

## A Case to Answer: The Extinguishment of the Sea Elephant Colony on King Island

I am standing at the southern end of the Sea Elephant beach. The beach sweeps north of what has become the hamlet of Naracoopa. The beach is free of any evidence of people – it is lonely and windswept – a classic beach on which to experiment with melancholia.

The early morning light is crystalline in its purity. The air is tinged by the smell of the beach and the sea, crisp and clean. The sea is polished, glass smooth, and the long breakers rise out of the smoothness.

It was not always like this. So empty.

When François Péron landed that in December 1802, he said, “the entire head of this bay was covered in elephant seals” and went on “the shores of this island are all covered with a prodigious number of amphibians.’ Péron was the naturalist on the Baudin expedition, Napoleon’s answer to Darwin’s voyage of the *Beagle*, with a secret mission to assess how the French could invade Sydney.

I imagine the huge mounds of animals clumped together in groups on this beach. Enormous piles of blubber. Péron’s description is hard to beat: “in all their movements, appear to tremble like an enormous bladder full of jelly, so thick is the layer of oily fat that envelops them.” The scale is difficult to convey. The animals are as big as the hull of a fishing boat. They have two flippers poking out one end, large webbed but prehensile with ‘fingers’. Other than flippers, they are almost all body, though with large and lustrous eyes (all the better to see prey in the watery depths), and for the males, a pendulous trunk-like nose (which functions like a rebreather when at depths that rival the strongest subs). There is an animal scent in the air, but it is not overpowering. These strange piles of grey-brown cylindrical objects clumped together along the beach. There are great gatherings of adolescent sea elephants in the river’s estuary pools. Occasionally one splashes water over themselves with a lazy flipper. Sea elephants do like to be together on land (though when at sea are solitary). I am imagining that we are here in late December, at the same time of year as Péron.

It is late in the breeding season, in my imagination, just before Christmas. Much of the time, the sea elephants lie motionless. Until one moves, raises its head, and others in the pod complain. At any time, there is the noise of elephants somewhere on the beach. Occasionally one enters the water – they move like jellied rolls of fat, rhythmically moving down the body in quivering succession. Land is not the environment that they are graceful or necessarily where they are comfortable. I may think them ridiculous, but if they could express themselves, they might say I look absurd to them, especially if they saw me swimming. The creatures are oblivious to me. They have no fear of people, making them such easy prey for the sealing expeditions.

Today the beach is bare, windswept and wave-shaped – no such extraordinary creatures in sight; nothing of that sort of scale. The biggest creature on the beach is the occasional red-necked wallaby. Their distinctive tracks are impressed in the sand near my feet. There has been no sea elephant colony here in over two hundred years.

Yet only six years ago, in December 2015, the Tasmanian press excitedly reported a sea elephant pup being born on King Island or one of the nearby islands. When discovered, the pup was about two months old. The nearest colony is now on sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island, 2000 km away. There was hope, though, hope that this was the beginning of a return of the colony. For animals, any species, loyal to the birth site, their breeding site, it is a mystery how a new colony begins. It happens but it is a contradiction.

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In November 2019, I bought a house on King Island at the end of a road by the edge of the sea. I sit at the kitchen table as I write this piece. A flame robin lands on the wires between the decking posts, its breast ablaze against the greys of sea and sky. The robin is on its way, migrating from the High Country of the mainland to Tasmania. It is a 4WD track to this house, and it is considered remote even in King Island terms. I bless my luck at being here.

To the north is the muttonbird colony of several hundred thousand birds, stretching to Grassy, some six or seven kilometres further north. It is a great mystery as to why and how colonies form. A colony presupposes a commitment to the place of birth but can only develop when that pattern is broken. King Island is my el dorado of natural riches. At night from the house, the distant single light of the Point Stokes lighthouse comes blinks four times and then is dark for six seconds. And again. All night, it emphasises the darkness.

Coming here, I learnt there was once a sea elephant colony not far to the north of here. I was surprised. No, startled. I thought of sea elephants as a creature of the islands of the Antarctic, distant places like Macquarie Island, where most people are never likely to be able to visit. Yet here they had been, with their great bulbous wobbly trunk noses, just up the road. I knew seals had been hunted, and the populations collapsed, but I never imagined that someone would have killed every last sea elephant on the island, the only sea elephants in Bass Strait. That's a crime to me. Among all the riches of nature on King Island, there is still a sadness to think of the loss of a unique colony of sea elephants, presumably one that had been thriving here since the last ice age.

The sea elephant colony on King Island was eliminated in what was perhaps three or four short, summer hunting seasons in the very early 1800s, by the end of 1805, to be precise. We know the name of the man who led the team of sealers who did much of the killing. We know the name of the merchants who likely organised and funded the venture. We know sea elephants are extraordinary to us landlubbers, confined to one terrestrial dimension.

The destruction of this sea elephant colony was a case of deliberate ecocide that happen in a very particular place within a short span of time. The people and the causes are identifiable. It is a harbinger of our times. So, how did this come about?

On 9 February 1797, with water up to the lower hatches, and the pumps losing the war with the leaks, Captain Hamilton ran his ship the *Sydney Cove* ashore on Preservation Island. It was before Bass and Flinders 'proved' to the satisfaction of the European colonisers, the existence of Bass Strait in 1798, sailing through on the *Norfolk*. Something Traditional Owners on both sides of the strait did not need to be proved.

The news carried by survivors of this wreck of immense seal colonies were the trigger for the sealing rush of the early 1800s in Bass Strait, but that is some months off. Seventeen men left the island in the longboat on a rescue mission to Sydney. The shipwrecked lived on muttonbirds, the short-tailed shearwaters, while they waited for rescue. (Somehow the depredations of the last 200 years have not dented the populations of these birds. They are still common in immense colonies across Bass Strait. Why have the sea elephants disappeared in the strait, and seal population struggled to recover, yet the muttonbird colonies continue to exist, if not to prosper?) The seventeen across the eastern mouth of Bass Strait without knowing the strait existed. The longboat was wrecked on the Ninety-mile Beach in Gippsland, on the mainland. They set out on foot. Only three from the longboat arrived at Port Jackson, a settlement of only some 1500. The others died of hunger and exhaustion or were killed for offending indigenous customs. These three hailed a fishing boat and were taken to Sydney town. Governor Hunter sent the schooner *Francis* and the sloop *Eliza* south as a rescue party for the survivors of the *Sydney Cove*.

Captain Charles Bishop of the brig *Nautilus*, which was moored in Sydney Cove on a speculative venture, heard the news of the substantial seal colonies the sailors of the *Sydney Cove* had seen. Before arriving in Sydney, Bishop had tried to catch the end of the otter skin trade as Captain Bishop said:

*with the knowledge of the trade and information I possess, of being able to get a large Cargo of Sea Otter Skins ... very well calculated for the Fur trade on the Northwest coast of America, wither I mean to proceed with her, for you are to recollect that the Fur trade is not so barren yet, but that with the knowledge I have derived will be made to answer well.*

Despite Captain Bishop's hopefulness, the market for otter skins was oversupplied. His interest turned to other species to exploit for coin.

Bishop immediately set sail in response to the news. He had been considering a voyage to Masafuera off Chile to seal there. Instead, he headed south to the Furneaux group of islands. Captain Bishop wrote in his letter dated 18 May 1798 to the ship owners:

*From the Commander and Sad remains of the Crew of the ship Sidney Cove of Bengal, who were obliged to run their Ship on ... to Save their lives, we learn that the Islands thereabout abounds with Fur Seals, and it is our intentions to proceed from here about the 25th of this month for those parts with a Strong crew of 25 men and two whale boats to kill and dry skins for China, and boil out Seal oil for this market.*

Then

*With much difficulty we at length put to sea 7 October in better condition than I had expected, and in a fortnight arrived at Cape Barren Island where we found Fur Seals pretty abundant and by the 20th Decr we had procured near 5000 Skins with about 350 Gallons oil*

When he sailed for Port Jackson that December, Bishop left a crew behind to continue the carnage.

As I read Bishop's memorandum book 'particularly Intended, by me, for Mr. William Bishop, Attorney at Basingstoke in Hamshire', it strikes me how energetic the search for commercial opportunity was and how surprisingly connected the world was, still only part explored, in terms of information, and quick the response was to events. Men like Bishop and ships like the *Nautilus* were out there looking for opportunity in the early nineteenth century, and opportunity was often in the products of wild animals, hunted to extinction or near extinction. Beaver, otter, seal. Much of the British colonial project was conducted less by English naval captains and more by sealers and fur traders driven by opportunity.

The other thing that I notice in my reading of Bishop's book of memoranda that dumbfounds me is the raw numbers being discussed, the rate at which the animals are being slaughtered. The sort of numbers recorded by Bishop was repeated again and again up and down the straight. One ship carried a haul of 34,000 skins. Sealing was about opportunity; it was not about sustainability. This story was repeated throughout Bass Strait for other species. The seals for their fur and oil, sea elephants for their oil, whales for their oil and ambergris, penguins for their oil and albatrosses for their feather. Some of these deaths were simply for fashion – for hats! This was a society unmoored from any sense of place, notion of care for the environment.

Bishop wrote

*we continued on this buisness untill the beginning of March 99, when having procured about 9000 Seal Skins with little Probability of getting more that Season.*

Bishop and the *Nautilus* had been there since September. The maths is frightening; over five months, 26 men killed 9000 seals. That is 450 a week per man and 75 a day (if they worked a 6-day week and respected the sabbath). The animals had to be skinned, and the oil boiled down. That would have been exhausting work.

Bishop's venture and those that followed scythed through the wild populations of Bass Strait the rest of the century. These were killing fields. Slaughter had been industrialised; demand was commercialised.

*Nautilus* was not the only crew ready to go to work sealing. The *Nautilus* showed the way, a way that led to the end of the sea elephant colony on King Island. On 14 December of 1799, the schooner *Martha*, commanded by a Captain William Reed, sailed into Port Jackson from Bass Strait with 30 tierces of seal oil and more than a 1000 seal skins. Reed's cargo is but one example on the record— many were not recorded.

Governors Hunter and King were keen to support an export industry of oil and skins, though Hunter had restricted the building of boats for fear of convicts escaping. King lifted this

restriction in late 1800 and granted permission for colonists to participate in the coming boom of the Bass Strait seal slaughter,

Captain Reed, returning from a sealing expedition on the *Martha*, was the first to report to Governor King of the seal colonies of the southern part of King Island. King tantalisingly wrote down the date of 1798 in the margin of a letter to Baudin written in 1802:

*If Mr. Baudin insinuates any claim of this visit, the island was first discovered in 1798 [King wrote 1799 in the chart.] by Mr. Reid in the Martha and afterwards seen by Mr. Black in the Harbinger and surveyed by Mr. Murray in February 1802.*

Perhaps an error, but if correct, Reed may have sailed through Bass Strait before Flinders and Bass – and pioneered sealing before the *Nautilus*. The sealers may again have been well in advance of officialdom. It is remarkable how much detail there is in the historical record yet how much variation there can be in that detail.

In January of 1802, Lieutenant Murray of the *Lady Nelson*, mentioned by King, had landed on King Island. He wrote in his log:

*Here we landed and the first thing we saw was a number of sea elephants of an immense size lying asleep on the beach, each of them, Barnes the boatswain's mate told me, would make 8 or 9 barrels of oil; as we rowed down the shore we took them to be bluish rocks. We found along this beach two freshwater lagoons full of those animals which made it taste brackish... We could not get near the upper part of them on account of the number of elephants playing in them both. I named the bay Elephant Bay from this circumstance.*

Murray was on a survey expedition arranged by Governor King. The island had already been sighted and named Governor King's Island by Captain Black of the *Harbinger* in 1800. The *Harbinger* was the second ship to sail through the recently discovered Bass Strait.

King wrote to Sir Joseph Banks on 5 June 1802:

*The great number of sea elephants, prime and other seals, that are throughout these Straits and all up the southwest coast, will make this (Port Phillip) a place of great resort, if the oyl of the elephant or skins are held in request.*

About "King's Island", he had this to say in the same letter:

*'Harrington' (Captain Campbell) returned to Port Jackson after being four months absent, six weeks of which time was in a very snug place on the Western side of King's Island finding with prime seal skins and elephant Oyl.*

I am again standing at one end of Sea Elephant Beach. Here I am wondering what François Péron was thinking as he arrived on the beach with three other scientists - Leschenault, Bailly, Lesueur - from *La Géographe*. The group spent three weeks on the beach. The ship had to stand off from the beach because of storms. At the northern end of the beach's long sweep was the sealers' camp, led by Daniel Cooper (or Cowper). Péron was fascinated by the elephant seals, a keen observer, and a quick one:

*in all their movements, appear to tremble like an enormous bladder full of jelly, so thick is the layer of oily fat that envelops them."*

He questioned Cooper extensively about the sea elephants to learn more from the man's experience. The sealers had been there since June 1802, about the time King was writing to Banks.

Péron testifies to our story. He was there when the extermination of the colony of sea elephants was beginning.

If you had been standing here with Péron on Sea Elephant Beach in late 1802, the beach would have been alive with sea elephants, the smell, the noise, the sense of the sheer scale of the animals. You would know it was real because of the crunch and roll of sand under your feet as you walked. The males' size is so stupendous, up to four tonnes, five even six times bigger than a polar bear, and all fat in a round body without definition, it is surprising they can move at all on land. The animals are not afraid of people. They do not run nor attack, though you would not want to be rolled on by an animal that weighs four tonnes. There are dead pups rotting on the beach because they have been rolled on. The beach is a scene of life and activity. It is the end of the mating season. The cycles are different further south, where it is colder, and sea elephant colonies still survive. They start breeding earlier and finish earlier. Today, there is not a pinniped to be seen.

Sea elephants spend most of their life at sea, which is much more their natural element. The blubber protects them when they go 500, 1000, even 2000 metres below the sea. A southern sea elephant that was tracked swam 4,800 kilometres over three months, making some 80 dives a day to depths ranging from 500 to 1000 metres. American sea wolf class nuclear submarines can go to a depth of 730m depth. The Russian Komsomolet submarines, with their titanium hulls, penetrate as deep as 1300 metres. The deepest dive of a sea elephant has been recorded at 2,388 metres. They can stay underwater for an hour and a half. Down deep, there are vast agglomerations of prey species — and predators limited to shallow dives are avoided. Despite their elegance at sea, and especially underwater, sea elephants need to come ashore to breed and then also have to return to land to moult. After breeding, they are at sea for two or three months, and then after moulting, they stay at sea for seven months.

The sealers to the north end of the beach were led by Daniel Cooper (or Cowper), who had been there for some six months when Péron arrived, with his wife and eleven other sealers.

Péron wrote of the sea elephants

*"The English have invaded these hide-outs which have for so long protected them. They have everywhere organised massacres which cannot fail soon to cause a real and irreparable lessening of the numbers of these animals."*

Péron became extinct himself on 14 December 1810, outliving the sea elephants and the emu species on King Island. A chest complaint and old wounds had caused him to give up writing the account of the voyage at volume 2, page 230A. He died not long after.

Onboard the *La Geographe* was also Surgeon Thomson, who had taken passage to return to Europe. Thomson regularly corresponded with Governor King and wrote on 18 January 1803

*I was yesterday the whole day onshore. I found in the bay an officer and seven men belonging to the Margaret which left this on 8 July for Otaheite. They have killed about fifty elephants in less than a month after the vessel had sailed which filled all their casks, yielding about 6,000 gallons of oil. The seals from continual harassing, seem to have forsook the island, and I am much afraid, from similar continued interruption, the elephant will be forced to seek some other haunts, and from there being none of these animals found in any of the other islands in the straits, it is probable that there are some particular causes, such as matter for food, bays free from reefs and of easy access to their large unwieldy bodies, etc., etc., peculiar to this island, which if they are forced to abandon entirely, would be a great loss and detriment to the colony*

I have a dream. One day an international court will be convened, maybe in the pub in the centre of Currie, King Island's capital. A panel of judges will be assembled, and barristers will arrive, to try the crime of ecocide against those that allowed the sea elephants to be eliminated from King Island, who 'forced the elephant to abandon ... this island entirely'. There is a time and a place. The crime happened over a short period of time, a period of a few years. It is not a diffuse crime, like say climate change, that is the responsibility of many; it is a crime of an identifiable few. It seems eminently suitable for a court case, a legal trial. I imagine a panel of judges, prosecutors and defence counsel, expert witness including historical figures such as Cooper and Péron, and maybe Governor King would be there. Should we hold King and Hunter responsible as enthusiastic promoters of the trade? How can the defence justify this wanton killing? To what extent, say, can we hold Bishop accountable? He was seeking to please the masters of his ships, the funders of his voyages. He was a working-class man on the up and up, conscious of the expectations to perform. Were the sealers just people of their time, or are they people of our time, where the same extinction rate continues? And now there is climate change. There is complexity here that merits a court hearing.

Then, there are the cod, the beavers, the otters, the whales, the seals, the egrets killed for their plumes, the carrier pigeon, the buffalo. They may see a judgement as a precedent for their own cases.

In the obligatory interim review report of Australia's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, Graeme Samuels said in 2020, in unequivocal words: "Australia's natural environment and iconic places are in an overall state of decline and are under increasing threat. The current environmental trajectory is unsustainable." What he did not say is that this trajectory started in 1788. For the sea elephants on King Island (along with a unique dwarf emu and dwarf wombat), that trajectory started as early as fifteen years after the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay. Samuels recommended lessening a confusion of regulation and creating a robust environmental enforcement agency to ensure more straightforward laws were abided by. Environmental laws, even weak ones, are rarely

enforced. The government rushed to cut environmental regulation but did not create its essential counterpart, required by the review, of an environmental cop.

Are we just too careless of the world in which we are embedded?