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Defining a pest: can a species be both a pest and a taonga? How worldviews influence pest control thinking and approaches.

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Through the Predator Free 2050 (PF2050) work we do with kaitiaki, kaumatua, and hāpori across Aotearoa, one question consistently comes up – what exactly is a ‘pest’?

If you take the Department of Conservation’s (DOC) [definition](#) (noting that they use the word predator and not pest, which we would argue has a different, very aggressive, even militaristic, connotation to it, something we will discuss at another time), it points to the big three species that everyone is likely familiar with: rats, possums, and stoats. But isn’t that limiting? What about the many other purposefully introduced species to Aotearoa? Should they not also be considered pests too?

Through conversations facilitated by our PF2050 work (supported by the DOC), these are the types of justified questions we’ve been receiving. In reflections on them, we have come to one key realisation – how a ‘pest’ is defined is socially prescribed, fundamentally changes over time, and, therefore, is dependent on the prevailing social and cultural attitudes towards the environment of the time (hence the differences in how the environment is treated pre and post colonisation). In other words, any given animal could be considered a taonga (treasure) or a pest and it all depends on who you are talking to, the mātauranga or knowledge they hold, and who has the power. Accordingly, the definition of a ‘pest’ is fluid, and it’s possible for an animal to be both a pest and a taonga at the same time.

For example, the now protected and coveted Kea were once mercilessly hunted and considered a pest because of claims that they attacked sheep in Te Waipounamu (the South Island). An economy-first philosophy underscored this pest classification because they were damaging the economic prospects of sheep farmers by killing a few sheep. A bounty was put on them, despite being a taonga species to local Māori and a keystone species in many areas. Upon realising their numbers had been significantly reduced, the Kea was eventually protected by the Crown and are now widely revered amongst citizens and tourists alike (though we do acknowledge that some are still deliberately hunted). The Kārearea (NZ Falcon) and Weka are two other birds that have been, and arguable still are, being persecuted due to their hunting habits.

The question then is why are some species being labelled pests and others taonga, and who makes that decision? At the risk of over simplifying, we’ve been finding that Māori and Pākehā have different starting points on what defines a pest, as do those who work on the ground and those who are making decisions about conservation. This begins to explain why the Crown is focusing on certain species and why many we work with are questioning its legitimacy to make decisions about what we target and what we protect. We believe, based on the evidence we’ve been gathering, that the main reason for the different views and approaches are the variable experiences and application of mātauranga a-

Using mātauranga, whakapapa, history, tikanga as a backing, this story frames the deer as a symbol of colonisation and, through pest management, a vehicle to decolonise:

The presence of deer is felt by our manu. Kohekohe is a tree that flowers in the winter. As such, it provides a food source for Tūī that helps sustain them over the winter. Kohekohe though, are also a food source for deer. In forests where deer have been present for a while, there is very little Kohekohe present. This means that Tūī struggle to make it through the winter. There is ample evidence available to show that the presence of deer means the demise of plant species, which is a threat to bird species. Deer can be found elsewhere in the world whereas many of our taonga species including the one I have mentioned, are only found here in Aotearoa.

I refer to our native species as taonga, rather than deer as a taonga, for many reasons. Firstly, many of our native species are part of our whakapapa. For some Iwi, they directly descend from certain species. For other Iwi, native species are considered part of their whakapapa because it was manu that enabled their tūpuna to live and produce children. Rather than a western paradigm of lineage being 'male + female = offspring', Māori ideology states that 'male + female + environment = offspring.' Another way to consider this philosophy is the creation stories of Te Ao Māori. Before making humans, Tāne had brought other life into this world. Tāne brought trees and birds to life before humans, thus, making them our tuakana (older siblings) in whakapapa. We are junior to them in many ways.

When our tūpuna arrived in Aotearoa from Hawaiki, manu helped them to survive. Manu were a vital part of this new environment that helped ensure our whakapapa continued. Manu taught our tūpuna how to speak and sing. This is evident in the names we call the manu and the songs that are sung by Iwi all over the country, that mimic the sounds of manu. Manu showed our tūpuna what food sources were safe in these new lands, as well as providing themselves as sustenance. Manu also kept our tūpuna warm by providing feathers for clothing.

So, it is for these reasons that I am comfortable saying our native species are a taonga, but I cannot confer the same title to deer. However, one could argue that deer are part of our Pākehā whakapapa. Deer have fed our ancestors, and – like manu – they taught us to talk which is evident in how we mimic the roar sound of a male deer. However, I am yet to see this argument be tested in a Māori setting.

If deer were truly a taonga for Māori, like our native species are, we would see deer being classed as kaitiaki (a kaitiaki is seen by some Iwi as a protector of whakapapa, mauri, mana) by Māori communities. Manu, ngāngara, rākau, have been classed by different whānau, hapū, and Iwi as kaitiaki. I am yet to see deer be referred to as a kaitiaki (please don't do it!). However, I know that elsewhere in the world, Indigenous peoples share a special relationship with deer species and some deer are regarded as 'guardians' in those cultures. Furthermore, to cement the prestige of some native species, hapū and/or Iwi will call themselves after those taonga species. There are a few examples of Iwi being called Ngāti native species (I won't list any examples as I haven't talked to these Iwi to get their permission). I only recently learnt that Ngāti is in fact short for 'Ngā tini o' meaning 'the multitude of.' So, I would be loathed to hear people calling themselves, the multitude of the deer.

I get why some people want to call deer a taonga and are challenged by the fact that it is a coloniser. As well as providing meat, hunting deer is a way for some people to connect to the ngahere. Connection to nature is fundamental part of Māori culture and informs many kawa and tikanga. We are seeing tikanga for hunting deer being used by Māori hunters. Karakia before a hunt and during a kill. Tikanga being applied to how venison is distributed and shared with whānau. Some people may see this as a good thing in that deer hunting is providing an opportunity to keep our cultural practices alive. My counter argument is that all we are doing is further colonising our culture. We are using deer to sustain tikanga that were developed for manu harvesting.

The harvesting of manu is where this conversation needs to head. Manu are undoubtedly a taonga, a resource, and a part of our whakapapa. Deer have no place in our native forests, so I therefore hope that we get to a point one day where deer numbers – along with other pests – are kept so low in our native forests, that manu are thriving and we can restore our harvesting practices. Deer are most welcome to stay in Aotearoa, on our farms and in our commercial forests. But the presence of deer in our native forests means the further loss of our actual taonga.

So, as I start planning for the roar in a couple of months, I conclude by encouraging all hunters to eliminate as many deer as possible from our native forests. I don't want to be complicit in further colonising our ngahere, our reo, our whakapapa and Tāne Māhuta. I'm hoping the roar is successful for me and I manage to get some deer. If I do, I know the venison I get will be the sweet and tender taste of decolonisation.

Stay tuned to Te Tira Whakamātaki's social media channels and newsletters for more short stories and thought pieces around what a pest is, how we talk about Predator Free 2050 and Conservation, and why that should matter to you, and many other environmental kaupapa.

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