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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A Multispecies Collective Planting Trees: Tending to Life and Making Meaning Outside of the Conservation Heroic

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### Abstract

To what extent do dominant narratives and ontologies support the work of ecological care? While working in anti-extinction conservation requires paying careful attention to the realities of precarity and ambiguity, this is not necessarily reflected in our public narratives of such work. Instead, as in Jean Giono's 1953 short tale, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, many conservation narratives are pitched in heroic modes, framing conservation as work intended to secure or rescue an obvious 'good' in perpetuity. However, such individual heroism requires that one overlook the radical interdependence of life and the ambivalent and uncertain aspects of ecological care. In this paper, I think alongside the work of another tree planter—Wellington-based practicing Buddhist Errol Greaves—about the affordances and challenges of re-storying one's world in ways that make space for contingency and relationality. While Errol's aims of regenerating native forest on Te Ahumairangi Hill and—by so doing—providing habitat for the endangered kākā (*Nestor meridionalis*), are in accord with governmental anti-extinction conservation and regeneration goals in Aotearoa/New Zealand, his mode of storying his work contrasts with public framings of conservation through being supported by distinctly non-heroic and relational narratives. Rather than arguing for any inherently ecological aspects of Buddhist ontologies, this paper attends to the ecological affordances of specific practices and framings. Specifically, I argue that, in shifting from storying anti-extinction conservation as heroic rescue to the work of tending to life, ecological care may gain both greater responsiveness and sustainability in the face of environmental precarity.

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## Introduction

For a long time, I held Jean Giono's 1953 short story, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, as a model of a life made meaningful through environmental action.<sup>1</sup> Even after the disappointment of discovering the story was fictional, the tale of Elzéard Bouffier, a shepherd living in the Alps of Provence, offered the hope that committed environmental action might result in a permanent—or at least very long-term—contribution to the flourishing of ecosystems. Throughout the story, set in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Bouffier plants thousands of trees. In the decades through which the short story travels, his labour gives rise not only to the emergence of a vibrant forest, but to wide-spread reinvigoration of the world around him: as a result of his consistent labours, birds come to make their homes in the newly-emerged forest and people return to once again inhabit the valley. As Bouffier ages, the forest is placed under the permanent protection of a ranger so that, at the close of the story, the forest is presented as being set to continue in perpetuity, an achievement framed as a memorial to Bouffier's 'truly exceptional qualities'.<sup>2</sup>

For me, as a pākehā (non-Māori) girl growing up in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa), this story of ecological rescue and restoration both reflected and reinforced my hopes that extinction crisis I grew up in could be 'solved' by human action. However, in order to create tales of such heroics, a story must overlook ecological realities of interconnection, ambiguity, change and uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> Heroic narratives, ubiquitous in Western story-telling, typically tell of superior individuals fighting on the side of the 'good' in a worlds containing both forces of evil good and evil. Heroic tales rely on the notion of independent, rational actors—individuals boldly forging new paths in the world and righting wrongs as they do so.<sup>4</sup> Approaching conservation and extinction as problems to be heroically 'fixed' not only potentially greatly underestimates the complexities of the challenges at hand, but may even exacerbate matters.<sup>5</sup> Heroic visions of conservation and anti-extinction action shift focus away from the multispecies reality of life, overlooking the ways in which a forest, to return to Bouffier's work, is always a multispecies happening, a (never-entirely harmonious) collaboration of soils, bacteria, fungi, water, sunlight and more.<sup>6</sup> As theorists such as ecofeminist, Marti Kheel, and ecologist and literary scholar, Joseph Meeker, have argued, tragic heroic modes not only reduce complexity, but require that ecologies be reduced to reductive battle scenarios.<sup>7</sup> Even establishing the possibility of a wholly 'good' action requires that one overlook the necessary harms that are part of care.<sup>8</sup> Even Bouffier's planting, for all it brought to the humans, birds and others who came to live there, would have displaced the lives of those who preferred the scrub and harsh tundra. Ecological realities make Bouffier's work of planting no less meaningful, but certainly more complex.

While there have never been certain futures, in our times of environmental crisis, the confidently heroic ending of the *The Man Who Planted Trees*, with its promise of a human-led, unambiguously-positive, stable solution, increasingly feels out of accord with the precarious realities of our times.<sup>9</sup> Climate change is already altering our weather and seasons; translocated biota—particularly humans—have caused massive levels of species extinctions; poisons and radioactivity are damaging not only living beings but their heritable genetic

material; capitalist expansions and plantation logics have wiped out huge tracts of previously flourishing ecosystems. Yet, despite the realities of such precarity, heroic framings continue to constitute a major aspect of the public narratives that inform conservation practice.<sup>10</sup> In settler-colonial countries like Aotearoa, establishing such tales as norms also marginalises and renders ‘cultural’ Indigenous recognition of kinship with the more-than-human world. And yet, as Indigenous conservationists have long been arguing, such individualist worldviews and imagined separations of humans and ecologies lie at the root of ecological harms.<sup>11</sup> It matters, as Donna Haraway argues, ‘what stories we use to tell other stories’.<sup>12</sup> As Eduardo Kohn has argued, our ontologies reflect and enable particular modes of recognising and relating with other selves.<sup>13</sup> How might non-Māori conservationists find ways of storying ecologies in more relational ways without appropriating Māori lifeways and the particular and long histories of Māori connection to the land in Aotearoa? As Anna Tsing notes, in the margins of mainstream practices, other stories that matter are being told and acted with.<sup>14</sup> What emergent or marginalised non-heroic ways of storying the world are already influencing non-Māori conservationists? Though no story is ever innocent, what relationships with the more-than-human world and indigenous practices of environmental care might such stories enable?

In this paper, I follow the particular storying and work of another man who plants trees, Errol Greaves, a charismatic retired pākehā (non-Māori) English teacher and practicing Buddhist who coordinates a team of humans planting native trees on Te Ahumairangi Hill. Thinking with his commitment to creating forests that might feed kākā (*Nestor meridionalis*) and other endangered endemic bird species, I consider both the challenges of working outside of heroic conservation narratives, as well as some of the potential resources that dwelling with non-heroic narratives might offer for responding well to the realities of ecological relationality. Rather than appraising any sort of ultimate ecological usefulness of a Buddhist-inflected ontology, I instead attend to the ways in which this particular relational mode of seeing oneself and the world might matter in terms of sustaining the work of ecological care, particularly in the face of impermanence and uncertainty.<sup>15</sup>

## Heroic Conservation?

This story is based on Te Ahumairangi Hill, a reserve of 38 hectares at the north western end of the Wellington Town Belt, not far from Aotearoa’s parliamentary buildings. Prior to colonisation by pākehā, the area had been a food collection site for local iwi (tribal) groups, Te Atiawa, Taranaki, Ngāti Ruanui and Ngāti Tama, whose descendants are collectively identified as Taranaki Whānui ki Te Upoko o Te Ika.<sup>16</sup> In 1839, the land was sold to the private firm, the New Zealand Company, as part of the Port Nicholson Settlement with the understanding that the area was to remain available for gathering food. However, in 1841, the reserve land was claimed by the Crown and reassigned as ‘town belt’ to be used for recreation, not food gathering. In the ensuing decades, the hill’s sustaining relationship with birds was also severed, as native trees were cut down and replaced with introduced flora such as grass, pine, macrocarpa, oak and sycamore—trees which provide little sustenance to native birds whose diets rely heavily on nectar and fruit.<sup>17</sup> Te Ahumairangi was renamed to reflect a lack of nurturance of a different sort when it came to be known as Tinakori Hill—a transliteration of ‘tina kore’, or ‘no dinner’, allegedly referring to the situation of Māori workers who, while working to build the roads which came to round the hill in the mid-nineteenth century were not granted the lunches usually supplied to workers as part of their recompense.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, as part of the Claims Settlement Act 2009, Te Ahumairangi was officially returned to its original name. While, since 2007, Taranaki Whānui ki Te Upoko o Te Ika have been

brought in to consult on the regeneration of the land, Te Ahumairangi remains part of the Wellington town belt and under the control of the Wellington City Council.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Te Ahumairangi largely remains under the heroic preservationist logics that guide terrestrial conservation in Aotearoa generally, requiring the separation of the ‘conservation estate’ from food gathering and human dwelling.<sup>20</sup>

Heroic framings affecting lives on Te Ahumairangi are also present in governmental approaches to introduced species. In 2016, the Predator-Free 2050 (PF 2050) plan was introduced by the government with the intention of ridding the country of ‘invasive predators’ by use of both current methods of trapping and poisoning as well as the development of new biological and genetic technologies. As the campaign’s website explains, PF 2050 aims to use such methods to ‘preserve our threatened species’ and provide ‘a legacy for future generations.’ Such heroic notions of saving and rescue of course also reflect the deep care felt by many New Zealanders to protect species from extinction. This does seem to require some degree of both killing and containment of introduced predatory species against whom many native birds and reptiles have few defences.<sup>21</sup> However, in order to carry out this work and to maintain a heroic sense of unambiguous goodness, species must be re-created as inherently good and bad.<sup>22</sup> Such framing provides categorical justification of the killing of problematic species.<sup>23</sup> As Ngāti Hine elder, Kevin Prime, has argued, while there are a wide range of Māori conservation approaches (and, indeed, many people working in mainstream conservation are of Māori descent), for many iwi, species management would be carried out in place- and time-responsive rather than categorical ways. In such modes of species management, rather than attempting to eradicate species entirely, management might variously involve hunting for food or clothing, leaving species be or, perhaps, if a species is out of balance, engaging in wide-spread culling practices.<sup>24</sup> As it stands in mainstream conservation in Aotearoa today, however, the framings of some animals as inherently ‘bad’ allows the ‘suppression of empathy or compassion’ towards such species.<sup>25</sup> And such framings have consequences: in Aotearoa, introduced predator species are at times the victims of acts of extreme violence with ‘pest’ species—particularly possums—regularly topping national lists of cases of animal cruelty.<sup>26</sup>

### A MULTISPECIES COLLECTIVE WHO PLANTED TREES? QUIET NON-HEROICS.

I met Errol after he had posted an ad on the suburb-based social network programme, *Neighbourly1* looking for people to help him monitor a kākā nesting box with the intention that—should any kākā nest in the box—that we would help to protect the nesting parents from attack and any fledglings from predation. The nesting box was attached to a pine tree on Te Ahumairangi and had been supplied by the Wellington City Council as part of an attempt to encourage the birds to breed in new locations around Wellington city. At the time I was conducting doctoral fieldwork within Aotearoa conservation worlds, attending to how people come to—and are called to—care for some species and kill others. Errol’s work seemed to offer an opportunity to consider how directly working to protect members of an endangered species (in this case kākā fledglings) might influence people’s relationships with introduced predators. I joined Errol and a team of several monitors and, between us, we shared the duties of checking the box every couple of days. No kākā came to nest in the box that year, so the project was ended prematurely. On my walks with Errol to visit the kākā box, however, Errol began to introduce me to some of the hundreds of native saplings he and his team had planted.

1 To which around half a million New Zealanders now subscribe and which is largely used for finding babysitters and reporting lost cats.

I became fascinated by his enthusiastic commitment to this work and asked to come along to one of the tree-planting team's weekly action days.

The planting was part of Errol's hope of creating an ecosystem which supports native birds such as the kākā. Kākā are listed as endangered and decreasing on the IUCN Red List, with fewer than 10 000 individuals as of 2016.<sup>27</sup> Like many native birds, the products of native trees—including nectar, seeds, fruit, honeydew and sap as well as tree-dwelling-invertebrates—are major components of kākā diets.<sup>28</sup> Habitat loss, predation by introduced mammalian predators and food competition from possums are cited as major causes of their decline.<sup>29</sup> Despite the overall decline, Wellington's kākā numbers are booming. In 2002, six birds were released at Wellington's Zealandia ecosanctuary. Supported by hundreds of volunteer hours to assist with breeding and protecting fledglings from predation. By 2016, Zealandia had banded 750 kākā. These birds can now be seen—and heard—screaming through the suburbs surrounding Zealandia, with many returning daily to feed on sugar water provided by the sanctuary. It was the apparent need for kākā to return to Zealandia to feed that first drew Errol into his planting work; from his home at the base of Te Ahumairangi, he had regularly noticed kākā travelling back and forth from Zealandia. As he explained in a later interview, he found himself wondering how he might help to regenerate the sorts of plants which could provide kākā with viable sources of food outside the sanctuary.

Upon joining the tree-planting team, I soon found I wasn't nearly fit nor robust enough for the manual labour in the sun this work required. By midday on my first session I was exhausted and found myself focused on keeping in the shade of the scrubby bush we were planting in. Errol, by contrast, seemed tireless, planting vigorously despite regular urgings from team-mates that he rest. As the half-dozen or so team members variously planted, rested and removed weeds from around the base of saplings that had been planted a few months back, Errol pointed out some of the broader connections supporting each young tree. He explained the importance of both native and introduced older trees in providing shady protection for the saplings. The health of the communities of fungi and bacteria in the soil, he explained, were also vital to the trees becoming established. In order to protect these fungal communities, Errol avoided using mechanical diggers and discouraged volunteers from any unnecessarily-aggressive shovel work.

In contrast to *The Man Who Planted Trees*, in which the narrator marvels that a great forest had 'sprung from the hand and the soul of this one man',<sup>30</sup> Errol was clear from the outset that this was the work of a collective of many species. Indeed, in many ways, my own telling of this story through focusing on Errol's actions suggests my own difficulty in thinking and storying outside of the heroic. Certainly, Errol was uncomfortable on the occasions I asked about 'his' work. He was emphatic in his acknowledgement that this was a team effort, one started by others and supported by various people as their capacities allowed. Moreover, this team was not only human: consciously working as part of a multispecies collaboration was a key element of Errol's regeneration methodology. For Errol, this was not *his* project—this was not a story of a man who planted trees—but rather of a collective of soil bacteria and birds and plants and humans growing together. Indeed, for this project to work, Errol recognised it would need to be taken up by a multispecies community of birds and fungus and bacteria. Thus, it was to my delight when, a year later, Errol emailed me to say that, as he had hoped, native trees were being spread by birds, with 'bird-distributed Pigeonwood (*Hedycarya arborea*) seedlings' springing up under a row of pine trees.

## ECOLOGICAL KINDNESS? PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES OF RECOGNISING KIN

In some ways, this story is not an unusual one: nest boxes supplied by the City Council have fledged kākā in other parts of Wellington; the native trees Errol plants are grown by Wellington City Council's Berhampore nursery for planting in parks and reserves throughout the city; and there are volunteer planting coordinators working in teams in many other parts of the country. However, the subtly different approaches evidenced in Errol's work—an acknowledgement of the collaboration and an absence of demonising of any flora or fauna—have implications for the lives on Te Ahumariangi Hill.

As I came to see more of Errol's practice, the contrast to mainstream conservation practices became increasingly apparent. Errol openly paid kind attention to worms and to bacterial communities in the soil, attempting to harm or disrupt them as little as possible and actively proclaiming their virtues as unseen co-creators. Errol also encouraged others towards such kindness. He noted that some changes in worldview may happen simply by doing the work of ecological care, stating that, 'actually, the world in which we live, if we're awake to it, can also wake us up'. However, he also noted that sometimes kindness needed a degree of prompting. Speaking of encouraging others to think about the broader connections involved in soil and worm care, he noted:

*I still think we need an intervention. So, that's why, for me, when I'm planting, I say that I would prefer that you didn't use a spade, but you use a fork to dig your holes, because you reduce the chance of cutting worms in half (laughs). Just by that one thing.*

*Knowing that consideration of worms was not a commonly-held view, Errol noted that he framed the use of forks rather than spades as a request, not a demand. While most people respected this preference, in order to help this along, Errol noted, laughing, 'I usually make sure that there are no spades.'*

From her research in conservation worlds and ecological tourism in the UK, Aotearoa and Canada, Tema Milstein has noted that expressions of feelings of relatedness and connection to the more-than-human world are often actively shamed.<sup>31</sup> Specifically in the context of Aotearoa, Amanda Thomas follows the years of campaigning of Ngāi Tahu iwi to have a non-instrumentalist, relational, framework accepted in the governance of the Hurunui River. For Ngāi Tahu, non-instrumentalist modes of care were accepted on the basis of their whakapapa, or genealogical, connection to the river. In contrast, as she notes, those pākehā who spoke for the importance of care for the river 'were constrained by pressure to speak the language of Western science, and lacked the descriptive technologies to talk about their "kinship" relationship with the Hurunui River'.<sup>32</sup>

Having the ability to comprehend relatedness is fundamentally entangled with kindness. The very term 'kind' has a root of 'kin'—a recognition of relatedness.<sup>33</sup> As O'Connor and Taylor argue, kindness is a way of acting that recognises our connectedness and interdependence.<sup>34</sup> For those of us who share in ontologies in which selfhood is about imagined independence, it is precisely this element of recognising our necessary relatedness that makes kindness particularly awkward. Kindness—seeing connection and recognising the vulnerability of the fundamental interdependence of existence—challenges our heroic individualism in which the nature of being is to be a discrete, independent unit.<sup>35</sup>

During our later interview, and after some probing from me as to why his approaches were so different, Errol noted that, for more than 30 years, he had been a practicing Tibetan Buddhist. His planting practices and ongoing reading of ecological restoration work reinforced

his sense that having respect for all living creatures was ‘probably a pretty healthy thing to have going’. As Buddhist studies scholar, Rita Gross argues, when one recognises the fundamental interconnection and interdependence of all life forms, one’s ethics shift to a consideration of the greater connectivities of which one is a part.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, for Errol, cultivating kind consideration of others was about recognising interdependence. As he noted, Buddhist practices of meditation actively cultivating kindness toward others (regardless of species) through meditating on one’s connection with the other. These methods of not becoming ‘coarsened’ required an active and ongoing praxis. As Errol noted: ‘I remember the Lamas saying to me, every time you extend that sensitivity to another creature, you soften your being. And every time you don’t, you harden—by repetition you harden—and you are able then to do coarser and coarser things’ [29:56]. While Errol acknowledged that sometimes there might need to be a coarse person in pack, avoiding becoming hard toward others forms a life was a fundamental component of his commitment to working on Te Ahumairangi.

There have been ongoing scholarly discussions about whether Buddhism, as a religious orientation, contains inherently ecological elements. As Buddhist studies scholar David McMahan argues, it is important to reframe such questions to instead attend to particular practices, as contemporary Buddhisms, particularly in Western countries, have particular historical entanglements with ecological sciences.<sup>37</sup> In this, some aspects of traditional Buddhism(s) shift. In particular, interpretations of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda* (pali) or *pratityasamutpāda* (sanskrit)), are strongly influenced by ecological thinking, as encapsulated by Barry Commoner’s ‘first law of ecology’, the notion that ‘everything is connected to everything else’.<sup>38</sup> Some scholars have identified the tenet of dependent arising to be a key ecological aspect of Buddhism through its affirmation of the contingency and interdependence of our thoughts and desires and also, potentially, of life.<sup>39</sup> However, it is precisely interdependence and impermanence which Buddhism identifies as the root cause of suffering—the root cause of the dissatisfaction of life and the reason for working towards leaving the cycle of earthly reincarnation. As McMahan has argued, such a fundamental desire for liberation from the contingency of the physical world hardly renders Buddhism the ecological worldview it is often touted to be. As a range of scholars have argued, however, rather than attempting to locate inherently ecological (or anti-ecological) aspects of Buddhism (if, indeed, it ever makes sense to speak of a ‘general’ Buddhism), more helpful questions might be asked about the intersection of environmental discourses and particular religious views.<sup>40</sup>

In particular, it might be helpful to consider the ways in which Errol’s own particular practices and learnings help him to cope with the difficult aspects of conducting conservation in non-heroic ways. Errol’s broad ecological kindness—a seeing of relatedness and a generalised respect for other life forms—makes apparent other challenges. In relational perspective, we experience a shift in our responsibility: we are no longer doing *the* right thing. In particular, through a relational perspective, Errol was unable to disregard the victims of decisions to kill.<sup>41</sup> In tracing connections, in tracing kindness, one loses the sense of an easy ‘good’: beings who matter are harmed by his actions. Perhaps counter-intuitively, without the possibility of anything being entirely, simply, good, Errol is more able to consider the harms of his actions, avoiding the sorts of cruelty which can often go unchecked when one operates under the mantle of the apparent and unquestioned, ‘right and good.’<sup>42</sup> While he noted that some degree of killing introduced predators did seem to be necessary to protect native birds from extinction, Errol did not personally demonise them and lamented their deaths. And, indeed, as a core ethical practice, Errol actively guarded against getting overly self-righteous and certain of the goodness of his actions:

*And as I said to you, you know, if I turn my attention to growing fruit for birds then I'm going to have all sorts of consequences, it's not as simple as my mind makes it to be. So I'm actually slightly kind of sceptical about my own initiatives and my own motivations. I like the idea of being able to see more birds and more kereru around where I live so I can create the conditions for that to happen, but if I get really energised about it, and exercised about it, that's when I know that I'm slipping into that non-thinking, not really recognising the consequences of it.*

For Errol, the emergence of such feelings of righteousness were a cue that he needed to pull back and reconnect. For Errol, heroic inflation was also dangerous aspect of the colonial mentality. As he noted:

*And if you think about popular culture of our teenage years—well, my teenage years—it was the end of the cowboys and Indians, you know. And that was about America telling its colonial stories. And here in New Zealand, if we are making the jump, that colonial story is here.*

There is, for Errol, a vital ethics in relinquishing the emotional high of the hero tale.

As I have noted elsewhere, a range of clinical studies have suggested that there may be wisdom in sadness, with sadness being associated with both less prejudice and more creativity in decision making.<sup>43</sup> Through having the affect tolerance to not avoid his sadness through discounting and demonising particular species, Errol made room for the possibility of less suffering. While conservation in Aotearoa often takes killing introduced species as a default, Errol paid attention to the part he himself was playing in the troubles, noting of rats, in particular, that 'they exist because we exist'. He actively attended to what he and other humans might be able to do rather than just kill, such as compost management, tending to the disposal of food scraps, consideration of modes of fencing that might discourage predatory mammals from accessing Te Ahumairangi and, of course, the work of actively supporting habitat renewal.

For those of us raised with worldviews assuming the existence of clear-cut goods and bads, such kind approaches can be deeply challenging.<sup>44</sup> Yet, such views reflect the ambiguous reality of combatting extinction. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa notes, when we look broadly at the lives of others, we see that 'we cannot possibly care for everything... there is no life without some kind of death'.<sup>45</sup> As Thom van Dooren has detailed, attempts to conserve some species may mean harm to others.<sup>46</sup> As Cary Wolfe argues in light of the great complexity of the living world and the enormity of the number of species under threat, 'we will have been wrong' in our attempts to fight extinction.<sup>47</sup> While we may hope that our actions will make a positive difference, in reality, we face the impossibility of ever choosing 'correctly': we live in a world in which there is so much that matters and in which we cannot choose to align ourselves with 'everyone and everything at once'.<sup>48</sup> Even if we wished to abstain from action, through our daily actions, we find ourselves impacting on the lives of others, supporting some ways of life and not others.<sup>49</sup> The question of what is to be done is never-settled and ever-political.<sup>50</sup>

Relatedly, neither are any modes of storying 'innocent'.<sup>51</sup> This extends, too, to Errol's own approaches which, like those other humans doing conservation work in Aotearoa, is still very much carried out within a pākehā register, in which a strong boundary is drawn between conservation and human subsistence activities. Indeed, Errol's very emphasis on not killing reinforces very separations that marginalise some indigenous practices of ecological care in which eating and making use of the feathers of birds are a vital part of living with them. It is



also, as Errol himself noted, questionable whether his leadership in consideration of other-than-humans would have been received in the same way had he not been pākehā.

Aspects of Errol's world view, however, potentially enable him to better respond to what Māori conservationists have long pointed out, that colonial conservation strategies have long caused immense damage by overlooking human behaviours.<sup>52</sup> As Māori conservation scholar, Margaret Foster has pointed out, pākehā-led conservation has neglected to attend to what is occurring outside of the 'conservation estate'—seeing human practices as somehow separate—allowing farming and commercial forestry practices and poisoning of land and waterways to go unremarked upon.<sup>53</sup> In operating outside of heroic framings, in refusing to see himself as being outside of ecosystems, Errol must consider his own actions.

Errol's ability to withstand the sadness of dismissing some species as categorically 'bad', seemed to allow him the possibility of responding attentively, rather than categorically. For Errol, the explicit question was not so much on the basis of introduced or native status but, rather, on the basis of the ability of species to get along in communities in order to support endangered species such as the kākā. Errol noted that, while some introduced flora might create harm, others might be beneficial. Errol was careful about his interventions, particularly around killing, nothing that his 'initial interventions may be simply orientation walks to observe, to watch, and to identify and reflect on the detail of what is happening'. Such openness to what might matter seems particularly important in the face of climate change. In a later email, Errol explained that the two-hectare pine plantation on the Thorndon/City side of Te Ahumairangi had become the focus of planting in 2017. As the pine trees aged, the canopy broke up and it was here that Errol noticed that bird-distributed Pigeonwood seedlings were growing up in the lightwells. He and his group weeded out the exotic sycamore saplings, noting that, in Aotearoa, this species tends to not share space easily. The team, however, made use of the shelter the pine trees offered, planting native podocarp saplings in amongst them. At the end of the summer, trees that were planted on the pine plantation side of the reserve had fared better, sheltered in the cooler microclimate under the fragmenting pine canopy. In contrast, the native saplings planted on the more exposed western, Wilton side suffered increased mortality during the long, hot summer of 2017-18.

It's not that this sort of responsive work with ecologies-as-they-are isn't already happening in mainstream conservation practices. Indeed, at times, this is precisely how conservation plays out in practice. However, such approaches of leaving introduced species such as pines and gorse in conservation areas tend to be cases of 'making do' with limited resources for removal rather than being part of official discourse or active strategies of reconciliation or accommodation.<sup>54</sup> As Kezia Barker writes, due to limited conservation recourses in Aotearoa, decisions have been made in regions throughout the country to no longer remove established gorse (an invasive, prickly bush introduced from the UK for hedging material) from many areas.<sup>55</sup> While leaving gorse on conservation land continues to be opposed by some members of the public, through such (in)actions, as Barker argues, it was discovered that gorse is a helpful nursery plant, not only fixing nitrogen, but also tending to die off as the saplings grow and shade the gorse.<sup>56</sup> A significant population of the endangered giant wētā may also have been saved by gorse.<sup>57</sup>

#### **INTENTIONALITY: ALLOWING FOR RESPONSIVE COMMITMENTS**

For those of us who have grown up with heroic ideals of the possibility of rational action winning the day, enabling ourselves to hold ecological realities and the impossibility of

categorical decisions might require active reorientation. Gregory Bateson argues that, as humans, we are only ever able to be conscious of the arcs of the greater circles of existence.<sup>58</sup> Bateson argues that imagined certainty about the world can enable the sorts of ‘too purposive’ decisions, such the application of DDT to kill insects, an action producing unintended systemic harm which Bateson argues arises from ‘failing to see the interlocking circuits of contingency on which life depends’.<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, he argues that various artistic, poetic and religious practices may be vital resources for encouraging the necessary humility of approach to the immensity of ecological interconnection.<sup>60</sup>

In order to enable ongoing care in the face of inevitable change, Errol noted the importance of attending to his overall motivation and intentionality, so that he might both kindly hold the impossible complexity of life and yet still act. As he noted, a focus on intentionality was vital to holding the ecological reality that interventions which are vital for some lives also harm others:

*It's that individual motivation to do good. As long as your motivation is for all sentient beings. And that's where the consciousness of the impossible impacts of what you're doing comes in. That's to do with those philosophical questions about doing physical damage to other things.*

This emphasis on intentionality also allowed Errol the humility and caution of being able to attend to the ‘impossible impacts’ of what he was doing, and yet to still act. This was not a question of giving up on trying to achieve certain outcomes. Instead, it was an acknowledgement of the difficulty of ever knowing just what the effects are and needing to attend to that. As Errol noted during our interview, it is never entirely obvious that we are doing ‘good’:

*I'm self-reflective enough to, I can't be gung ho about this sort of work. I can't be gung ho at all. I mean, rats? When you plant a lot of fruit trees for birds you're also providing a lot of food for rats and mice. Those numbers are going to explode, I know. I know, because they're dining at the same table.*

Feminist materialist scholar, Stacy Alaimo argues for just such a shift in our goal-setting particularly for its ability to make space for emergence and contingency:

*I realise hope is a powerful political force, and for many people indispensable for survival, but I prefer the Buddhist ideal of ‘right intention,’ performed while detaching from projected outcomes. This sense of relinquishing control, while perhaps problematic for perpetual political struggles which must project forward in time, makes sense for a new materialist understanding of emergence and intra-active agencies.<sup>61</sup>*

In letting intentionality guide one’s process, there is room for being *attentive* rather than myopic focus on particular outcomes.<sup>62</sup> Unlike in heroic modes, this responsiveness and adaptability is not a failure or a second choice but, rather, is the reality of living as part of an emergent, relational world.

## On Making Meaning and Tending to Life

In facing such uncertain outcomes of one’s actions, however, one is met with the question of not only how to keep on without the hope of doing the right thing or even of knowing entirely what the effect of our action are, but also how to do so without the promise of permanence. For those with individualist, permanence-based ontologies, as religious studies scholar Roger Gottlieb argues, conservation is often valued due to its promise of a degree of permanence.<sup>63</sup>

Certainly, just such a hope is present in *The Man Who Planted Trees*—the hope that one might be part of a lasting legacy, of proving that humans could be ‘as effectual as God in other realms than that of destruction.’<sup>64</sup> But what if we find ourselves facing futures offering no such promise of stability?

Towards the end of my formal interview with Errol, as we edged towards the two-hour mark, great gusts of wind hammered the picture window of the small local café we sat at. The rain became torrential, pelting to the extent that Errol and I were forced to pause our conversation. When the rain subsided sufficiently that we could hear one another again, I returned to the interview, noting that it seemed appropriate that the weather outside had gone so wild, considering the precarious state of things, environmentally:

*Laura: That weather seems sort of perfect—it feels like ‘who knows what’s going to happen to the world’? It’s like you said before, ‘We’re in a sticky patch’, which I think is such a lovely euphemism [both laugh]. But yet you’re still doing this action which is life-giving—a really hopeful act—or life-supporting, maybe—*

I trailed off, suddenly conscious of the vulnerability of Errol committing to something like this, to the work of supporting the emergence of a flourishing forest, a home for endangered birds, despite the presence of political and climatological precarity. I felt like I was exposing Errol, somehow threatening his work, raising questions about its meaningfulness, through pointing to this precarity. So I stopped, mid-sentence. Errol waited in the silence for a moment before responding. He spoke carefully, with long pauses between his sentences:

*I don’t think I’m ready to—honestly, the honest answer is I have no choice. I mean, I have to live. I cannot contemplate suicide. But I’m actually kind of, I’ve just about done everything. And all I’ve got to do is—the work up there is actually just me breathing and exercising myself in a meaningful way. Andy [a member of the planting group] laughs at me when I talk about meaningful work: ‘Do something meaningful!’ Sheila [another founder of the group and knowledgeable planter] even sort of satirized me, saying ‘If you feel like doing some meaningful weeding, come and join us!’ [both laugh]. But actually, that’s what it is, that’s what I’m doing. At this time in my life, that’s my garden, and obviously I want other people to help me do it, because it’s a big job, you know [laughs]. And I am—to be really honest—I have no choice.*

I have returned, repeatedly, to Errol’s comment that he had no choice. Errol concluded our interview by repeating his statement that, if he wanted to live, this was simply what he must do—that, at its core, his labour was an anti-suicide measure. Although I was initially startled by this stark recognition of dependence—of the vulnerability of it—I have come to think that it is this apparently desolate statement that holds the seemingly contradictory anti-heroic power of Errol’s work. Errol does not act to save others, but to maintain himself—a self that is fundamentally relational. As Deborah Bird Rose has noted in her studies of the participatory entanglements of flying foxes and eucalypt and melaleuca blossoms, dualisms of selfishness and altruism break down as one recognises that one *is* one’s relationships.<sup>65</sup> Errol identifies that, for him, that which keeps him tied to life is not so much the forest itself, but the *act* of working, the forging and re-forging of connections. In a relational perspective, however, such labours do not require heroic will. Rather, one is simply doing the necessary work of tending to life. And in his work of turning back to care for life—despite all the temptations to fall into hopelessness—Errol is tending to life, *tending* both in the sense of leaning toward aliveness and of caring.

This is a turning towards the present and towards the *work* required in order to *make* meaning. Ayala Pines, psychologist and scholar of burnout in a range of aspects of life, has argued that ‘the root cause of burnout lies in our need to believe that our lives are meaningful, that the things we do are useful, important, and even “heroic”’.<sup>66</sup> However, if, as for Errol, one accepts that there is not ultimate, permanent meaning, one’s life becomes a continual work of the creation of meaning. While heroic conservation tends to be outcomes-focused, a saving of the world, the realities of care are, instead, a matter of ongoing response, the work of sustaining and mending connections. Perhaps most importantly in our current ecological crisis, by finding meaning and coming to trust in the work of tending to life, there is a point to action, to continually turning towards life. In finding meaning in action itself, as Gottlieb argues, ‘even when things are at their most bleak...it is truly worth carrying on’.<sup>67</sup> The work of caring for our interconnection is, as Errol says, not a choice but, rather, an anti-suicide measure. While outcomes are never permanent, in relational view it becomes clear that the work of care is part of a continual weaving of oneself into the world, the necessarily ongoing work of tending to life.

And accordingly, the story of Te Ahumairangi doesn’t have an ending. As Errol made clear on numerous occasions, it is never entirely obvious how things will turn out. Without any ultimate assurances, the work of tending to life continues. When I last heard from Errol, kākā had moved in, with two clutches of chicks hatched on the hill. Hundreds more trees had been planted with the intention that this greater ecosystem might continue, an inharmonious and uncertain multispecies collective that includes trees and soil and fungus, humans and mustelids, rats and bacteria, and a growing community of birds.

## Conclusion

There have, perhaps, been times when we could imagine the possibility of something like permanence. Elzéard Bouffier’s 50 years of planting trees in the Alps of Provence were framed by the hope that the forest he planted would continue forever. However, our current environmental crisis renders change and impermanence unavoidably apparent. How do we deal with the ecological realities of being neither good nor permanent? Not all worldviews support such humility or help to sustain the work of ongoing care in the face of such realities. In such light, it is not a question of finding ‘true’ stories but, rather, of attending to what particular ontologies might enable.

In settler-colonial nations such as Aotearoa, in which individualist concepts of what it is to be a human are typically framed not as one ontology among others but instead as *the* rational truth, relational considerations of the world are often dismissed as ‘cultural’—despite the ways in which such worldviews provide helpful tools for the consideration of the overwhelming reality of ecological connectivity. This requires both the refusal of dismissive moves in which non-hegemonic worldviews are rendered merely ‘cultural’ (as opposed to an important reflection of understandings of the world) as well as resisting default framings of mainstream heroic storyings as being somehow more objective or scientific.

In attending to what a particular worldview might enable, it is not just a question of whether it emphasises relationality or not. We are made of vast interconnections and any world view must necessarily see and value some connections over others. There is also the question of the particular qualities of those relationships. Without the requirement of heroic simple goodness, such ways of storying may help to protect species from being rendered inherently killable, as well as encouraging consideration of the effects of human actions and habits on

extinction. In emphasising the realities of interconnection, Errol may have started with the goal of making a home for kākā, but he came to find himself as part of a greater mystery of an emerging multispecies community. In this, however, no mode of storying or being in the world is innocent; apparent kindnesses can cause surprising harms. Indeed, the very emphasis on non-killing in Errol's particular ecologically-influenced Buddhist practice is potentially the most violent towards Māori worldviews through its potential to reinforce colonial separation of people from the 'conservation estate'. And yet, Errol's related critique of inflated hero stories was a vital aspect of his own critique of colonial attitudes and reductively categorial approaches to conservation.

In coming to see ourselves as our connections, what environmental care *is* shifts. Errol's planting was—and is—motivated not by the hope of leaving legacies of immortal goodness but, rather, by the moment-by-moment choice to create flourishing communities of life—including his own—through engaging in what he refers to as 'meaningful work'. Perhaps ironically, such vulnerable, non-heroic, recognitions may be vital for sustaining anti-extinction labours. Within such a frame, we come to see that we are working to maintain the relationships of which we are comprised. In a relational perspective, one does not need to have 'unfailing greatness of spirit' in order to engage in ecological care.<sup>68</sup> Instead, through recognising ourselves within ecosystems—indeed, *as* ecosystems, such care is simply doing the humble, necessarily imperfect, work of keeping ourselves going. It is the work of tending to life, of refusing despair. Finding ourselves outside of grand heroic narratives, without the hope of permanence or ultimate rescue or of there ever being a simple 'good' with which to side, there is the potential for finding pleasure in meaningful work. Errol participates in the work of tending to life not as 'a' human planting trees, but as part of a multispecies collective of astounding complexity. In returning to Te Ahumairangi to continue to plant and attend to those others around him and to continue to attend to what is emerging, Errol is exercising himself, doing meaningful work, *creating* meaning and ever-particular, could-have-been-otherwise, flourishing in the world. Work he continues to do.

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