

Rachel Carson Center Perspectives

How to cite:

O’Gorman, Emily. “Pelicans: Protection, Pests, and Private Property.” In: “Troubling Species: Care and Belonging in a Relational World,” by The Multispecies Editing Collective, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2017, no. 1, 41–48. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7773.

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ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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Emily O’Gorman

Pelicans: Protection, Pests, and Private Property

In 1911, on a group of small, rocky islands in the Coorong lagoon in South Australia, approximately two thousand pelicans were slaughtered. Australian pelicans (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) were seen as particularly conspicuous competitors for fish by the growing fishing industry there as they took fish from the nets when fishermen brought their catch to the surface.¹ After the killing, the islands were leased by a group of ornithologists who sought to protect the pelicans and other birds that nested there.

Centering on this event and its fallouts, this essay explores the way in which specific modes of caring for the Australian pelican have been entangled with class politics, cross-cultural relationships, and the law. I first came across the slaughter in an archive created by the South Australian Ornithological Association (SOA) held by the State Records of South Australia. This archive reveals the complex roles of the ornithologists, who sought to maneuver through a highly legalized landscape and circumvent legislation in order to realize the kind of protection they wanted for birds. I draw on this archive and other sources such as newspapers and ornithological publications and place them critically within broader colonial power structures and discourses.² In doing so, I situate the ornithologists’ care for pelicans within particular and intersecting class structures, colonial ideologies, and legal frameworks. Ultimately, the ornithologists’ mode of caring for pelicans—their approaches to protecting breeding areas—had a range of important consequences.

The Coorong, Pelicans, and Islands

Today, the Coorong is an iconic wetland in Australia known for its birdlife. It is a long, relatively thin and shallow saline lagoon, located southeast of Adelaide. In the north, it lies adjacent to two lakes—Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert—and the mouth of the Murray

1 This essay draws on material published in Emily O’Gorman, “The Pelican Slaughter of 1911: A History of Competing Values, Killing, and Private Property from the Coorong, South Australia,” *Geographical Research* 54, no. 3 (2016): 285–300. Please refer to this text for full references of all archive entries where they are not provided here.

2 For an overview of the relationship between archives and power see: Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 1–19.

River. From there it stretches approximately one hundred kilometers south. Historically, this area has attracted many different kinds of birds, with over two hundred species recorded in the region, as well as other animals and plants. In 1966 part of the area was declared a national park and in 1985 it was listed as a wetland of international importance under the 1971 Ramsar Convention.

The Australian pelican is just one of the birds that visits the Coorong and is amongst the most visually prominent. These birds are big and have, in fact, been claimed as one of the “heaviest flying birds in the world,” with adult males on average weighing eight kilograms. These birds can also gather in the thousands. It is perhaps no surprise then that the epithet in the species name means “conspicuous.” For pelicans, the Coorong is perhaps most significant because of its islands. They have nested on the Pelican Islands—a group of six small islands in the lagoon—almost every year since at least the mid-eighteen hundreds, but probably much longer. By the early twentieth century ornithologists regarded the islands as one of only two main nesting places for pelicans in the state.³

A small fishing industry started in the Coorong and Lower Lakes region in the 1840s, expanding rapidly after 1885 when steam rail connected the local town of Goolwa to Adelaide markets. Local fishermen have long seen pelicans as pests, and reports of young pelicans being killed and eggs smashed on the islands in the Coorong go back to at least the 1870s. It is unclear how often these “raids” on the rookeries took place but there is some evidence that they may have happened almost every year. In many ways, then, the 1911 slaughter was not an unusual event. However, the strength of the debates it mobilized, particularly regarding care for specific species and more generally native Australian birds, the archival and newspaper records it generated, and its fallouts clearly indicate that something set it apart. In many ways this “something” may have been a growing ethos of care and protection for native birds fostered by certain groups at the time.

3 Samuel White, “Destruction of Pelicans,” *Emu* 10, no. 5 (1911): 344. See also F. R. H. Chapman, “The Pelican in South Australia with Special Reference to the Coorong Islands,” *The South Australian Ornithologist* 24 (1963): 9.

The Slaughter

Of the two thousand or so pelicans slaughtered in 1911, most if not all were young birds. A group of local men had in fact waited for a large number of eggs to hatch in order to kill more birds. This was so that they could collect the maximum payout from the one-penny bounty that had recently been put on the head of each pelican by the State Fisheries Department—for which they needed to present the heads. Already seen as problem by many fishermen, the birds had recently been added to an official list of pests (which already included cormorants, turtles, and tortoises) by the State Fisheries Department.

Just after pelicans were listed as pests, they were also listed as “unprotected” in the Bird Protection Act 1900. Presumably, this was to tally with their listing as a pest to fisheries. This meant that there was now no closed season for killing them and they were no longer protected within a protected district in the Coorong. This is a fairly complicated set of events, but in general terms, within the space of two years, a number of legal changes meant that pelicans were no longer protected at all in either the Coorong or the state as a whole. The fact that the Minister of Fisheries declared a bounty on pelicans was regarded by many at the time as the direct motivation for the slaughter. The bounty not only encouraged people to kill pelicans, but reinforced the culling as a community-minded action. However, as news of the slaughter spread, many people were outraged that young birds had been massacred and questioned whether pelicans were a pest at all.

Members of the South Australian Ornithological Association—who were strong advocates of bird protection—were especially outraged. One of the members, Samuel White, expressed his views to newspapers soon after news reached Adelaide. He stated that: “It is one of the most dastardly acts I have ever heard of.” He argued that more of these raids, “so brutally perpetrated,” would lead to “the extermination of this remarkable bird.” White thought that pelicans were being unfairly vilified and argued that the ornithologists “can prove that pelicans do not consume the enormous quantities of fish they are alleged to do.” Other members of the association and biologists similarly argued that pelicans did not eat enough fish to be pests, or that they ate fish that commercial fishermen did not want, like bony herring.⁴

4 See White, “Destruction of Pelicans.”

Ornithologists and other bird-protection advocates saw the pelican massacre as an example of the type of events that were possibly contributing to increasing local and species extinctions of birds in Australia and around the world. They argued that it was due to human activities that in the north Atlantic great auks had become extinct in the 1840s, and now pelicans and other bird species could no longer be found in some areas of Australia.⁵ The story of the raid on the rookeries, and particularly White's interview, gained quite a lot of publicity and was featured in metropolitan newspapers across eastern Australia. Many reporters commented on Australian pelicans as "quaint," "noble," and "remarkable" birds that were native to the continent, and so should be protected. The massacre of young birds seemed insupportable to many, particularly when coupled with White's argument that pelicans in fact were not eating the quantities of fish that the fishing industry claimed. One reporter called the massacre of pelicans "illogical" and another both "foolish" and "cruel."

While no one defended the killing of the young birds, local fishermen voiced their views that pelicans reduced their hauls, eating the fish they needed for market. A former fisherman from the nearby town of Meningie, W. Tregilges, wrote: "I have frequently been four or five dozen . . . bream short [due to pelicans]. . . I have put out a mullet net at night and in the morning have seen about 20 or more . . . [pelicans] along the net quietly saving me the trouble of taking the fish out, but they would go a little further than that and cause me to buy more nets," because of the damage they caused when they pulled the fish out. While many saw the pelican as a national icon, for Tregilges pelicans were "one of the most useless and ugly birds we have."⁶ Fishermen and ornithologists disputed knowledge about pelican behavior, specifically whether or not they ate large quantities of marketable fish. These conflicting views may reflect their different values, framing how they defined the problem.⁷ For example, these groups may have had differing opinions about what were acceptable losses: what ornithologists regarded as minor losses, fishermen may have seen as major or unacceptable, with the added expense or inconvenience of damaged nets.⁸ There were also clear

5 For more on emu extinctions in particular areas of Australia see Libby Robin, "Emu: National Symbol and Ecological Limits," in *Boom and Bust: Bird Stories for a Dry Country*, eds. Libby Robin, Robert Heinsohn, and Leo Joseph (Collingwood, VIC: CSIRO Publishing, 2009), 250.

6 W. Tregilges, "Destructive Pelicans," *Daily Herald*, 15 February 1911, 3.

7 Daniel Sarewitz has explored the connection between knowledge and values in the context of the sciences; see Sarewitz, "How Science Makes Environmental Controversies Worse," *Environmental Science & Policy* 7, no. 5 (2004): 385–403.

8 Emily O'Gorman, "Remaking Wetlands: Rice Fields and Ducks in the Murrumbidgee River Region, NSW," in *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman (London: Routledge, 2014): 215–38.

socioeconomic differences intersecting with and shaping these different values and needs. The leaders of the metropolitan South Australian Ornithological Association, who advocated pelican protection, were from middle-class and wealthy backgrounds, whereas the fishermen were often much poorer.

Protection, Pests, and Private Property

In Australia, by the 1880s, there was an extensive system of bounties in place for particular native and introduced animals and birds, supported by legislation.⁹ The killing undertaken under this system was extensive and often became fixated on eliminating particular species in a given area. Deborah Bird Rose, in her work on past and more recent dingo hunting and baiting, has used the phrase “will-to-destruction” to describe this kind of systematic killing of all of a particular kind of animal.¹⁰ A single “pest” animal or bird was seen as too many by some (but not all) farmers and fishermen and any loss as too great. It was within this context that arguments for the protection of birds gained increasing traction among biologists and advocacy groups from the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. Most Australian states then passed legislation that offered some protection to native animals by default, and in order to be considered “unprotected,” they needed to be specially listed.¹¹ The protection laws, which were not always successful, mainly aimed to regulate hunting through closed seasons over the periods that were thought to be the birds’ breeding seasons.

Scientific groups and other bird advocates often argued for the protection of birds because of their utility in agriculture and fisheries by feeding on and thereby controlling pest populations. Protecting useful species was one of the main goals of the South Australian Ornithological Association. Support for humanitarian protection of birds and animals also grew through the first decades of the twentieth century and these sentiments were evident in the widespread condemnation of the slaughter of young pelicans in 1911. There were many conflicting views about killing and protecting animals in this period, even within the same government administrations.

9 Steven White, “British Colonialism, Australian Nationalism and the Law: Hierarchies of Wild Animal Protection,” *Monash University Law Review* 39 (2013): 452–72. In South Australia, it was only in the early twentieth century that animals regarded as pests by fishermen were officially listed as such. This was a period of expansion and intensification in agriculture and fisheries.

10 Deborah Bird Rose, “What If the Angel of History Were a Dog?,” *Cultural Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2013): 67–78.

11 South Australia did this in 1874, which is relatively early in Australia.

Privatizing Protection

Prior to British colonization, the Ngarrindjeri indigenous people had lived in the region for approximately eight thousand years. Aboriginal laws stem from sets of kin relationships within a particular country (to Aboriginal people, country refers not just to a landscape, but the culture, community, and all else encompassed within it); for example between people, plants, animals like pelicans, ancestors, land, and water. The Coorong was the territory of the Tanganekald, one group within the Ngarrindjeri. During the period of initial British colonization, which began in earnest in South Australia in the 1830s, Ngarrindjeri numbers significantly decreased, due in most part to introduced diseases such as smallpox and frontier conflicts with colonists. The British government had previously declared South Australia to be “unoccupied,” and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many Ngarrindjeri were moved onto land set aside by the government for Aboriginal people or to pastoral properties and missions.

Aboriginal people had a tradition of collecting the eggs of both black swans and pelicans, a practice pre-dating colonization. These collections were mostly carried out when the pelicans had laid their first clutches of between one and three eggs. Pelicans would lay a second clutch if their eggs were taken or crushed—something that the ornithologists seem not have known at the time. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Aboriginal people were exempt from the bird protection laws on Crown Land but not on private land, unless they first gained the permission of the owner. These practices also became rapidly entangled in the responses to the 1911 pelican slaughter.

Soon after the cull, the ornithologists sought security for the pelican rookeries from the state Crown Lands Commissioner. Ultimately, the commissioner—who had a personal interest in bird protection—decided to lease a number of islands, including the Pelican Islands, to the South Australian Ornithological Association to create a place where birds were protected absolutely, even those listed as unprotected (like the pelicans). With this lease the islands became subject to some of the laws of private property. One condition of the lease was that the ornithologists prevent people from visiting the islands, and they soon erected signs that notified people to keep off.

One of the intentions of leasing the islands was to stop Aboriginal people from gathering bird eggs. One ornithologist wrote that: “The island rookeries will now . . . be less

liable to receive visits from the bird-killers and egg-robbers,” meaning both Aboriginal people and fishermen. Some also sought to change legislation to prevent Aboriginal people from collecting eggs more widely. At least some ornithologists wanted Aboriginal people to be subject to the bird protection laws that prevented hunting or egg collecting during the birds’ breeding season. Another ornithologist wrote in a report to the Crown Lands Commissioner that the “natives”:

“ . . . rob the nests disgracefully, taking both fresh & well incubated eggs . . . the latter are thrown out. . . . I have the records from authentic sources that the natives go in small parties . . . to the best breeding places. . . [and] take hauls of 200, 400, & 500 eggs of the swans, this is repeated as long as the laying lasts . . . the Bird Protection Act [should] be applied to blacks and whites from the line south of Adelaide and Mannum.”¹²

Echoing the complementary discourses of colonization, race, and assimilation, the state Animals Protection Act 1912 stated that only “full-blooded” Aboriginal people were exempt from adhering to bird protection legislation.¹³ While the next protection act in 1919 did not include this qualification, it did include the paternalistic provision that if “any of the privileges . . . are being abused” the governor could suspend them. The National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 did not include any provisions for Aboriginal hunting or egg collecting, and cultural geographer Philip Clarke noted that after this act “swan-egging practices of the local Aboriginal people were by stealth” in the region.¹⁴ Many state acts of the 1970s did not include exceptions for Aboriginal people and therefore prevented activities such as hunting, burning, and harvesting plant material within protected areas, which continue to be important in indigenous philosophies and practices of caring for country. In recent decades in the Coorong National Park, Aboriginal rangers have, however, facilitated the incorporation of some of these activities into park management.

12 State Records of South Australia, South Australian Ornithological Association (SOA): Re Islands in Coorong (1911).

13 Many Aboriginal people and scholars have problematized these ideologies, embedded in language, within the postcolonial movements of the last few decades. Notions of “blood purity” have also been examined by many indigenous scholars as problematic notions of identity that have carried forward discourses of race and assimilation. See discussion in Mitchell Rolls, “The Meaninglessness of Aboriginal Cultures,” *Balayi: Culture, Law, and Colonialism* 2, no. 1 (2001): 7–20.

14 Phillip Clarke, “Contact, Conflict and Regeneration: Aboriginal Cultural Geography of the Lower Murray,” PhD diss., University of Adelaide, 1995, 332. See Clarke for more on local Aboriginal peoples’ practice of collecting eggs and Europeans’ negative views of this.

Over the last 40 years various avenues have also been developed at state and national levels to include indigenous people in protected areas management, a process that has been significantly influenced by the Aboriginal Land Rights movement.¹⁵ Contemporary environmental problems pose new questions, but the complex, opposing sets of values of different communities today resonate with those of the pelican slaughter of 1911. Indeed, in some ways they cannot be fully understood without these histories. We continue to live in contested landscapes and with the legacies of these past disputes. The slaughter and the leasing of the islands reveals some of the intersecting ideas about killing, private property, and care that, sometimes at odds and sometimes in agreement, shaped lives, livelihoods, and the values and practices of care across species on the Coorong.

15 Indigenous Protected Areas (national) and Co-Management (state and national) are two government arrangements, developed over the last 30 years, that have sought to officially recognize and value indigenous environmental knowledge and management. See Helen Ross, Chrissy Grant, Cathy Robinson, Arturo Izurieta, Dermot Smyth, and Phil Rist, "Co-Management and Indigenous Protected Areas in Australia: Achievements and Ways Forward," *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 16, no. 4 (2009), 242–52.