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2014

Caught in the net of life and time

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Caught in the net of life and time

Abstract

Huge dark eyes staring, the young kangaroo convulses next to me on the ground. My son restrains the dog that attacked it, my daughter sobs. The western sun slants through eucalypts, magpies carol in the distance, it is warm and still. We have had what nature writer Barry Lopez calls 'the conversation of death' and the joey will soon die. I am working with people who hunt, where lives are sustained through the ending of the lives of others. Hunting is constantly controversial, with arguments ranging from 'the first hunters were the first humans' to 'meat is murder'. But there are distinct cultural variations: there is a general acceptance of traditional Indigenous peoples' hunting and in middle-class Australia often an assumption that 'shooting' is a redneck activity. Across the world there is a wide range of social attitudes and beliefs around modern hunting. Anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that in relationships between hunters and animals, there is 'a working basis for mutuality and coexistence'.

Keywords

net, caught, time, life

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Adams, M. (2014). Caught in the net of life and time. *Meanjin*, 73 (2), 74-81.

Caught in the Net of Life and Time

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HUGE DARK EYES STARING, the young kangaroo convulses next to me on the ground. My son restrains the dog that attacked it, my daughter sobs. The western sun slants through eucalypts, magpies carol in the distance, it is warm and still. We have had what nature writer Barry Lopez calls ‘the conversation of death’ and the joey will soon die.

I am working with people who hunt, where lives are sustained through the ending of the lives of others. Hunting is constantly controversial, with arguments ranging from ‘the first hunters were the first humans’ to ‘meat is murder’. But there are distinct cultural variations: there is a general acceptance of traditional Indigenous peoples’ hunting and in middle-class Australia often an assumption that ‘shooting’ is a redneck activity. Across the world there is a wide range of social attitudes and beliefs around modern hunting. Anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that in relationships between hunters and animals, there is ‘a working basis for mutuality and coexistence’ (Ingold; see References below).

Our bush place is called Cloud Range—600 acres on the edge of the Snowy Mountains. To the north, snow-covered Half Moon Peak and Mount Morgan define the horizon. The western boundary is the upper Murrumbidgee River. We have cattle properties on all sides, all with extensive areas of forest, and Yaouk Nature Reserve and Kosciuszko National Park close to the east and north. Some locals know our property as ‘the lee paddock’, because it is in the lee of the Black Range, and in the past provided shelter for stock in cold southerlies.

As I reach the young kangaroo, it is an afternoon in late summer and we are walking cross country. It is one year on after ten years of drought, so there are many young kangaroos, and our neighbour thinks the mothers are pushing away the joeys younger than usual. Our joey is inexperienced, confused and quickly caught by the dog—an urban-raised golden retriever that has never hunted an animal in its life. By the time I pull the dog away from the kangaroo, although there are no obvious external wounds, the joey is seriously injured and cannot stand. I kneel beside it in the dust and my instinct is to just be with it quietly while it dies. But as it convulses and struggles the voices of my education are telling me to ‘put it out of its misery’. This is the story we are told: if possible, you do not allow an animal to suffer. So I take my daughter’s knife and quickly cut the young kangaroo’s throat to the vertebrae, nicking my finger in the process. I assume it is dead in an instant but the bodily reflexes mean that it continues to seem alive for some moments. I immediately regret doing it. Not because of the possible pain, because I don’t really think it suffers more than a second, but because of the seeming unnecessary violence of the act.

When the joey was still, I asked the kids what they thought we should do. They both unhesitatingly said we should eat it. We had not intended to hunt a kangaroo, but now that it had happened it would be wrong—in fact disrespectful to the animal—to waste the meat. My son and I hung the kangaroo from a eucalypt branch, skinned and eviscerated the body before cutting it into sizes appropriate for cooking. We cooked it with home-grown onions and potatoes and, although we regularly eat kangaroo purchased in the supermarket, have never tasted such tender meat. Before putting it in our mouths, we offer a toast to the kangaroo that has given us this meal.

On Cloud Range there are many macropods belonging to three different species. Each species relates to us differently and at least some individuals of some species also relate to us differently from their fellows. The swamp wallabies generally take off the instant they see us, while the grey kangaroos are slower to move. The flight distance of the red-necked wallabies is quite short, and we can be ten metres away before they start to react. This lack of nervousness is an indication they have few predators—no human hunters, and probably no canine hunters (dingoes or wild dogs).

In ecosystems where top predators are active, there is an ‘ecology of fear’ that drives the behaviour of prey species: they are more vigilant, dedicate less time to eating, and take flight more easily. Some ecologists have recently been arguing that these predator-driven ecosystems are more diverse and more resilient than ones where the keystone predators are absent. This discussion has centred vigorously on the reintroduction of wolves in parts of the United States, and been extended to dingoes in Australia. Scientists such as Cristina Eisenberg have argued that the loss of top predators from ecosystems all over the world creates a conservation risk as significant as climate change. It is controversial—the historic disappearance of these apex predators is, after all, because of human persecution, and we don’t seem to take lightly the idea of letting them back in.

It is challenging to think clearly about our roles in the fear and death of ecosystems. At the largest scale, it is clear that humans are the top predator on the planet, and the violence of environmental degradation is readily evident almost everywhere. In the West at least, much of this violent predation is enacted by machines, and much of the death is collateral damage: the huge factory ships that harvest hundreds of tonnes of fish (as well as ‘bycatch’) at a time; aerial spraying of aboricides over thousands of hectares of habitat;

construction of enormous concrete dam walls that have impacts over huge areas up- and downstream.

But at the landscape scale, the walking scale, the relationships between people and what environmental philosopher Val Plumwood called the 'rich interspecies communities' are more ambiguous. While the incident with the dog was unintended, we do hunt on our land: we sustain our lives by the taking of other lives. I have harvested food from the sea for most of my life but I have only recently become a hunter on land. I have a firearms licence and a rifle: I kill animals to eat. While I am new to this, other members of my family have a tradition of hunting, first in India, then in New Zealand. Since I have started to do this, I have been thinking about the meanings and motives in hunting, and as I speak with more and more hunters, some patterns begin to emerge. One typology that is crystallising so far looks like this: a group of 'ethical' hunters; a group outside this; and a group of professional hunters. The first group is not publicly evident, the second group is, and the third group is usually not subject to criticism.

One of the themes is the silence of ethical hunters. Hunters who are serious about their ethical responsibilities—who prioritise safety, who aim for clean kills, who scrupulously use the meat and other products from their kill—seem to be absent from much of the public discussion. Possibly it is because at least a number of these people work in professional, middle-class jobs, where there is routinely acute criticism about hunting, and they want to spare themselves the circularity of the arguments that ensue if they out themselves. Ironically, it is their absence from the debate that makes it easier to demonise hunters in general, as the visible and vocal hunters are unfortunately often the ones shooting out of their ute windows as they drive past farm paddocks, or maybe arguing vociferously for a lessening of gun control.

While ethical hunters have indicated to me that they are often silent about their hunting activity, hunters from the other end of the social spectrum are potentially also invisible. It is likely that there is a reasonably high level of hunting of native animals by farmers and by Aboriginal hunters. Many farmers hold the view that they have effectively sovereign rights over their land, and many Aboriginal hunters consider that whitefella law does not apply to them. There is no indication in the threatened-species or conservation literature that the level of this illegal hunting in New South Wales is problematic in conservation terms. This supports the hunters' view that the rules are political rather than conservation-based.

Hunters who hunt as a job, with the possible exception of kangaroo shooters, are often also invisible in public discussion. These are people who are employed in government agencies such as national parks and livestock health and pest authorities, and sometimes on large rural properties, to spend their time shooting, trapping and poisoning particular species, native and introduced. They tend to have unique and rather arcane knowledge and skills that enable them to carry out their hunts, but they are not often heard in hunting discussions.

The particular knowledges of some of these people—dingo trappers, fox shooters, people who muster and trap wild horses—are acknowledged by their employers, but not recorded or validated in any ongoing or public way. They are ‘heritage’ skills, the result of lives or generations lived in particular landscapes with their attendant animal occupants. They live very close to their environments, they know the animals they hunt individually, the animals probably know them individually. Some writers have explored how the livelihoods of these people contribute to ecological processes. Botanist Francis Putz argues that in North America, ‘as incendiaryists and hunters, the oft-disparaged rednecks play vital but seldom recognized roles as environmental stewards, roles that are currently being only partially filled by officialdom’. The types of burning carried out by marginalised rural people in the backblocks, along with their hunting activities, can contribute to better landscape-scale ecological outcomes than state-sanctioned bans on hunting and burning.

An hour before dawn, a hard frost. Orion is rising in the eastern sky, Scorpio sinks in the west. Orion is the Hunter, coming with his dogs, Canopus Major and Minor, and Sirius, the dog star. As Orion and the dog stars rise, dingoes howl from the dark mountains that bound the eastern horizon. I load the magazine, put it in my pocket, and step quietly out of the house with the rifle.

After an hour of quiet walking I startle a rabbit. It bolts through the scrub and I follow, quickly and quietly. At the edge of a clearing I stop, and not ten metres away a swamp wallaby sits up warily. But I haven’t left the trees and my human shape is disguised. I slowly raise the rifle and look at him through the scope: his dark face looks straight at me, thick black fur shot through with gold. A few seconds and he has had enough, drops his head and bounds off in the peculiar flat gait distinctive to his kind. As the eastern sky lightens, a pair of gang-gang cockatoos fly through the eucalypts, their creaking call like a rusty hinge.

If I were with Aboriginal people, that flight would likely be remarked upon. I have never been in the bush with Aboriginal people when there has not been

comment on the significance of particular natural phenomena, bird and animal behaviour, gusts of wind, mist. A month earlier I had been in a national park south of Sydney with several Aboriginal people and a couple of researchers. A young boy was with us, a nephew to one of the women whose ancestors walked that country for tens of thousands of years. As we crouched to look at ancient axe-grinding grooves in the sandstone, a huge flock of black cockatoos wheeled overhead. I have seen black cockatoos many times, and almost always in small flocks, maybe two to ten. This flock was thirty or forty, and they twice circled us, calling. One of the men said 'they're welcoming him to Country', because it was the first time the boy had been to this special place.

In the first tentative steps of my journey towards being a hunter, I need to pay a lot of attention to animals. A predator needs to know its prey: it should be a tight relationship, founded on knowledge, skill and respect. But it feels much more than biological, physical and practical.

Time spent with Indigenous people tells me some of them still know this. There is much more in the world than our rational frameworks enable us to understand. In a world dominated by science, I think we have something to learn from Indigenous peoples, but maybe also from those people labelled white trash or rednecks: dingo trappers, horse people, station workers on vast properties.

As I spend more time working and living on these mountain slopes and forests, my desire to engage with these dimensions of knowing becomes stronger. Hunting, killing and eating the animals and plants that share our rich interspecies communities connects me to the place. As I drink rainwater falling on this land, and eat the other species I share it with, the constituents of the cells of my body are slowly replaced with ones that derive from the ground I am standing on and the sky above.

For people who live close to their environments, the cycles and processes of life and death become tight and intricate. As I have started tentative engagements with people who hunt for a living, or who choose to make wild food a main part of their diet, the intricacy and depth of their skill and knowledge have become apparent. These are people who, in middle-class terms, often have low levels of literacy and educational attainment, who live on the margins of society, who have casual employment or none. Their hunting and harvesting equipment is often distinctly low tech, homemade and arcane. Their knowledge comes from long-term engagement with place, and with the non-human inhabitants of those places. They listen to and learn from their bodies and emotions. They pay attention when they get a shiver down their

spine. Writer Hugh Brody says ‘the hunter-gatherer mind is humanity’s most sophisticated combination of detailed knowledge and intuition’, and ‘it is artists, speculative scientists, and those whose journeys in life depend on not quite knowing the destination who are close to hunter-gatherers, who rely upon a hunter-gatherer mind’.

I go out again to hunt rabbits. Late in the afternoon, I sit with the rifle across my knees in the shelter of trees above a small ephemeral wetland. As I watch, two wombats and an echidna come out. The wombats emerge and then stand completely still for minutes on end—I am only sure they are wombats and not rocks because the low sun creates a rich brown aura around them as their fur is backlit. The echidna trundles along exploring with its nose, completely ignoring me. After I am there quite a long time a couple of rabbits emerge and start feeding. I am not in a good position but aim and fire at a rabbit about sixty metres away. It is too long a shot for the situation and the rabbits bolt away unharmed. The noise of the shot breaks the stillness of the afternoon, and I get up and walk quietly to the riverbank, cradling the rifle. As I pause against a tree, one of the rabbits bounds into view and then freezes. I sight and fire, and the rabbit falls instantly. I stay still, looking at the scene, which is again serene and calm as the echo of the shot dies away. The river, swollen with snowmelt, murmurs past, birds call. Then I walk over to the rabbit and, crouching down, see it is a female, prominent teats indicating it probably has young.

On the way back to the house I shoot another rabbit, also a female, that freezes in plain view. I think about the evolutionary disadvantage of having defences that can’t possibly work against the only predator that kills at a distance. I skin and dress the warm rabbits, thinking how similar their anatomy is to mine: heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, intestines, bones, muscles, skin, blood. Unless you work in medicine or the military, you don’t often see the internal human anatomy. I bury all the organs and the head and feet: dust to dust, but via whatever animal digs them up during the night. When I cook these rabbits into a birthday pie, I use the internet to find a famous cook’s grandmother’s recipe.

All of this raises questions: I am reflecting the lifestyle of ancestors who lived 50,000 or 100,000 years ago, but using complex modern weapons. I prepare a meal to a century-old recipe that I find from my laptop. Killing lactating females is good strategy if you want to control feral species numbers, and at least some of the young are probably what biologists call ‘the doomed surplus’ (my daughter is dumbfounded by that expression). The adult rabbits

die swiftly and I use their meat, but what is my ethical responsibility to those other small shivering bodies slowly becoming still in their burrow?

The experience of kneeling in the dust with the dying kangaroo has stayed strongly with me. It reminded me of another lesson I received from an animal. I once worked as a ranger in a mountain national park. Lost in a white-out on an autumn mountainside, I became increasingly close to panic, starting to run across the snow-covered rocks trying to get my bearings. Momentarily pausing to catch my breath, I saw a rabbit. It was casually hopping around, finding tufts of grass poking out of the snow, and nibbling the tips. I straightened up and watched it, as it went on with its life being a rabbit on a mountain. My breathing returned to normal, I realised I just needed to relax, let the looming panic drop away, and think sensibly about my situation. Ten minutes later I had found my way back to the path. It was seeing the rabbit so at home among the black and white rocks and rising blizzard, so relaxed and competent, that let me find my own centre and strength.

The title of this essay comes from American writer Henry Beston:

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals ... For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.

This writing links to contemporary ideas of ‘more than human agency’—the awareness and acceptance that there are forces and knowledges beyond the human, that the animals we share places with are active conscious agents in their lives, observing and thinking about us as we observe and think about them. All this again raises questions. How do I weigh my transient presence on Earth with what I think of as my responsibilities? How do we make space in our crowded lives for stillness, reflection, presence? What are the ways we can move as a society towards a moral human–nature reciprocity, rather than looking at nature as an object for amoral utilitarian resource management? Paradoxically, killing animals could be useful in developing better ethical, non-secular understandings of the relationships between humans and the rest of the world.

When I kneel down next to the animal I have hunted, there are strong emotions. Wild animals are very beautiful, and it is a rare experience to be very close to them. But now my appreciation of its beauty is shadowed by the knowledge I have caused its death, and there is sadness as well. I share this experience with many hunters—there are *always* mixed emotions: pleasure in the beauty of the creature, sadness at its death; pleasure that I have once again provided food, a level of revulsion with the violence involved. I am not sure if this is the human condition: we are so separated, as Beston says, from our animal selves that we can debate these dilemmas rather than fully embracing them.

It seems counter-intuitive that at a time of massive planetary extinction engaging with the conversation of death could be a positive step. But taking responsibility for the deaths you cause makes it hard to avoid the moral implications. I do not feel that I have the answers here: this exploration feels tentative, speculative. I feel a constant tension between my Western sensibilities and what my body and heart hint at. Watching the young kangaroo's blood seep into the dust under the eucalypts, I see blood on my cut finger—I can't tell if it is the kangaroo's or mine. **M**

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