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# Settler Sanctuaries and the Stoat-Free State

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Aotearoa/New Zealand has forged a contemporary international identity as a leader in the establishment and management of animal sanctuaries. This article treats Aotearoa/New Zealand as a 'typically exceptional' or 'exceptionally typical' example, seeking to unravel the deeper settler colonial investment in sanctuary as concept and practice. It is especially interested in what animal sanctuaries in Aotearoa/New Zealand might look like from the perspective of the stoat (*Mustela erminea*), and why such a perspective might matter. Acclimatised by Europeans from the 1880s onwards to help secure agronomic settlement, and more recently named as a so-called 'animal pest' to be targeted by the New Zealand government's 'Predator Free 2050' campaign, the stoat discloses a foundational history that yokes sanctuary and settlement. It also reveals ongoing patterns of displacement and persecution. From the stoat's position outside the perimeter fence, the article proposes, the settler colonial logics of enclosure and 'deathworlding' (Rose 12) appear exceptional in the extreme.

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**Keywords:** *Sanctuary, Aotearoa/New Zealand, settler colonialism, stoat, acclimatisation, persecution*

## Uncommon Sense

This article takes as its starting point five recent and explicit claims to international exceptionalism made by the government of Aotearoa/New Zealand<sup>1</sup> in respect of biodiversity and its management. One claim, published in *The New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy* (Ministry for the Environment), highlights the uniqueness of the country's endemic fauna:

We boast the world's only flightless parrot (kakapo [sic]); a bird with nostrils at the end of its beak (kiwi); a primitive frog that lays eggs that hatch adult frogs (Leiopelma species); a large insect which fills a role that small rodents play in other countries (giant weta); and many other exceptional species. High percentages of New Zealand's indigenous species are endemic (they are found nowhere else on earth) – a result of isolated evolution and the diversity of New Zealand's land and seascapes. This level of endemism is remarkable internationally. (2)

A second claim, advanced in the same report, is that Aotearoa/New Zealand possesses a world-beating record of endemic biodiversity loss. '[N]othing since the extinction of the dinosaurs (65 million years ago) compares with the decline in indigenous biodiversity in New Zealand over the last century', the report declares (4). Making a third claim to exceptionalism, the same report notes that Aotearoa/New Zealand 'now has the highest number of introduced mammals of any country in the world' (7). A fourth claim, published in the *Biodiversity Strategy* and in the Department of Conservation's *Resolution Island Operational Plan*, is that Aotearoa/New Zealand is a global pioneer in establishing island sanctuaries 'to create safe havens for rare or threatened species' (McMurtrie et al. 9). Resolution Island in Fiordland was designated a reserve for the protection of native fauna and flora in 1891, the 2008 report explains, thus becoming the world's first island sanctuary. The 2008 report goes on to detail a programme to eradicate so-called 'animal pests' – specifically the stoat (*Mustela erminea*, a small carnivorous mammal native to Eurasia and North America and also known as the short-tailed weasel) – from Resolution Island [see fig. 1]. The stated long-term aim of the programme is to maintain the island 'in a stoat-free state' (7). A fifth claim to international exceptionalism, announced with fanfare in 2016, is that Aotearoa/New Zealand is to serve as a global pioneer for strategies coordinated at the national level to eradicate animal pests. The state-sponsored 'Predator Free 2050'

campaign, which identifies the stoat as a prime target species, was launched by the New Zealand government as ‘the most ambitious conservation project attempted anywhere in the world’ (Kirk). This fifth claim to exceptionalism aims to address the crisis implied in the conjunction of the second and third claims as it protects what is presently valued in the first and extends the reach of the fourth. Reconfiguring the entire country as an island sanctuary for endemic species, it aspires to literalise the notion of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a ‘stoat-free state’.



*Fig. 1. Stoat (Mustela erminea).*

*Image credit: Keven Law*

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Exceptionalist logics and self-exceptionalising stories are characteristic or ‘typical’ of so-called new world countries (see Fairburn). Yet a key feature of the New Zealand government’s interlinked claims to environmental exceptionalism is that they work on the basis of a collective appeal to their own unexceptionalism. In making its claims, the New Zealand government naturalises the emergence and spread of animal sanctuaries as ‘common sense’ and a common public good. Through this means, sanctuary-work is sanctified – placed beyond critique or reproach – and it is construed as securing the ground of national identity rather than ‘breaking ground’ (as it were). More deeply, however, these claims obscure the extent of the government’s own role in creating the conditions that have put endemic species in jeopardy. As a so-called new world country – and, specifically, as a settler colonial state – Aotearoa/New Zealand was founded through takeover and makeover of an already-inhabited indigenous territory. European newcomers quite literally ‘broke’ ground in order to establish their own homeland. As the Australian anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose has put it, settler colonial places are ‘damaged places’, and settler-descendants bear the burden of violent histories of conquest that have resulted in habitat destruction, environmental degradation and extinctions that amount to ecocide (‘Dialogue’ 129). While the New Zealand government’s rhetoric carefully evades acknowledging the government’s responsibility for ecological devastation wrought to date, the same government has been an active sponsor of the legislation, policies and practices which reconfigured Aotearoa/New Zealand as laboratory for the acclimatisation (or importation, release and naturalisation) of exotic species and set in motion its catastrophic loss of endemic biodiversity. State-sponsored protectiveness towards endemic species – including those now taken as icons of national identity, such as the *kākāpō* and kiwi – has emerged only belatedly (see Park, *Ngā Uruora* and *Theatre Country*), now that the grounds of European settlement have come to seem secure. At a national level, then, a ‘contradictory inner-history of settlement’ (Turner, ‘Being Colonial’ 40) underlies the government’s claims to exceptionalism.

Tied to this, the government’s claims invite consideration of economic imperatives that have catalysed the emergence of acclimatisation and conservation agendas in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The *Biodiversity Strategy* makes it clear that biodiversity is ‘New Zealand’s biological wealth’ in that it secures primary industries and contributes ecosystem services that secure

agricultural productivity by decomposing wastes, cycling nutrients and so on; it offers ‘untapped opportunities’ for the growing biotechnology sector (bio-prospecting commercially valuable compounds, for instance); and it serves as a ‘major selling point’ for commodity-production and tourism ventures seeking to capitalise on the ‘clean and green’ national image by staging consumer-visitor encounters with unique endemic species, environments and products (see 3-4). It follows that the Predator Free 2050 campaign was jointly announced by the then-Prime Minister and the ministers for primary industries, conservation, tourism and science and innovation. Indeed, the Prime Minister unveiled Predator Free 2050 with the deeper rationalisation that introduced pests threaten the economy and primary sector, estimating their total economic cost ‘at about \$3.3 billion a year’ (qtd in Kirk). As this suggests, the logics of environmental management in a settler place are, at base, economic ones, so that what is deemed good for the environment or good for a species at any given time will turn out to be what is good for the economy.

Across the globe, the advent of the present era of mass extinctions is making the work of animal sanctuaries increasingly central to the survival of biodiversity. In these extreme times, however, it is important not to take the role and work of sanctuaries as given – as if their value is self-evident, incontrovertible, a matter of consensus. Indeed, an emergent body of international scholarship has begun to examine ways in which the animal sanctuary movement has come to serve as a new flashpoint for ‘contestations around the use and social status of animals in multiple political-economic contexts’ (Abrell 26), with regimes of ‘violent-care’ (van Dooren) and ‘necro-care’ (Abrell) emerging as a particular concern (see also Gruen and Emmerman). The recent and rapid history of environmental upheaval and the concerted pioneering of sanctuary-work in Aotearoa/New Zealand stand out in this context, suggesting that animal sanctuaries in settler colonial places may bear ‘exceptional’ burdens and offer advance lessons in how responses to mass extinction events and cascading loss of biodiversity play out (see Boswell, ‘Lessons from the Dodo’).

This discussion unravels the relationship between animal sanctuaries and the settler state, arguing that the depth of settler investment in sanctuaries in Aotearoa/New Zealand derives from the founding of the country as a sanctuary settlement. Indeed, if a sanctuary is

understood as a technology of exception – a space of immunity, or a place where the rules that ordinarily pertain are suspended – then this assists in explaining the force of settler identification with sanctuaries and sanctuary-work. Applying a concept borrowed from the Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben, commentators have begun to note that a colonial state is, by definition, a ‘state of exception’ (see Svirsky and Bignell). In a settler colonial place, as Mark Rifkin has explained, metapolitical authority is at stake, sovereign violence is foundational and ongoing, and the rules which previously pertained (that is, indigenous ways of going about the place and organising life-in-place) are perpetually suspended or ‘excepted’ (see 77-81). The discussion builds on these insights, foregrounding the contradictions that are apparent in the tendency of settler regimes to self-conceptualise both as disenfranchised (sanctuary-seeking) and sovereign (lifeworld-reconfiguring). As it unfolds its case, the discussion seeks to understand the extent to which Aotearoa/New Zealand is founded on the makeover work of acclimatisation, not just of imported animals and plants, but of people, institutions, modes of thinking and ways of life. The discussion is especially interested in contributing to understandings of the role of violence in acclimatisation histories and sanctuary-work. It proposes that settler colonial places are founded on unstable categories of care and condemnation: such places show how esteem for species may become warped or even inverted over time, what ensues when animals are excepted for (chosen) and excepted from (denied) care, and how caring for certain kinds of species may place other kinds under active attack. The discussion concludes by looking to indigenous ethics of environmental stewardship that are neither founded on – nor reducible to – ‘sanctuary-thinking’.

From the outset, I should make it clear that this is not intended as an exercise in ‘invasive species denialism’ (Russell and Blackburn). Quite apparently, stoats and other introduced animals pose significant, urgent and ongoing threats to endemic biodiversity in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and their negative impacts are well-documented in the scientific literature.<sup>2</sup> In reflecting on the role of sanctuaries in settler places, however, this discussion seeks to suspend the ‘common sense’ that might appear to underwrite the New Zealand government’s claims to exceptionalism and place animal sanctuaries beyond critique. In pursuit of this aim, the discussion elects to keep intermittent company with the stoat, looking to



historical sources and contemporary commentaries and reports to flesh out the fraught role this species has played in successive waves of ecological transformation in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Because it is thoroughly pathologised as an ecological villain – a troublemaker to be pursued (or ‘ferreted out’) by the Predator Free 2050 campaign – the stoat traverses terrains that lie beyond admissible perimeters and parameters of care. The function of the stoat in this discussion, then, is as a provocation or figure of ‘disturbance’ (Tsing 88-89), and for this reason the discussion deliberately suspends judgment on it. I should also make it clear from the outset that what follows is less about stoats than it is about socio-political configurations and ‘eco-logics’ that the stoat begins to expose. Most New Zealanders have never laid eyes on a stoat and it is not my intention here to hunt this creature down or to trap or flay it: to a large extent, the stoat will escape. The value of the stoat is precisely in the glimpses or flashes of ‘uncommon sense’ that it affords. The stoat disrupts the business-as-usual thinking of settlement, surfacing as a limit case which asks us to confront norms of care and notions of what is agreed-upon in a domain of life that is both shared (common) and contested (uncommon).

## Refuge

In contemporary usage, the term ‘sanctuary’ is widely taken to refer to a place set aside where animals facing threats to their existence can be offered refuge to live and in some cases breed in safety. Human-wrought environmental crises – in the forms of climate change, habitat destruction and ecological degradation producing biodiversity loss and extinctions across the globe – have given potency and urgency to this type of sanctuary. These expanding applications of the term, however, belie the fact that animal sanctuary is founded on and defined by human needs and concerns. They also belie the fact that sanctuary is not a universal human value. As a concept and practice with a distinctly western provenance, sanctuary has emerged from particular configurations of sovereign authority and religious belief. The term dates from between 1300 and 1350 AD, coming down via Middle English from the late Latin *sānctuārium*, which is etymologically derived from the Latin *sānctus* meaning holy or hallowed. Definitions broadly concur that a sanctuary is a sacred or consecrated space and that it carries special resonance in Judeo-Christian traditions, referring to the holiest precinct of a place of worship

(Bagelman 1-5, Nelson 1-12). From Anglo-Saxon times, churches have served as places where fugitives are able to seek temporary protection from the law or from the exercise of sovereign authority. On the basis of this tradition, sanctuary has strongly come to encompass spaces where those who are on the run are entitled to immunity from arrest, or where those outside the framework of legal or governmental protection may seek shelter (see Abrell 39). As well as naming a spatial zone of refuge or asylum (a place for the displaced), the term refers to the immunity afforded by refuge in such a place. Sanctuary is sought by someone or something (a supplicant) who identifies as being subject to persecution, and/or it is bestowed on someone or something who is identified as being subject to persecution. Operating outside of time and outside of the laws and regulations that govern the larger social world, it functions as a state of ‘suspension’ (see Bagelman 2-5).

When these historical origins of sanctuary as concept and practice are set alongside the history of settler colonialism in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the deeper contours of sanctuary-work in this place begin to emerge. Both individually and on a collective basis, Europeans tended to self-select to participate in establishing settler societies in so-called new world places because they felt they were experiencing hardship in their original homelands (religious persecution, for instance, or an inability to own land) and because they perceived an opportunity to enhance their existence (gaining wealth, property, status, happiness, freedom of faith and so on) by eliminating whatever was threatening them or placing them ‘under stress of adverse economic factors’ (Lockley). The organised settlement schemes marketed and administered by the New Zealand Company in London in the mid-nineteenth century deployed rhetoric of precisely this kind, offering prospective immigrants free passage and the ability to ‘except’ themselves from the tough living conditions, class inequities and ‘struggle for life’ produced by a rapidly industrialising Britain (see Lamb 290-94). An earlier wave of active settlement in Aotearoa/New Zealand had already been initiated by the Church Missionary Society, founded on a Christian theological understanding that European intervention in as-yet ‘uncivilised’ environments was ordained as a right or duty sanctioned by God, and seeding a strong settler-held belief that Aotearoa/New Zealand was ‘God’s own country’ (Bracken 6). For these

combined reasons, settlers were able to conceive of their activities as being conducted on sacred grounds and within the parameters of the ancient and noble tradition of sanctuary-seeking.

In practical terms, the oceanic travel required to reach Aotearoa/New Zealand from Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was arduous, and the climate and environment encountered here were not considered by Europeans to be wholly inhospitable. For this reason, voyagers tended to take sanctuary on first arrival, gratefully imagining they had reached a primeval paradise (see Forster 79-80). Yet because Aotearoa/New Zealand was also perceived as furnishing a range of threats – in the form of a majority indigenous population whose behaviours could not be predicted by European newcomers, and a landscape that seemed unkempt, ‘deficient’ and strange (lacking agricultural infrastructure, mammals and game species, for instance, and populated by flightless parrots, birds with nostrils at the ends of their beaks, frogs that hatch ‘adult’ young rather than tadpoles, and insects that act like rodents) – Europeans more deeply took exception to what they found, and set about creating their own safe havens or sanctuaries-within (see Boswell, ‘Fractured Atmospherics’). Settlers furnished these scattered settlements with animals and plants imported to reconstruct ‘the living faunal and floral scenes of the land they had abandoned’ (Lockley), securing their settlements and themselves against whatever seemed threatening or irregular. The ‘graft’ or work of settlement involved reproducing and joining these isolated, interiorised archipelagos of safety and comfort in a spreading network. It also involved grafting a new lifeworld over the existing one, to overcome the fact that settlers had no prior connection to what was already there and no knowledge of how to inhabit it. Settlers set about swelling their own populations and the populations of the organisms that they were importing, and they set about breeding the number and size of their sanctuary settlements, with demographic, biological and geographical dominance leading them to assume possession of the whole of the place.

As these circumstances begin to make clear, settler colonialism is inherently sanctuary-inscribing and sanctuaries are inherently settlement-producing. As these circumstances also make clear, a sanctuary is always an island (bounded, discrete) and the operation of sanctuary in a settler context needs to be understood as a human-animal concern. Sanctuary-work in settler places is profoundly bound up with acclimatisation activities, and acclimatisation emerges as

involving much more than the physical transportation and release of animals and plants – or, to put it another way, acclimatised species carry with them hefty cultural burdens which include imported knowledge practices, institutions of living and modes of belonging. Ways in which the concept and practice of sanctuary becomes troubled in a settler colonial place begin to emerge, too. First, sanctuary is assumed by settlers on behalf of themselves and their imports rather than sought via supplicancy or bestowed by those for whom it is a recognised tradition. As this suggests, while sanctuary is founded on providing a place for the displaced, its displacements will unfold differently in a settler colonial context because the concept and practice have been translated outside of their own place, time and heritage. Second, settlers assume governmental authority (that is, sovereignty) over a so-called new world country at the same time as they and their imported species assume refuge there.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, and because a sanctuary is, by definition, a suspended state and a response to circumstances of crisis or imagined threat, settlers construct for themselves a superimposed polity that is both a state of suspension and a state of exception (see Bagelman, Agamben, Svirsky and Bignall, Rifkin). Such a polity operates outside of time and space in that it exteriorises, excludes and treats as ‘exceptional’ (that is, aberrational) the prior and ongoing authority of the indigenous owners of the land on which it is founded. And third, sanctuary is not contained in the usual ways in a settler colonial place because settlers have designs on the whole of the place, and sanctuaries serve as key expressions and vehicles of this re-design (that is, they serve as apparatuses more of advance than retreat).

The fact that Aotearoa/New Zealand took shape as a sanctuary state helps to explain the extent to which its national identity is founded on the work of sanctuaries (see for instance Campbell-Hunt, Dorfman, King). It also explains the stoat’s entry into the country as an element of the furniture or design-work of settler sanctuary-making. Just as rabbits had been before them, stoats and other mustelids were acclimatised as part of ‘a positive frenzy of exotic introductions’ (Lockley), in part for sentimental reasons (on the basis of their furry familiarity to settlers), and in part on the basis of their ecological functionality. Rabbits were imported and released to supply a plentiful source of protein for settler diets; stoats were subsequently imported and released to control the resulting over-abundance of rabbits. The stoat also promised to lend an air of refinement to the new landscape-under-construction (stoats turn

white during winter months, with their so-called ermine pelts traditionally used to adorn imperial robes in Europe, and to trim academic regalia at Oxbridge universities). The stoat, then, was deliberately shipped here from 1885 onwards, deliberately husbanded at breeding depots around the country, and deliberately liberated to establish ‘free-living’ (van Dooren 114) populations, and it enjoyed an initial range of protections courtesy of settler law. The stoat discovered in Aotearoa/New Zealand its own newfound sanctuary and conditions of freedom: reprieve from natural predators, respite from the chillier climate of its former northern hemisphere home, a bounteous supply of food, and state-sponsored encouragement to go forth and multiply.<sup>4</sup> The initial and underlying operation of sanctuary in Aotearoa/New Zealand, then, is what reconfigured as a ‘stoat state’ a place which had, up until that point, been altogether stoat-free.

## Persecution

Ordinarily, sanctuary as concept and practice operates on the basis that persecution is underway, that someone or something is facing crisis (present pursuit or imminent danger) and requires protection. In a settler colonial place, however, patterns of protection and persecution unfold differently because logics of displacement and replacement enable settlers to claim the position of victimhood for themselves in advance, with persecutory outcomes following from this. Such back-to-frontness, which works to disavow dispossession of indigenous peoples and things, is a characteristic settler pose. As commentators have noted, the settler ‘hides behind the persecuted, the migrant, even the refugee (the settler has suffered elsewhere and ‘is seeking refuge in a new land’)', inflicting oppression through the justification that they are fleeing oppression (Veracini 14); settlers presume the proprietary rights of hosts in lands where they are in fact guests, strangers or invaders (Smith); settlers are disposed to misconceiving the ‘originary exteriority’ of themselves to an indigenous place, creating settlements whose interiorised worlds and encircling operation seek to exteriorise and expel prior local knowledges (see Turner, ‘The Truth of Waters’). The fact, too, that sanctuary is imposed as part of the makeover and takeover of a so-called new world territory means that sanctuary does not just entail removing to safety the person or thing experiencing persecution. From the outset, the problem of

sanctuary in a settler colonial place is that the act of spreading refuge-for-some (in the first instance, settlers and their imported species) directly entails spreading persecution-for-others (indigenous peoples and endemic species). In this context, the ‘violent-care’ enacted by settler sanctuaries is extreme: protection directly and intentionally breeds persecution, justifying and calling it forth.

These insights explain how the imposition of sovereign authority that is characteristic of a settler state of exception is able to be underplayed: sanctuary-seeking (both as material practice and imaginative trope) provides a form of cover which permits settler culture to disavow its usurpation of authority and its will-to-make-over an indigenous territory. According to its tradition and history, sanctuary works to protect from persecutory or coercive power whoever or whatever is vulnerable. Yet such power actually emanates from settler sanctuaries, which are themselves instruments of coercion. This coercive power is perhaps seen most clearly in the fact that settler colonial sanctuaries are founded on an intention to proliferate change that will actively and permanently re-engineer the world of life, superimposing a new place over the top — and at the expense — of an existing one. As these logics of displacement and replacement suggest, sanctuary is not a contained or corrallable phenomenon in a settler colonial place. Rose proposes that the acclimatisation of foreign species in settler contexts needs to be understood as a form of ‘ecocide’ (‘Dialogue’ 129) or ‘deathworlding’ (*Wild Dog Dreaming* 12), in that it creates conditions of crisis in which endemic creatures can no longer survive or where their futures are endangered. Settler places thus offer lessons in the creation of ‘anti-animals’ or creatures who are understood as being opposed to the natural world, and whose persecution can be justified (Holm; see also Boswell ‘The Sensible Order’).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the sanctuaries that settlers create for themselves draw on the notion of sanctuary in the religious sense, and these sanctuaries — and the crises of authority and environment that they produce — are permanent and ongoing. For these reasons, the death-work of settlement is implicitly and perpetually placed beyond (that is, secured or made immune from) external reproach or reckoning.

Unbeknown to themselves, the animals that settlers acclimatise are implicated in this larger scheme of death-work, and many are selected in part for their very potential to carry out (‘execute’) persecution. On the recommendation of an 1883 report prepared by the

Superintending Rabbit Inspector, the stoat was first introduced to Aotearoa/New Zealand to control the so-called rabbit ‘plague’ which was threatening the material and economic success of agronomic settlement. The stoat was supposed to destroy organisms in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as a member of what Joan Druett, in her study *Exotic Intruders*, terms ‘the extermination squad’ (167-86), and the fact that it was working in the service of settlement meant explicit judgment on it was already suspended. The stoat proved hardier and better suited to the needs of life in a new place than did other introduced mustelids (the larger ferret and smaller weasel). Adaptive, agile, plucky, opportunistic, perseverant, fiercely self-preserving, instinctually able to secure its own advantage, reproductively precocious, territorial and able to establish residence in a vast range of habitats – swimming considerable distances across water bodies to reach such places if need be – the stoat emerged as a ‘natural-born’ settler. While it is not exactly the case that the stoat’s human sponsors intended to give it a free pass to kill indiscriminately and with impunity in their sanctuary state, by the time mustelids were introduced a number of endemic ‘ornithic forms’ (Buller 192) were known to be passing into extinction, and scientific papers were documenting significant and already-observable losses of indigenous biodiversity, and speculating as to how these patterns would unfold. In debating mustelid introductions, however, settlers were more concerned with the incidental persecutory threat such creatures might pose to newly-acclimatised avifauna than with any sense that endemic species might be placed at further or first-hand risk.<sup>6</sup> Tellingly, the first change in the stoat’s legal status in Aotearoa/New Zealand was in a 1903 amendment to the Rabbit Nuisance Act of 1876, providing for the destruction of mustelids ‘which have since proved to be the (natural) enemies of game and poultry’ (qtd in Druett 235). Revealing the extent of the inversion of conservation priorities documented in the New Zealand government’s recent *Biodiversity Strategy*, these sentiments provide a viewshaft onto occluded forms of settler ‘common sense’ that seem – from a twenty-first century vantage point – decidedly foreign.

### **Strangeness and ‘Success’**

The home-making work of settler colonialism involves domesticating and furnishing the so-called ‘new’ place with imported species so that it feels secure, comfortable, protected and

protective — just like home, or better than the homes settlers have left behind or fled.<sup>7</sup> What this means, however, is that settler sanctuaries have origins in warping categories of exotic and familiar, as well as those of rarity and abundance. Initially, creatures that are familiar to settlers (rabbits, stoats) are strange to the place itself, while creatures that come from the place (flightless parrots, birds with nostrils at the ends of their beaks) are deemed unfamiliar and strange. Initially, too, animals imported from outside have scarcity value (perhaps only a small handful of specimens survive the voyage); whereas animals that already live in the place appear to settlers to be easy-to-encounter or easy-to-obtain. The spread of settler sanctuary, then, involves the spread of European species which are ‘exceptional’ in the place itself, reverse-engineering the place from the point of view of the settler and reverse-engineering exotic/familiar and rare/plentiful axes of relation. Spreading ‘strangeness’ in these ways, the concept and practice of sanctuary reveals that settler colonialism habitually mistakes what is strange about itself and its activities. Displacing this strangeness onto the territory in question, and seizing authority over this territory, it creates exceptions to whatever is ‘normal’ or ordinary there.<sup>8</sup>

On one view, the operations of protection and persecution (who or what is protected from persecution, and who or what is subject to persecution as a result) are radically unstable in a settler colonial place. As settlers come to feel safe in their more or less successfully self-created sanctuary state, dawning misgivings about what they have destroyed or almost-destroyed begin to surface (see Boswell, ‘The Sensible Order’; Turner, ‘Being Colonial; Park, *Ngā Uruora* and *Theatre Country*). Reversed or inverted kinds of sanctuary — like Resolution Island and other offshore islands, as well as the so-called ‘mainland island’ sanctuaries that have followed in Aotearoa/New Zealand — are set aside by the settler state to protect the ‘strange’ endemic animals whose persecution was set in motion by the sanctuary-work of settlement, and who were originally envisioned as being grafted-over or phased out. Over time, an arsenal of technologies is pioneered to keep these new sanctuaries and their occupants safe (traps, poison bait stations, surveillance devices, tracking tunnels, electrified predator-proof fences, gene editing techniques, forms of immunocontraception and so on) and deployed both within the sanctuary and beyond it. These newly-forged practices and parameters of protection produce



new forms and figures of persecution. Those targeted will turn out to be animals who were originally brought to Aotearoa/New Zealand to carry out the job of settler sanctuary-making, and are now to be punished for their successful acclimatisation. The apparent extremity of this inversion follows from the fact that the original environmental transformation of a so-called 'new world' place is, itself, extreme.

On another view, however, what appears as a reversal of protection and persecution simply extends the already-embedded logics of sanctuary-thinking as a key expression of what is enduring about how New Zealanders understand their relationship with nature. What is familiar/exotic and what is rare/abundant have been transformed (so what is in these classificatory categories has shifted), yet the categories themselves still apply. Contemporary sanctuary-work is continuous with the principles of selectiveness, replacement and disposability on which settlement is founded, and with the economic imperatives that drove settler sanctuary-making from the outset. Quite apparently, not all acclimatised species are chosen for persecution. The New Zealand government, for example, still exempts for ongoing protection whatever it deems 'useful' (for agricultural or biotechnology purposes, or as tourism drawcards), selecting for persecution animals that either (a) threaten newly-esteemed endemic species, (b) fail to be of economic benefit, and/or (c) harm introduced animals that are of economic benefit. The persecutionary practices that underpin initial settler sanctuary-making, though, are ongoing, and contemporary sanctuary-work maintains earlier ambitions to roll sanctuary out. That is, the place itself is still subject to extreme makeover and something is still being persecuted as an 'anti-animal' for reasons still touted as 'righteous' (King 125). The death-machineries which are plainly visible in a settler sanctuary and which secure its work (traps, poison bait stations, electrified perimeter fencing) serve as a reminder that the deathworlding work of settlement continues, and they make it clear that an animal sanctuary is a machinery of death.

Again, the stoat has become ensnared in these logics. Concerns about the stoat's role in the destruction of endemic birds and its capacity to 'intrude' into any sanctuaries to be set aside for these birds were voiced by settler scientists as early as 1885 (see Martin 115). The author of an 1895 paper titled 'The Displacement of Species in New Zealand' noted that it was 'most

unfortunate' that birds 'of such exceptional interest as the kakapo [sic] and kiwi should have their extinction accelerated by the introduction of such pests as the stoat, weasel, and ferret, which are annihilating the surviving portions of one of the most remarkable collections of indigenous birds in the world' (Kirk 7-8). By this time, the stoat-as-settler-sanctuary-maker had become a runaway 'success', penetrating districts where it had not been released and where rabbits were as-yet 'unknown' (Thomson 73). Notably, the first islands set aside as sanctuaries for endemic fauna were selected at distances from the mainland and from 'stepping-stone' islands that were considered un-swimmable for stoats, and an early crisis in settler conservationism occurred when the first keeper of the sanctuary on Resolution Island recorded a stoat sighting there in March 1900 (Hill and Hill 252). As Druett explains (173-4), mustelids in nineteenth-century Aotearoa/New Zealand faced a complex range of unofficial treatments and persecutions – including incidental poisoning – arising from their perceived lack of effectiveness in controlling rabbits. Legal protection for the stoat did remain in place until 1936, at which time bounties began to be offered on stoat carcasses. While state-sponsored anti-stoat sentiment has gathered momentum since then, the stoat population has continued to flourish, such that by the early 1980s, Aotearoa/New Zealand housed the largest feral population of mustelids in the world.

Discharged from its original sanctuary-making duties and reviled as having 'found an unwanted place in New Zealand's landscape' (Predator Free 2050), the stoat has been re-branded by settler culture not just as an 'animal pest', 'invasive species' and 'unwanted organism', but as a 'serial killer', and as 'public enemy number one' (see Department of Conservation; Toki; Wright) [see fig. 2]. The extremity of this re-characterisation is explained in part by the fact that the stoat is more resistant than any other imported 'pest' to efforts to control its population (this turns out to be its super-power or its true exceptionalism). As the previous New Zealand Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment explained in a 2011 report appraising the nationwide conservation practice of aerial-dropping 1080-laced carrot and cereal baits, carnivorous stoats are harder to target than omnivores such as the possum or rat, with mass extermination efforts currently reliant on secondary poisoning via rodents (see Wright 22-23). The stoat's re-characterisation also needs to be understood in light of the fact

that settlers imaginatively identify – in the first instance – with the animals they acclimatise as assistant or surrogate agents of sanctuary-making. The extreme persecution returned to the stoat through contemporary sanctuary-work bespeaks unease associated with the deeper knowledge that European settlers are Aotearoa/New Zealand's 'most formidable exotic intruder of all' (Lockley), and that settlers and their culture are what settlement still ultimately seeks to acclimatise.



*Fig. 2. Serial Killer Kills Over Twelve Thousand Kiwis. Image credit: Forest & Bird (reproduced with permission)*

## Without Exception

Agamben observes that in a state of exception, the suspension of laws in response to supposed crisis becomes a prolonged state of being. What European settlement in Aotearoa/New Zealand most profoundly excepts or suspends on an ongoing basis is recognition of indigenous authority over the place, in particular, acknowledgment of first laws (tikanga) which already managed life-in-place at the time of European arrival and which continue to pertain. Patterns of environmental regulation articulated and codified through kaitiakitanga (guardianship or stewardship) and whanaungatanga (kinship) are outlined in the opening section of the *New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy*:

Maori have a holistic view of the environment and biodiversity that derives from a cosmogony (belief system) that links people and all living and non-living things [...] All components of ecosystems, both living and non-living, possess the spiritual qualities of tapu [sacredness], mauri [life-force], mana [power, authority], and wairua [spirit or soul]. Maori, as tangata whenua [people of the land], are the kaitiaki (guardians) of these ecosystems and have a responsibility to protect and enhance them. This responsibility of people to other living things is expressed in the concept of kaitiakitanga. (2)

The *Biodiversity Strategy* proposes that these views must be understood and valued as a first step towards ‘a bicultural approach to biodiversity management’ (2).

As noted by the Waitangi Tribunal’s recent *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei* report on indigenous flora and fauna, however, kaitiakitanga is not reducible to sanctuary-thinking (see 299-300). Despite surface-level congruences between kaitiakitanga and contemporary sanctuary-work (concern for the welfare of endemic species as taonga or treasures, for instance, and the ability to impose temporary ritual prohibitions via rāhui), kaitiakitanga is not settlement-producing and its motivations are not persecutory or ecocidal. A rāhui, for instance, might be placed on an area ‘as a device for separating people from land, water and the products from these’, and it is lifted – with appropriate ceremony – after an agreed lapse of time (Māori Dictionary). Endemic animals whose populations are replenished or protected by rāhui may afterwards be made

available for sustainable customary harvest, in accordance with principles of balance and reciprocity. What kaitiakitanga reveals, then, is the extent to which animal sanctuaries express and enact imported designs on Aotearoa/New Zealand by carving up the lifeworld and its species into zones and categories of exclusion. Seeking to overturn or profoundly re-engineer life-in-place, sanctuary-thinking cannot care for all things or conceive of a lifeworld holistically. And whereas settler sanctuaries may well produce conceits based on unconscious imaginative identification – such that European settlers vilify (as an expression of therianthropocentric scapegoating or self-loathing) those introduced species that most remind them of themselves – kaitiakitanga is founded on lived modes of relationality and connectedness.

It remains unclear what place creatures such as the stoat might have within a lifeworld conceived according to the principles of kaitiakitanga, or how such an animal might be managed in proper accordance with these principles (what responsibilities might be owed, what care might be extended, what modes of relationality might pertain). In a study of indigenous Australian responses to introduced species, anthropologist David Trigger notes that while there is some negativity towards such species as emblematic of European dispossession, in other cases certain fauna and flora have been embraced within Aboriginal cultural traditions (628). Iwi perspectives advanced in relation to species introduced to Aotearoa/New Zealand indicate complex patterns of acceptance and rejection, bearing out a version of Trigger's findings. In respect of the introduced brushtail possum, for instance, Kevin Prime, the environment coordinator for Ngātihine, has offered comments which may also apply to the stoat:

A pre-European Council of Elders [...] would have accepted the possum as a bountiful food source, eaten its meat, brains and innards, used its fur for cloaks, used its bones for needles and adornments [...] Such a council would definitely have observed the habits of possums in relation to the moon, weather and seasons, had possum included in their hunting and harvesting calendar, caught and used possum as pets and decoys [...] and declared a rahui [sic] when possum numbers fell below a sustainable level to allow the numbers to build up again. (3)

In testimony published in *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei*, Phil Aspinall of Ngāti Porou points out the ironies apparent in contemporary restrictions on customary harvesting of endemic species in state-

controlled reserves, viewing these as evidence of the state's power to continue to create circumstances of exception:

Now if I was alive in 1800 I wouldn't let the Pakeha bring these things [possums and stoats] in. But how am I to know that they were no good. You see? It's like everything else. They bring it in, they ruin the country and then they tell us don't kill the pigeons [kereru], don't kill the pigeons, you're killing all the birds but they're the ones that did it. They brought these beautiful animals here, possums, stoats [...] What a wonderful country we live in. How can paradise be paradise when all these pests [...] have been introduced by, I'll just say it, by the Crown.  
(307)

Further responses have been offered by a Māori focus group convened to contribute to a national report on *Social Acceptability of Stoats and Stoat Control Methods* in 2002. While respondents referred to the stoat as *hoha* ('nuisance') and *koretake* ('good for nothing') and described the patterns of mourning and loss to which the stoat has given rise (see Fitzgerald and Wilkinson 11-15), the fact that this species is accommodated within indigenous frames of reference indicates forms of familiarity and integration. As this report and the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment's 1080 report make clear, too, the stoat is also caught up in debates about the ethics of the use of chemical poisons and immunocontraception which have led iwi to voice opposition to practices that persecute the wider world of life and interfere in its relationships (see also Ogilvie et al., Bootham, Wright). Precisely because it is implicated in the 'emergent ecologies' (Kirksey) and negative environmental impacts of settlement, then, the stoat has a place or role in a storied landscape. As well as prompting new articulations of attachment to land and species, it bridges histories of settlement and relationships to the past that cannot be erased.

## The end?

This discussion has sought to defamiliarise or make-strange whatever might seem normal, natural, virtuous or venerated about an animal sanctuary as a safe haven in order to examine the

settler investment in sanctuary-work and the deeper historical links between sanctuaries and acclimatisation activities. In this context, the stoat – as an example of biological-control-gone-awry, and as a limit case for care – reveals the norms and values which underpin state-sponsored environmental management practices, which in turn extend the settler reconstructive agenda. Animating the differential between kaitiakitanga and settler ecological regimes, the stoat's value is that it discloses or un-encloses what is expelled by European settlement as being 'exceptional to it' (Turner, 'The Truth of Waters' 114). If the stoat is a figure of ecological crisis in Aotearoa/New Zealand – an 'impossible' creature whose own ground-breaking cleansing or future-absence must be brought about in order to secure the settler state and its faunal icons of national identity – then one of the spectres that the stoat alternately and implicitly raises is the 'impossibility' of Aotearoa/New Zealand: settler polity threatened from within and exposed as perpetual scene of crisis, uncommon ground, damaged or strange place, suspended state, ecocidally-driven killing machine.

Whereas the 'immunity' or sanctuary that has been extended to the stoat in this discussion is only temporary, the New Zealand government's Predator Free 2050 campaign seeks a permanent solution to the problem of the stoat. The regime of violent-care that seeks to bring about the stoat's end in the sanctuary state of Aotearoa/New Zealand is already in motion and is unlikely to be paused. Incredibly – or perhaps quite logically – this is despite a recent scientific finding that stoats in Aotearoa/New Zealand are a reservoir for genetic diversity that has since been lost in their northern-hemisphere home ranges, such that their population is now understood as constituting an 'invasive ark' for otherwise-extinct genes (see Veale et al.).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in relation to the stoat, Aotearoa/New Zealand may offer a further, remarkable lesson when the logics of sanctuary-making are pushed to their extreme (or taken at their most literal and continuous). It is clear that in settler colonial places, where the world of life is subject to ongoing re-engineering, sanctuary is presently taken to legitimise the persecution of animals who are framed as persecutors by the operation of settler sanctuary-making itself. Yet because the settler state sanctions such treatment by creating 'anti-animals', what it produces is the need for further sanctuaries to protect whatever it elects to persecute. The prospect of such an outcome for the Predator Free 2050 campaign is by no means hypothetical. A test-case has

already played out on Enderby Island, off the southern coast of Aotearoa/New Zealand, in a bid to make that island rabbit-free. The Enderby Island rabbit evolved through the deliberate liberation of twelve French Blue rabbits on the island in 1865 by the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria to provision castaway sailors. No stoats were ever released on the island to control the burgeoning rabbit population, nor were any able to swim that far, so the island has always been free from stoats. Under the terms of a plan to convert Enderby Island into an offshore sanctuary for endemic species, however, the rabbit was subject to a concerted eradication campaign by the New Zealand Department of Conservation in the 1980s and 90s. The Enderby Island rabbit was then ‘rescued’ from extinction, re-housed in sanctuaries, and singled-out for a special breeding programme once the Rare Breeds Conservation Society determined that it was a genetically distinct species which had now been turned – by the New Zealand government – into the rarest rabbit in the world (see Torr; Whitman).

As this cautionary tale suggests, the power of the settler state to welcome foreign animal species by acclimatising them and offering free sanctuary and then to subject them to wholesale persecution and create the conditions of their willed endangerment and possible extinction is, indeed, exceptional. As this cautionary tale also suggests, given the roots of the imported logics of sanctuaries in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the stoat may soon – or once again – be owed safe haven here.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term Aotearoa/New Zealand in order to represent the difficulty of a place that is effectively two places at once (an indigenous place and a place of settler occupation), and as a means of refusing the smoothness of bicultural rhetoric.

<sup>2</sup> King suggests that ‘the part played by stoats in the *total* history of extinctions in New Zealand appears to be insignificant’, because stoats were acclimatised relatively late and thus never came into contact with many of the endemic bird species known to have been lost (106-7). This view



is in contrast with the bulk of the scientific literature, which holds the stoat responsible for widespread avifauna decline.

<sup>3</sup> Or, perhaps, they assume authority by taking refuge there, or take refuge in assuming their authority.

<sup>4</sup> Stoats do not tend to turn white in the temperate climate of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> Developing Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* (the figure of 'the excluded'), Abrell proposes the term *bestia sacer* with reference to animals treated by humans as property or material resources, describing how such animals may transform to become sacrificial citizens (iv-v). For the purposes of the present discussion, however, Holm's category of the 'anti-animal' goes further towards explaining the zealous persecution of 'excluded' species in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

<sup>6</sup> Martin (115) is an exception to this pattern.

<sup>7</sup> On the founding of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a 'better Britain', see Turner ('Being Colonial') and Boswell ('The Sensible Order').

<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, the term 'Māori', coined by the indigenous population as a self-descriptive term after European arrival in Aotearoa/New Zealand, means ordinary or not-strange.

<sup>9</sup> As Veale et al. explain, the context for discovery is the mid-twentieth century introduction of the *Myxoma* virus to Britain for biological control of rabbits (to protect grazing), which has produced the unforeseen side effect of decimating stoat populations there.

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