other, biologically equally worthy organisms, thus acknowledging its own participation in other, more 'subjective' human meaning-making systems.
- 2) The economic argument. Koalas are keystone icons of Australia and the cult of cuteness. They generate a tremendous amount of tourist revenue for the country, revenue that may be jeopardised by negative publicity irrespective of the 'truths' contained therein. In 1997 Hundloe, Hamilton and Wilks estimated that the species was worth approximately \$1.1 billion and 9,000 jobs to the Australian economy (p. 6). Powerful media images, and the emotive associations they foster, have elevated the koala to the status of a global celebrity that now brings an estimated 140,000 tourists to Kangaroo Island annually.

Stratford et al's 1999 multidisciplinary review concluded that when it came to koala management, scientific certainty was impossible. In their judgement, the push for more scientific knowledge of the koala should not be undertaken without also acknowledging the validity of extra-scientific perspectives. However, this doesn't go far enough. An insightful summary comes from Professor Hugh Possingham (1998), the scientist who chaired the Minister's task-force:

There's the cuddly koala. I mean, at the same time that I was saying 'Kill two thousand koalas' ... that same week, believe it or not, Bill Clinton's daughter ... cuddles a koala. And Michael Jackson cuddled a koala ... arguably the two most powerful people on the entire planet said they loved koalas, and here I was ... trying to shoot two thousand of them (<http://www.ssaa.org.au/conpossing.html>).

The entry into the fray of media-friendly, emotive lobby groups of koala 'fans' like the Australian Koala Foundation seems to mirror the formation of fan-based socialities around human celebrities. These groups supply far more compelling texts to popular koala discourse than any number of 'objective and rational' task-force reports. Deborah Tabart, the executive director of the AKF, has been an outspoken koala advocate in the global media— something that has dismayed Australian scientists, who find their messages hard to relay to the public in the face of rhetoric like this:

Their gentle presence melts the hardest human hearts and their intrinsic value is best measured by the looks of love on people's faces when they come into close contact with them (Australian Koala Foundation, 2004).

In April 2004 Tabart appeared on the Nine Network's *A Current Affair* along with the University of Adelaide environmental scientist David Paton—actually one of the more media-savvy scientists. Paton made a sober, measured plea for the institution of a cull on Kangaroo Island. In contrast, an outraged Tabart called his plan 'murder' (Fordham, 2004). From a 'media values' point of view, Tabart simply wiped the floor with Paton.

As a result of local and international pressure the South Australian government has felt compelled to continue its sterilisation and relocation program. Since 1997 about 3,400 koalas has sterilised, and more than 1,000 have been shipped to the mainland. In spite of this expensive effort, by 2004 there were estimated to be 30,000 koalas on Kangaroo Island (McGarry 2004, p. 6). The cost of translocating just one koala in Victoria has been recently estimated at between three and four hundred dollars (Harbutt 2004, p. 21). The dubious economics of translocation versus culling should be self-evident, but mere economics is no match for the emotional power the koala exerts on the public and governments alike.

In effect, the scientific battle for 'objective koala management' has been lost, while the war being played out on the representational arenas of popular culture still rages. More evidence of the international sensitivity of these issues surfaced in May 2004 with the revelation that some Kangaroo Island farmers were illegally shooting koalas. Faced with the impending visit of a Japanese *TV-Asahi* film crew attracted to the island by the ongoing controversy, and fully aware of the importance of the Japanese tourist market, the State Government refused to investigate these allegations (Pippos & Heggen 2004, p. 33).

Thus late in 2004 governments remain effectively paralysed by conflicting imperatives. The trees are still being damaged; the koalas potentially eating themselves to a starvation more 'cruel' than any shooting scenario. Whatever the grounds for these decisions, they have little to do with scientific advice and a lot to do with promotionality. In summary, the koala is not native (on Kangaroo Island at least) but a 'weed' that is causing long-term ecological damage. However, the koala's status means that any action involving their deliberate destruction is unlikely to occur. While the koala may be losing the battle for 'natural selection', it is a huge winner in the 'cultural selection' stakes.

### ***Coffin Bay brumbies and 'The Man from Snowy River' effect***

In 1837, the pioneering Hawson family imported Timor ponies to their property near Coffin Bay, on the southern tip of the Eyre Peninsula west of Adelaide. When in the early twentieth century mechanisation superannated the horse as a draft animal, sixty or seventy ponies were released into the remote Coffin Bay Peninsula and began to breed (Duckworth 2001, McGarry 2002). When the peninsula was formally declared a National Park in 1982, the horses were still there—except they were now feral animals on land being managed for the preservation of native species. As far as the National Parks Service was concerned, the horses had to go. This was the start of a long battle for the representational high ground, one that illustrates that not all feral animals are created equal.

Horses hold a very special place in the history of animal domestication. Although some horses have been bred for food, their principal utility for humans has been as beasts of burden. Once domesticated, horses made human societies mobile in a way they had never been before.

As Jared Diamond (1997, p. 76–77) reminds us, horses completely revolutionised the practice of colonisation and warfare, overturning entire empires in the process. All the ‘settler societies’ of the last five hundred years, colonial Australia included, simply would not have functioned without them.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the removal of the horse from day-to-day urban life, the mythology of the horse and its bushman rider has assumed a prominent position in our national mythology. The late nineteenth century bush myths continue to be reproduced on the Australian screen (*The Man from Snowy River*, 1982, based on the poem by A. B. ‘Banjo’ Patterson), in its literature (Elyne Mitchell’s *The Silver Brumby*, 1958), and in advertising. Horses are no longer crucial to our survival, but have become important to our growing tourism, sporting and recreation industries. Horses are imposing and powerful, and embody beauty, nobility and sexual potency. One can bet on them at the races, take them on an ecotourism trek, or even own one as an expensive pet. A Canberra-based rugby football team is named The Brumbies. Horses are domestic animals with the mystique of wild charismatic megafauna. In short, almost everyone loves horses. In the cultural selection stakes, horses are great ‘winners’.

Australia now has more feral horses than any other country on earth, variously estimated at between 300,000 and 600,000 (Duckworth 2001, p. 132). From a conservation biology perspective, these brumbies are simply more large herbivores gone wild. However, management practices of other feral herbivores, such as goats and rabbits, that frequently go unmentioned upon tend to attract tremendous public concern when horses are involved. This concern is frequently exploited by the media, especially if it can leverage pre-existing sentiment by showing slow-motion footage of majestic stallions leading herds of mares and foals through spectacular mountain country; even more so if the brumbies’ ‘special relationship’ with the bushman can also be exploited. The strength of public sentiment is reflected in the existence of several active pro-brumby lobby groups, such as Brumbywatch Australia and The Brumby Protection Group. The historical resonance of the brumby is also used by groups like the Mountain Cattlemen’s Association of Victoria to leverage support for cattle grazing in the Australian Alps in face of evidence suggesting that cattle and brumbies both cause considerable environmental damage to that area (O’Brien and Wren, 2002).

It is entirely possible to be a staunch supporter of national parks and native wildlife and yet desperately want the romance of thousands of brumbies running free in the bush to persist. The media, sensitive to public fondness for wild horses, often reflects this contradiction too. The massive media-led public outcry that follows incidents such as the infamous October 2000 aerial feral horse cull ‘gone wrong’ in the Guy Fawkes National Park in New South Wales demonstrates the sensitive nerve brumby stories touch with the Australian public (Carruthers 2000, pp. 18–22).

This complexity has been a characteristic of the unfolding saga of the Coffin Bay ponies. Such was the local sentiment that the Coffin Bay Pony Preservation Society was formed as early as 1981, even before the declaration of the National Park. The subsequent two decades saw an unusual compromise between this group and the National Parks Service in which ‘20 mares and their foals were allowed to be kept in the park, plus one stallion which was changed on a regular basis to avoid inbreeding’ (McGarry 2002, p. 3). The rest of the herd was regularly removed for breaking-in and sale. This arrangement came to an end in 1999 with the release of a draft management plan for the National Park which called for the

removal of the horses. That triggered media interest from several parts of Australia, interest that quickly homed in on the ‘bush myth’:

[T]he Coffin Bay ponies, with a pedigree dating back to a herd of Timor ponies, the kind immortalised in the Man from Snowy River, are to be evicted next month ... But locals are fighting the state government decision, saying the ponies have heritage value ... ‘To us they mean a bloody lot’, said Joe Cooper, a stockman in the area long before it was declared a national park ... ‘They’re a unique breed of horses’ (McGarry 2003, p. 5).

Such charged reportage drew equally emotional responses from the public. These responses highlight not just city/country frictions, but a tendency for people to consider feral animals present in an environment for a substantial span of time ‘honorary natives’. They also highlight a common feeling that some natural areas need extra charismatic megafauna to stimulate tourism, even if it isn’t native.

Such was the outcry that in 2003 the State Government was forced to compromise. The pony preservationists had wanted a corner of the National Park declared a ‘pony reserve’ in contrast to the National Parks Service, which simply wanted to cull the animals. Instead, the final 35–40 ponies were slated for relocation to a special parcel of nearby land purchased equally by the Pony Preservation Society and the State Government for \$200,000.

This story illustrates the difficulty of pursuing ‘pure’ conservation biology agendas. Complicating matters is the fact that the environmental impact of a small number of ‘feral’ brumbies in the park is dwarfed by the impact of some 2,000 ‘native’ kangaroos present in the same area. Although in other instances kangaroo culls have led to a public outcry, often overseas, here there has been almost no coverage of this ongoing management problem in a park lacking top predators that might naturally limit herbivore numbers. Instead, the threatened removal of a few horses hit a sweet spot in the media selection stakes that was hard for ‘scientific’ land managers to ignore.

On one level the brumby is simply another hard-hoofed herbivore run wild and doing damage to Australian ecosystems. From a logical conservation biology perspective, these animals should be treated in the same ways as other feral pests. However, our long cultural love affair with horses means that traditional culling methods for feral populations are likely to generate the kind of public outcry that might harm broader conservation aims more than they help them.

### ***The case of the olive in South Australia***

The European olive’s natural history, its long, complex co-evolution with humans in its ‘native’ Mediterranean basin, and its arrival in Australia form the background to a fascinating and still unfolding story of bio-invasion and often contradictory cultural responses.

The deliberate introduction of the olive into South Australia in the mid-nineteenth century was, in the age of acclimatisation societies, a logical step. Many areas in southern Australia do share broadly similar climates and soils to the Mediterranean basin—the area where olives are often dominant in the landscape, where they have been indispensable to humans for thousands of years, and where olive trees are assumed to be part of the ‘natural ecosystem’.

But even in the Mediterranean, things are complicated. Many of the olive-dominated areas there are in fact not representative of original pre-human or even pre-farming landscapes but are actually ‘weed-scapes’ dominated by former domestic trees reverted to the wild (Berville’, 2003). Thus the Mediterranean basin situation provides a perfect challenge regarding what ‘native’ and what ‘weedy’ really means.

Olives were planted enthusiastically around Adelaide as early as 1836. However, in spite of an impressive amount of planting and high hopes for the industry, colonial South Australian society was too Anglo-Saxon to support the kind of oil dependence fostered by Mediterranean diet and customs. Poor promotion saw the industry languish by the early part of the twentieth century. Ironically, the early industry failed just at a time when waves of southern European immigration could have been its salvation.

So for several decades olive trees near Adelaide effectively went unharvested, while a whole range of other, often introduced animals such as starlings and foxes helped spread their seed. Olives grew easily on the denuded soils of cleared landscapes and thrived without their usual Mediterranean retinue of pests and pathogens. The march of the olive as a ‘noxious weed’, unheralded at first, had begun.

The dawn of the twenty-first century brings us to an age of competing and often paradoxical discourses. On one hand, the massive wave of post-war European migration and the globalisation of the media have brought to us the people, traditions and aspirations to finally utilise the olive and its oil. The olive has become a *cause celebre* in a kind of sophisticated multicultural food, wine and B&B culture that is highly valued in late capitalism. Olive oil has been found to have beneficial health effects. Thus old plantings are being harvested again and massive new—often tax advantaged— ‘sunrise industry’ plantings are being undertaken:

The state’s biggest olive oil harvest yet is drawing to a close, with an estimated three million litres of oil worth up to \$20 million produced this season (Austin 2004, p. 38).

In areas around the urban fringe of Adelaide such as the Southern Vales, that are already associated with ‘value added’ crops like vines, olives have been incorporated into a ‘tourism-lifestyle complex’ with values closely tied to the urban romance about a return to the land and the simple pleasures of ‘natural’ produce. All this is happening with government encouragement. In short, culturally and politically, the olive is ‘cool’ (Sly, 2004).

But on the other hand, from a biodiversity and conservation point of view the olive is now a seriously out-of-control weed:

Infra-red aerial photography reveals feral olives are smothering up to 75 per cent of native bushland in the southern Adelaide hills (DiGirolamo 2003, p. 3).

[W]here there is an abundance of olives ... there is a greater than 50% reduction in biodiversity and native plants (Damaini & O’Neill 2003, p. 2).

In the Mt Lofty Ranges the problem is now so obvious that the State Government has had to convene an ‘Olive Task-Force’ to make some recommendations about control. The paradoxical situation is that while conservation-focused Government departments (along with NGOs like Trees For Life and private landholders) are effecting active and expensive removal

of ‘bad’ olives, more ‘good’ olive plantings are being encouraged by development-minded Government departments and industry groups! The discourses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ olives compete freely for attention in the media, and at present it seems that, thanks to the high ‘sign-value’ status of olive products and culture—and a lack of public interest in weed invasions in near-city areas—the ‘good’ olive is winning.

However, if the olive is a weed even in its supposedly native habitat of the Mediterranean, what does that say about its status in Australia? Tim Low (2003) suggests that “[n]ative” as a biological category shouldn’t be defined by political boundaries’ (p. 3). This idea makes sense when one considers the geographic size of Australia. Gardeners may think that they are doing the right thing by planting Australian natives, but is a tree from Western Australia planted in Victoria significantly less likely to become a ‘weed’ than a olive from Europe? Where does one draw the line? Perhaps weediness is a process of disturbance that dies away over time—in which case the olive may reach some sort of uneasy equilibrium with Australian ‘native’ organisms in several centuries, just like the dingo has 4000 years since its arrival.

The olive tree has a history of intimate cultural association with humans that is older than the Bible. Humans spread the tree around the Mediterranean basin so long ago that where it is and is not ‘native’ is now almost irrelevant. Unfortunately the tree is also a serious weed with the potential to dominate vast areas of Mediterranean-climate Australia. The issue has developed into a classic media battle for hearts and minds: the plant’s virtues and threats both receive media coverage, and both (contradictory) positions seem to co-exist.

### ***Conclusion***

These have been excerpts from just three case studies. From olives to koalas to the Wollemi pine and feral cats, the contradictory media coverage given these issues, and the divergent public, scientific and government responses to them, suggest that management decisions taken on a ‘science only’ basis—especially when they involve charismatic megafauna and flora, and notions of what is native and what is ‘weedy’—are going to be *increasingly* difficult to pull off in the future. There is an inherent contradiction between the principals of biogeographic diversity (time, isolation, distance, unique characteristics of site) and the realities of a ‘weedy’ mobile, affluent and increasingly hybridised global society where decisions are mediated by spectacular images, consumer desire and networked sociality.

Darwinian selection may not be dead, but there is a new kid on the block, one that, at least for scientists and conservationists, must seem perverse, fickle and frustrating. Certainly it works on timescales that seem mercurial compared to the glacial ‘punctuated equilibria’ of natural selection. When I refer to ‘cultural selection’ or ‘media selection’ I really mean the social factors that come into play when highly mediated, fashion-savvy consumer societies enter the debates—as they must—surrounding conservation and land management decisions. We cannot arbitrarily wall off the world of genetic selection from the world of human symbolic and material diversity as if they exist in different universes. This is an old romance of the environmental movement, but possibly no longer a tenable one.

Perhaps we have to think about a new kind of biosphere: a place where the kind of natural (or unnatural) ‘selection’ that occurs, where the kinds of ideas, discourses and memes (to use Richard Dawkins’ now infamous term) that enter and circulate in the ideosphere—in other words, via vectors of cultural selection—cannot be quarantined from good old-fashioned genetic selection. Neither genetic nor cultural selection have any imperative to move towards

some final state of perfection. This is something that gets scientists—who would often like to imagine the field of public discourse as some kind of rational chessboard, and who often can't understand why the public doesn't necessarily believe in the 'objective science' of, for instance, global warming—incredibly hot under the collar. Ours is increasingly a mongrel society: highly mediated, global in tastes and desires, and subject to the instabilities of irrational fashion cycles and thought contagions. In this 'weedy' and paradoxical biosphere, where genetic processes become mostly subordinate to cultural processes, a species that may well be doomed from a purely biological point of view will not be allowed to die because we love it so much, because it is a cultural 'winner'. This combination of biosphere and ideosphere does not have to be fatally impoverished, as many conservationists might imagine it to be, but it will certainly be a very mixed-up and contingent.

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