The sound of extinction
Affect and expertise
in an age of risk management

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¾ world’s mammal species are bats
Christmas Island pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus murrayi*)

Flying fox

Red crab

**EXTINCT**
Christmas Island pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus murrayi*)

- ‘Widespread’ (1900)
- ‘Common’ (1984)
- Seven reports documenting ‘marked decline’ (1990s)
- Listed as ‘Endangered’ (2001)
- Listed as ‘Critically endangered’ (2006)
- Report to govt. and call for captive population to be established (2007)
- 20 estimated to remain; ‘Extinction imminent’ (Lumsden, Jan 2009)
- Xmas Island Expert Working Group established (Feb 2009, reports June 2009)
- Minister Garrett initiates emergency response (July 2009)

Sources: Martin *et al* (2012); Lumsden & Schulz (2009)
Christmas Island pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus murrayi*)

26 August 2009

Bat detector set-up on Christmas Island

Photo by Martin Schulz. Cited in Lunney & Law 2011: 494
Extinct!
The last call – 26 August 2009
Firstly, I apologise for not providing feedback to ABS members earlier. I must admit I have not found it easy coming to terms with the fact that, in all likelihood, we observed the species going extinct and were unable to prevent it. I have found it difficult to write, or talk, about this since returning from the island. It is not easy to document the decline of a species over the last 15 years, warn anyone that would listen that there was a real risk that it would go extinct by 2009, and then have your prediction come true.

Lindy Lumsden, in The Australasian Bat Society Newsletter #33 (November 2009)
26. This created a flurry of media interest for a day. I did five radio and several newspaper interviews on Tuesday 8th September. And then the media lost interest and moved on to other stories. But I sincerely hope the government does not move on so quickly. There are many other threatened species on Christmas Island that need intensive attention to ensure they don’t suffer the same fate as the pipistrelle. This is the only positive I can take out of the whole sorry series of events, that attention has been drawn to the predicament of threatened species on the island and action might be taken before it is too late for the others. We live in hope anyway.
Post-truth

*post-truth* – an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.

Oxford Dictionary
“It wasn’t just the health of the pipistrelle that was dire, but that of the entire Christmas Island ecosystem, already under siege from crazy ants and with vegetation cover diminished from superphosphate mining. ... a change was required in policy thinking – one which would see us aim to erect a fence at the top of the cliff rather than send an ambulance, in an often fruitless and expensive quest, to the bottom of the cliff.’

Peter Garrett, former Environment Minister
(Quarterly Essay 49: 83)

“Garrett was convinced by the orthodoxy that ecosystems rather than species should be the focus of the national conservation effort”

Tim Flannery, QE 48: 6-7
Risk management

“Our primary interest was not to apportion blame in these cases; rather, we sought to identify tractable remedies such that future extinctions may be less likely”.  

Woinarski et al 2016

... scored low on any prioritization that weighted charisma, utility, cultural significance, or ecological role.”

(cited in Woinarski et al 2016: 16)
## Recommendations for the future vs In the case of the CI pipistrelle

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<th>Recommendations for the future</th>
<th>In the case of the CI pipistrelle</th>
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<td>Informed, empowered and responsive governance and leadership</td>
<td>Informed but no single authority for urgent action</td>
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<td>Institutional accountability with pre-agreed action plans</td>
<td>Research approved but not action options (do nothing or captive breeding)</td>
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<td>“Monitoring of declining populations without the intention to decide between different management options will only document extinction” (p.279)</td>
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<td>Decisions whilst opportunity to act exists</td>
<td>Failure to act immediately on 2006 information</td>
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**Ultimately relies on a managerialist and cost-benefit paradigm**

Conceivable that ‘do nothing’ was best decision “because of a perceived low likelihood of success relative to the cost of management and limited resources that could be better allocated elsewhere.” (p.279)
Re-thinking human purpose

a “disappearance [that] not only is to be questioned but already is a questioning, uncannily interrogating we who remain behind”.

(James Hatley. 2000. Suffering Witness)

“... I grew increasingly dismayed at how haphazard and generally ineffectual our efforts at preventing extinctions have been. ... The demise of a bat may not weigh greatly in the balance of human wellbeing, but it speaks volumes about the human soul.”

Tim Flannery QE48: 1-10
Some tentative conclusions

• Facts and Values in contested policy

• The generative value of imagination and emotion

• Post ‘post-truth’?

*post-truth* – an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.

Oxford Dictionary
THE END