

# Rat Island – lessons from ancient Aotearoa for middle England today

*This article began as a book review of William Stolzenburg's Rat Island (Bloomsbury 2011). However, the narrative of past misdeeds as the backdrop to the current extinction crisis juxtaposed with my own experience of trying to conserve habitats as a local councillor, inevitably pitted the culpability of the present generation of middle England against that of ancient peoples exploring untrammelled lands; it asks whether lessons will ever be learnt and what if anything can be done to turn extinction's tide.*

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### Stolzenburg's Rat Island

Far from giving us 'new reason to hope' as the publisher's description of *Rat Island* suggests, this was one of the most desperately sad reads I have had for a long time, and the deaths of Stolzenburg's heroes, Don Merton and Richard Henry Kakapo (see page 48), left me feeling far from optimistic for the future of species' conservation despite the undoubted successes detailed in this book. My overall impressions are of irretrievable loss coupled with a sharpened focus on how our species continues unabashed and unabated to exterminate others.

### Early chapters in the extinction story

For those unfamiliar with this story it is a truly shocking one. Knowing, for example, that in the UK the larger predators had been extirpated one by one – with the last wolf being killed in around 1743<sup>1</sup> – was no preparation for learning the scale of the violence which drove literally thousands of animals to extinction, a high proportion of them on islands as "20 per cent of [the] Earth's terrestrial animal species [lived] on just 5 per cent of its landmass".<sup>2</sup> The first wave of extinctions were caused by Polynesian seafarers – the Maori – who in antiquity wiped out 2,000 species as they travelled between 800 islands in the South Pacific eventually reaching Aotearoa; the Maori can lay claim to exterminating the Giant Moa.

One of the most appalling atrocities was committed by Commander Bering's Russian sailors, stranded on what is now known as Bering Island near Alaska in the early 1740s. As Bering's men began to run out of otters and seals they turned to the sea cows; at first they were unsure of how to kill them, but eventually perfected their art of bludgeoning and harpooning them, pulling them onto the shore and slicing them up alive. The sea cows lived in tight-knit family groups and pairs and would attempt to save stricken family members, to the extent of crawling up the beach and remaining there for days after their mates had been killed. Within 27 years Steller's Sea Cow was extinct.

The majority of Stolzenburg's book describes attempts by Merton and others to eliminate introduced 'invasive' animals from a series of islands. These were mainly rats, but included foxes, weasels, cats, even mice, and farm animals left behind by Europeans. The non-natives mostly eradicated birds and other animals because they had not evolved to cope with the former's predation. Was this necessary and does Stolzenburg demonstrate that the ends justified the means? The author does not really ask or answer this question, and there are some aspects of this book which either trouble me or which could have delivered its message more effectively.

Almost *en passant* Stolzenburg discusses animal welfare. The uncomfortable fact is that the cats and pigs caught in traps, and the rats being poisoned, suffered very considerably. The author cites Marc Bekoff's concerns about the suffering inherent in using lethal means and also quotes Jaak Panksepp's experiments in which rats express 'joy'. "And where there was joy, could such emotions as fear and anxiety, sorry and empathy, be far away".<sup>3</sup> An emphatic no, according to Bekoff, who goes further and argues that animals have morality, "just like we have it".<sup>4</sup> The rats' ultimate downfall derived from what Bekoff describes as their "intricate networks of relationships",<sup>5</sup> allowing 'king rats' to eat Brodifacoum without any apparent ill effects so ensuring that all the remaining rats followed suit. One of the ironies of Stolzenburg's account is the conservationist hunters' respect for their prey, and in particular rats; the animals needing to die for conservation exhibited behaviour rather closer to us humans than the avifauna and the other species their deaths required.

Overall the book could establish context rather better. The background to the current extinction crisis is very powerful, but knowing where all the islands were was a struggle (a map would have been a great help) and early in his book Stolzenburg moves effortlessly from the Maori term Aotearoa to New Zealand which may be confusing to readers not familiar with this part of the world. The book has no conclusion or summary, and while it describes how individual islands were restored to their near pristine glory, the reader does not learn how many islands remained dominated by rats and other 'invasives'. We are not told to what extent this new more muscular approach to conservation had worked across the world or of how much unfinished business is left.

### The passing of a hero

There are some issues with Stolzenburg's writing, which is generally lucid and engaging. He occasionally should have listened to Dr Johnson and struck out his 'particularly fine passages' such as "the clouds billow on approach...a sphere becomes a scythe, a serpent, a genie emerging from a lamp".<sup>6</sup> He repeatedly uses the word 'decimate' when he means significantly more than one in ten. These are, however, minor points in a generally fine book, which pulls together different strands of the extinction story to unfold a tale we all should know. My main criticism is the lack of synthesis and instead a dénouement comprising the death of a flightless parrot numbering some 200 of his kind, beloved by one of the principal saviours of his species, Don Merton, who died in April 2011.

So why don't I sense any hope in this book? First, it is the lack of context – there is no indication of what has been achieved globally or of how much there is left to do.



After his retirement in 2005 Dr Don Merton went back one more time to the Kakapo reserve in Codfish Island to visit Richard Henry Kakapo (so named after the first conservationist who tried to save his species). Don Merton was 72 when he died and Richard Henry - who was found dead on Christmas eve 2010 - perhaps 30 years his senior.

Photo: Margaret Merton

Second, we live in the age of what Richard Leakey has called the *Sixth Extinction*,<sup>7</sup> so despite the efforts of Merton *et al* we are still in one way or another expunging other species from this planet without let and scarce hindrance - on our own island one species becomes extinct a fortnight.<sup>8</sup>

### A hopeless cause – trying to conserve habitats in middle England

Being invited to review *Rat Island* had a particular poignancy. Conservationists need little reminding of what Charles Elton called the 'importance of cover,'<sup>9</sup> but the pressure on habitat where I live – be it suburban gardens or the surrounding countryside – is significant and growing.<sup>10</sup> My local town in Hertfordshire is the ninth most affluent community in the UK<sup>11</sup> where the average detached house is priced at more than £900,000.<sup>12</sup> Predictably the local planning authority is busy with applications proposing the demolition of characterful 1930s houses set in spacious grounds with one or more replacements and much larger footprints. This pressure may be being felt particularly strongly in Hertfordshire, but it is not unique; in London 6,400 acres of gardens were converted to hard surfaces between 1998 and 2008<sup>13</sup> and on a larger scale perhaps some 100,000 gardens gave way to in-fill developments between 2000 and 2010.<sup>14</sup>

Invariably when I sat on the Town Council's advisory planning committee I cut a lonely figure opposing in-fill developments. What surprised me was how immune my fellow councillors were to arguments in favour of preserving gardens because they

harboured wildlife-rich habitats. At my first planning meeting I tried to persuade the Council to recommend refusing the development of an old orchard and meadow – at the meeting I was astonished to hear one councillor state that "he would like the landowner to realise his opportunity". Fortunately the planning authority refused permission, but the developers appealed and the decision is pending. This was my first realisation that, no, most local politicians are not concerned about the environment, the street scene, the way local neighbourhoods are being disfigured by over development – in fact they usually vote for it. This is because, they say, they are in a quasi-judicial role and must follow the planning criteria set down in the Local Plan. Nothing in their demeanour suggests voting against their conscience; environmental considerations do not weigh heavily if at all.

Where my Town Council has a direct responsibility concerns the development of its own land in the shape of a former allotment where a habitat survey discovered Roman snails and slow worms. Their protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) is unlikely to prevent their habitat's destruction. The battle for the former allotment – characterised by near weekly skirmishes in the local paper's letter page – has a number of dimensions, some of which are unprintable. What is on public record is the wrangle between the Town and District Councils; the latter owned a ransom strip precluding access, but following local elections in May 2011 and with the Tories gaining control of both councils access is now permitted. The Town Council will financially gain from this development; this presents a clear incentive. The Council naturally prefers, however, to emphasise the proposal to build accommodation for people with learning difficulties and affordable housing. In isolation this presents a much better case than the destruction of characterful homes and their replacement with £3m plus (*sic*) Range Rover Sport equivalents of the housing world. But it is not a one or either situation – it is both. There can be only one cumulative outcome. All species suffer, from birds and invertebrates<sup>15</sup> to charismatic animals like hedgehogs, which from their 1950s population of some 30m have declined to perhaps 750,000; some commentators predict their extinction in the next decade.<sup>16</sup>

Where do the snails and slow worms feature in the allotment argument? A local action group's efforts to defend their habitat are derided within the Council as insincere and cynical; there is quite an industry in Roman snail jokes.<sup>17</sup> I probably did well to extract a handshake from the previous Leader of the Town Council committing him, privately at least, to include consideration of the rare species living on the site. Now that the Leader has changed (which happens annually as the mayor and leader roles are conflated) I have made my case all over again; I am searching for at least some understanding and compensation measures, but the habitat will go.

For all the party activism there is much that is quietist in local government and a surprising dearth of prescience. I became a councillor to at least influence the shape of things to come and remain astounded at how little my colleagues care about the most obvious threats. Two illustrations evidence this assertion. First, there is the Town Council's initial reluctance to respond to the Coalition Government's

draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in 2011. Implicitly this document aimed to bully District Councils into assigning parts of the countryside – including greenbelt – for development within their Core Strategies or Development Plans as if councils failed to do so *independent inspectors* could reject their plans.<sup>18,19</sup> Even where the NPPF appeared to protect the countryside - “planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats...” - developers and councillors simply had to explain how “the ...benefits of the development outweigh the loss”.<sup>20</sup> At the time I argued that Hertfordshire’s towns would become separated by, if anything, ribbons of parks and sports grounds which our descendants would consider countryside as they would know little else. My colleagues repeatedly fail to see beyond their own lifetimes and to appreciate the consequences of successive generations of councillors giving up areas of countryside even though the pattern of schools successfully building on erstwhile playing fields and then converting countryside into replacement playing areas is an established pattern and source of much angst ridden controversy in the District. I am glad to say an official response to the NPPF was made through my insistent lobbying of the Leader and personally drafting some of the text.

Second, and as recently as late June 2012, the Town Council decided to change its position in respect of Luton Airport’s expansion. Formerly the Council had agreed to “contest the expansion of Luton Airport” and now it has decided to “seek to influence plans to expand Luton Airport, reflecting the concerns and aspirations of residents”. The Town Council did make the case for improved infrastructure, but in fact that is the antithesis of what the area needs – would residents really want their local roads turned in dual carriageways? For me a key issue is that expansion will further erode the tranquillity of the surrounding countryside where it is already most keenly felt. And the scale of the threat? Luton airport currently manages some 9m passengers per year – the plan is to expand more than threefold to 30m which is nearly the size of Gatwick. To move from outright opposition to ‘seeking to influence’ breaks one of the most elementary rules of negotiation.

If councillors at their various levels in local government cannot adequately react to threats of this nature, never mind shape the future of their communities and the environments they will inherit, is it any wonder that the graver underlying problem of species’ extinction continues, largely unspoken, but nonetheless inexorably? The inability of town halls to both protect and predict, to will and direct the future, is inextricably linked to the fate of other species; by failing to control the environment for ourselves, councillors are hardly likely to be able to protect it for others. And while I lament the demolition of beautiful town houses and the loss of their gardens, and the creeping suburbanisation of the countryside where I live, what makes me angrier still is the crowding out of other species in the process.

### Lessons from Aotearoa

What lessons can be drawn from ancient people’s behaviour? The Maori were perhaps unaware of the consequences of their actions, but that does not hold for the situation in England today. Equating extinction with development is not wholly fair and its causes in the UK are no doubt complex and multifaceted. Nonetheless



The countryside around Ayot St.Lawrence, the home of George Bernard Shaw, is already blighted by aircraft noise and a threefold increase in passenger numbers if Luton airport expands as proposed will further erode the tranquillity of the countryside.

Photo: Simon Leadbeater

the type of unsustainable development epitomised by, *inter alia*, most in-fill housing is a key driver. David cannot always beat Goliath in the form of insurmountable economic and demographic forces and Central Government planning dictates. But this is not where the problem lies. Trying and failing would be a good start, but not recognising the problem reinforces the unsettling feeling that in the main councillors do not reflect the capability inherent in the communities they serve. There are also, of course, malign influences and officer careers tied up with development and growth, but perhaps the failure lies in local politicians’ inability to link unsustainable development with extinction – and much else besides.

Baring’s sailors, while upsetting modern day sensibilities might – if they could – excuse their behaviour by saying they were fighting to survive. In contrast modern day councillors, with their officers’ reports supplemented by aboricultural and environmental impact assessments, have the time and resources to weigh nature in the balance. There is no parity here – greater culpability must lie with the decision makers who are incrementally acceding to the removal of habitats essential for the survival of a dwindling range of species.

This is the context within which I read William Stolzenburg’s *Rat Island*, and so no, the book has not given me much hope; at a personal level I feel powerless to stop extinction’s relentless progress. Is there an answer – do we need to find another Don Merton? If the truth be known saving iconic species from extinction – difficult

though it is – may be easier than halting extinction's tide in middle England, where we have already lost so much of our species diversity and where local politics does not recognise the plight of what little remains.<sup>21</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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## References and notes

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3. *Rat Island* Op.cit. p. 147.
4. Bekoff, M & Pierce, J., (2009) *Wild Justice. The Moral Lives of Animals.* p. xi.
5. *Ibid*
6. *Rat Island* Op.cit. p.4.
7. Leakey, R. & Lewin, R., (1995) *The Sixth Extinction*
8. Hambler, C., Henderson, P.A., Speight, M.R., (2010) Extinction Rates, extinction-prone habitats, and indicator groups in Britain and at larger scales. *Biological Conservation*
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10. The predicated increase in the UK population to 100M by the end of the century, much of the increase being in the south east, is an obvious factor.
11. Church Urban Fund (May 2012), *Poverty in Numbers*
12. [www.home.co.uk/guides/sold\\_house\\_prices.htm?location=a15&month=01&year=2012](http://www.home.co.uk/guides/sold_house_prices.htm?location=a15&month=01&year=2012)
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14. Leadbeater, S.R.B., (2010) '*Do the Environmental Benefits of Gardens outweigh the need for Affordable Housing.*'. The Ecologist. [http://www.theecologist.org/blogs\\_and\\_comments/commentators/other\\_comments/638940/do\\_the\\_environmental\\_benefits\\_of\\_gardens\\_outweigh\\_the\\_need\\_for\\_affordable\\_houses.html](http://www.theecologist.org/blogs_and_comments/commentators/other_comments/638940/do_the_environmental_benefits_of_gardens_outweigh_the_need_for_affordable_houses.html)
15. Pointed out by Richard Bashford of the RSPB <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1665630>
16. *Daily Telegraph* of 18<sup>th</sup> June 2012 quoting gardener David Domoney
17. An email of 15 July 2012 from a councillor inspecting the allotments is not untypical. That this email was copied to me is also not a coincidence. "In an East allotment it seems a lonely Roman snail has wandered all the way from Westfield to find a new home. Little did it realise that there are perils in an allotment site such as slug pellets. Of course we didn't get a second opinion as to it's [sic] true nationality. Perhaps the place is crawling with them but we never noticed before."
18. Department for Communities and local government (2011), *The Draft National Planning Policy Framework.* p.5.
19. NPPF Op.cit. p.13.
20. NPPF Op.cit. p.48.
21. There will be exceptions to this argument.If,as reported by Richard Black, a coup creates the vacuum for indiscriminate hunting combined with deforestation on an island with a unique species such as Madagascar, then this creates a very difficult situation. However, in a sense Britain has already been through this extinction phase and what I am describing is how it is embarking on another. BBC News, Black, R. (13 July 2012) *Lemurs Sliding Towards Extinction* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-18825901>

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