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Predators, Pain and Simulation —A First-Person Reckoning with Predator Free 2050

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Abstract
Actor-network theory (ANT) has long provided a non-hierarchical framework for knowledge creation. Recent formulations of flat ontology have given the approach new traction. This assemblage model of knowledge production offers one way to understand the nonhuman other. While ANT is pertinent to questions of animal suffering, the writings of Peter Singer remain central to the moral claim that suffering should animate human compassion. In combination, ANT's assumed equivalence of human actors and nonhuman actants and Singer's utilitarian call for animal liberation have shaped animal studies for decades. My substantive concern in this paper is an accounting made through dolorimetry—the measurement of pain. I focus on Predator Free 2050, an ongoing national eradication policy now managed directly by the Department of Conservation following the disestablishment of its separate funding intermediary, Predator Free 2050 Limited. This state-sanctioned framework has recently expanded its national strategy to target four primary introduced mammalian predator categories: rats, possums, mustelids (stoats, ferrets and weasels), and—following a significant regulatory escalation—feral cats. The central thesis is that Predator Free 2050 produces an imbalance of cruelty, systematically maximising the suffering of animals in New Zealand.

Keywords: Predator Free; animals; suffering; dolorimetry

Preamble

This article begins from a simple but largely neglected question: How much suffering does Predator Free 2050 produce? Rather than evaluating the programme primarily in ecological, economic or managerial terms, it examines it through the lens of *dolorimetry*, understood here as the accounting and measurement of pain. The focus is *Predator Free 2050*, New Zealand's ongoing national predator-eradication programme, now administered directly by the Department of Conservation following the disestablishment of Predator Free 2050 Limited. Over time, the programme has expanded both in scale and ambition. Its principal targets now include rats, possums and mustelids (stoats, ferrets and weasels), while recent policy developments have extended eradication efforts to feral cats. The argument advanced in this article is that Predator Free 2050 has generated a profound imbalance of cruelty. By privileging the protection of some species through the systematic elimination of others, it institutionalises and maximises animal suffering on a national scale.

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Introduction

A quarter of a century ago, Nigel Clark (1999, 2001), with Claudia Bell and John Lyall (see Bell, 2012), explored *actor-network theory* (ANT) and ferality in New Zealand. Their work appeared at a time when questions of landscape, embodiment and human–nonhuman entanglement were only beginning to attract attention in local sociology. Mike Lloyd edited a special issue of *New Zealand Sociology* in 2002 on ANT, bringing the approach into broader circulation (Curtis, 2002; Matthewman, 2002). That issue captured a brief but meaningful moment when an international theoretical framework was reinterpreted in a local context.

By 2002 ANT was a mature and internationalised approach. It had circulated for years in journals such as *Social Studies of Science* and had become established as a means of analysing distributed agency. Its central commitment was what would later be called *flat ontology*, or an object-oriented approach (Kramer, 2023; Nimmo, 2016a, 2016b). ANT declined to reserve action or consequence for humans alone. It refused to privilege the human actor or to divide the world into subjects and objects, agents and tools. Instead, action emerged from networks of people, animals, materials, devices and institutions (Callon, 1986, 1999; Latour, 1999; Law, 1991; Law & Hasard, 1999). Social analysis became a matter of tracing associations and following translations as they unfolded. Callon's (1986) chapter "Some elements of a sociology of translation" remains the classic example. His scallops were not metaphors, but actors enrolled, translated and displaced through the contingent processes of fisheries management. Their survival was not only biological but also infrastructural, dependent on how they were positioned in a socio-technical system. ANT invited sociologists to understand that agency could be assembled, conferred and withdrawn across species and objects alike.

This rejection of the subject-object divide was both intellectually ambitious and practically useful. It created space for nonhuman actors to be included in accounts of structure and agency. Curtis (2017) later imagined ANT as a method that could be combined with classical Marxism, ultimately through Mandel's recovery of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. He speculated that "notions of ferality are critiqued as part of an overstated conception of decolonisation" (Curtis, 2002, p. 91).

The Department of Conservation

Ferality became a fertile concept, at least for sociologists. In the work of Bell, Clark and Lyall—including their art and performance projects—ferality expressed energy and embodiment grounded in the amalgams of the Antipodes. Their orientation was consciously distinct from the perceived narrowness of British sociology. It was experimental and performative, with attention to both human and nonhuman vitality. None of this work anticipated the rigid and punitive logic that would come to characterise the Department of Conservation (DOC).

DOC's vision was not an amalgam, nor a coexistence of species including feral ones. Rather, it aimed for reversal: a constructed return to a pre-human New Zealand that possibly never existed and was certainly undocumented. In this departmental logic, indigenous birds and insects were sanctified, while almost everything else—certainly everything deemed feral—became expendable. Pest management was framed as moral sorting. Worse still, extermination campaigns reached beyond recognised pests: cattle, horses and even familiar bird species became targets. What follows is a *memento mori* in three short paragraphs.

Enderby Island cattle are a clear example. They were not modern livestock, but a feral lineage descended from nineteenth-century strays. Over time, they survived on seaweed and adapted to the subantarctic climate. They posed minimal ecological threat other than to seaweed. Yet they were rounded up and shot at the turn of the century. Their extinction, and remarkable story of survival and adaptation, was recorded in bureaucratic language as if it were a routine administrative adjustment (Brown & Cox, 2022).

The Kaimanawa horses illustrate a similar dynamic from the same period. They had lived on the Central Plateau of the North Island for roughly two centuries. This wild herd was largely uncared for. Quite the opposite: in the late twentieth century and into the early 2000s, the New Zealand Army attempted to wipe them out using helicopters and machine guns, surplus tools and personnel from the Vietnam War. That campaign seemed as much about soldierly boredom as ecological management. Public backlash against machine-gunning horses from helicopters forced a shift to controlled culls, but the compromise resolved little. Significantly, DOC has never abandoned its preference for eradication and continues to push for numbers that critics consider below a viable population (Curtis, 2002; Department of Conservation, 2025)

Rosellas also came under scrutiny in this era, but with a happier outcome. Introduced to the Taieri region in the nineteenth century, they had become familiar to generations of southern New Zealanders. When a new population appeared on Auckland's North Shore, DOC prepared eradication plans. These were abandoned quietly after intense local resistance. The locals liked rosellas. Fortunately, attachment could be reinforced by documentation showing that rosellas were not recent arrivals. Official names on maps, such as Rosella Ridge in the Silver Peaks northwest of Dunedin, were enough to prevent their extermination (Department of Conservation, 2000; Miskelly et al., 2022; Taieri Recreational Tramping Club, 2024).

These examples expose the moral character of conservation in New Zealand. Decisions rest less on ecological evidence than on categorical sorting. Their fate depends less on effect than on affect. Clark (2001) was right to call this a metaphysics. At heart, it is a project of purification and simulation.

Ontology, morality and the question of suffering

ANT suited a sociology tired of positivism but still attentive to consequences. Its refusal to arrange the world into hierarchies of meaning and matter offered a way to remain empirical without lapsing into empiricism. ANT asked not who deserved rights, but what produced effects. While concern for the suffering of animals and critiques of human domination of nature emerged from several intellectual traditions, including ecofeminist scholarship associated with Val Plumwood (1988, 2002), Singer's work remains particularly relevant here because it places the suffering of sentient beings at the centre of moral evaluation. Where ANT dissolved metaphysical hierarchies, Singer challenged moral ones. He wrote from a post-positivist philosophy rather than sociology. In *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (1976), *Practical Ethics* (1979), and *The Animal Liberation Movement* (1985), Singer argued that the capacity to suffer—not reason, speech or self-awareness—was the only justifiable threshold for moral inclusion. Species membership, like race or gender, was arbitrary. By rejecting speciesism, Singer forced suffering to the centre.

For many New Zealand sociologists, this was a belated discovery. Curtis, for example, did not engage with Singer's work until long after beginning his analyses of agribusiness. That sectoral approach focused not on animal suffering but on commodification: sheep and cattle as biological inputs into the logics of the meat and dairy industries (Curtis, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2018; Curtis & Reveley, 2002). ANT and ferality offered one way to think about the nonhuman, but it was Singer who made the ethical dimension unavoidable. Curtis's *Toward a Life-Force Theory of Value* (2019) marked a late career shift, the first serious attempt to theorise nonhuman agency rather than marginalise animals as commodities. It also represented a turn towards animal studies: an effort to understand the nonhuman not merely as raw material for agribusiness but as vital and sentient, with agency and the capacity to suffer. This was a move towards ethics, and also towards a more expansive ontology. And, in this, Curtis was no trailblazer: Taylor (2011) had already challenged mainstream sociology's traditional anthropocentric (human-centred) bias, and specifically, how leveraging frameworks like ANT can be adapted to dismantle the rigid human-animal binary. Taylor (2011) argued that by recognising animals as active

participants in social systems rather than passive objects, sociology can move past mere observation and actively support animal liberation and social justice.

Certainly, Singer and ANT emerged from different traditions—utilitarian ethics and post-structural sociology—but converged in their rejection of human exceptionalism. One critiqued moral exclusion; the other undermined ontological hierarchy. Together they make visible not only suffering, but also the systems that organise it.

Audit culture and the administration of animal suffering in New Zealand

Ethical oversight of animal suffering in New Zealand is dominated by audit culture: a system where procedural compliance is a substitute for moral judgement. As Michael Power (1997) argued in *The Audit Society*, institutional legitimacy in such regimes depends not on outcomes but on the production of documentation, forms and internal checks that perform accountability while deflecting deeper scrutiny. In this context, the appearance of thoroughness matters more than any engagement with real effects, including suffering.

New Zealand's Codes of Welfare are structured around the *Five Freedoms*, which reinforce this audit-driven logic. These are freedoms for animals: from hunger and thirst; from discomfort; from pain, injury or disease; from fear and distress; and the freedom to express normal behaviour (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2009). They establish a minimal, administratively measurable baseline for treatment. Though not directly enshrined in law, the Five Freedoms are echoed in MPI (Ministry for Primary Industries, n.d.) policy and inform the ethical frameworks taught to Animal Ethics Committees (AECs) and staff. They provide a moral façade, defining welfare in terms of what can be delivered and recorded, rather than asking whether the animal should be used, killed or involved at all.

This framework operates as a form of audit culture attached to minimal standards. It does not demand that research, farming or eradication be morally justified. It asks only that the activity be documented as compliant with the code. Harm is often authorised in advance without meaningful harm-benefit analysis, and suffering is proceduralised rather than confronted. Once an activity is approved, even extreme or prolonged suffering is insulated from public debate.

Critics in human-animal studies have long highlighted this structural evasion. Annie Potts, co-director of the New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies, argues that frameworks like the Five Freedoms enable moral distancing and reduce ethics to bureaucratic box-ticking (Potts, 2009, 2012; Potts et al., 2013). Her work shows how animals such as possums are cast as national scapegoats, while their mass killing is rationalised as long as procedures are followed. Institutions avoid the central question—Should this harm occur?—and instead ask only whether the paperwork is complete. Michael Morris (2011) has similarly criticised MPI's dual mandate as both regulator and promoter of animal use. He argues that genuine oversight is compromised by such divided responsibilities, because an agency tasked with expanding animal industries cannot also provide impartial enforcement of welfare standards. This structural conflict of interest undermines public confidence and limits the potential for meaningful accountability (Morris, 2011).

Under the Animal Welfare Act 1999, any use of live animals in research, testing or teaching requires AEC approval. These committees are meant to include scientific, veterinary, lay and welfare perspectives, yet they are typically housed within the institutions seeking approval. Universities review their own staff. Crown Research Institutes do the same. The result is a closed loop in which the continuation of harm is assessed by those aligned with its perpetuation. DOC, which oversees predator control programmes including Predator Free 2050, maintains an MPI-approved code of ethical conduct. Trials of new toxins or lures require AEC approval, yet many lethal methods—including widespread trapping, baiting and poisoning—proceed under the

label of operational necessity, bypassing ethical review altogether. Whether or not these practices are technically legal, their moral defensibility is thin. In practice they are treated as routine, despite inflicting prolonged suffering, targeting whole species, and causing secondary poisoning of non-target wildlife.

Predator Free 2050, now managed directly by the Department of Conservation, funds dozens of partner organisations to conduct such operations. Ethics oversight, where it exists, is opaque. MPI approves institutional codes and receives compliance reports but rarely inspects, audits or intervenes. Independent review of outcomes is virtually non-existent. This is audit culture in its clearest form: correct paperwork is treated as proof of ethical adequacy. Real effects—pain and fear—are kept at the margins. As Gregory (1998) observed in the wake of the Cave Creek disaster, the Department has a disturbing track record in this regard. Audit culture is a deliberate mechanism of moral evasion, allowing institutions to document compliance while turning away from suffering.

The smiling

There is a visceral shock to the activities of DOC and, more recently, Predator Free 2050, that lies not in their technical details and effects but in their affect. As SAFE (2023) has documented, animals labelled as feral or pest are often killed with evident pleasure. The traps and poisons are one thing; they are expected. What startles is the cheerfulness. School possum hunts, advertised as wholesome community events, frequently involve children drowning baby possums. Photographs of beaming volunteers gathered around empty traps—traps that will later hold suffering bodies—feature across the websites of state-aligned conservation organisations. The smiling becomes instructional. Cruelty is no longer merely tolerated or audited; it is made celebratory.

Such cruelty is perhaps unsurprising. This is a settler nation built on killing. Each year, New Zealand exports the meat and by-products of millions of sheep and cattle. Industrial slaughter is a routine matter. Curtis (1996) wrote on the sociology of the meatworks and the commodity chains that enabled trade unions. He observed how animals were killed, how their bodies were processed, and how death was normalised. But in his published material (and unpublished notes), there is no mention of anyone smiling on the killing floor. Fatigue, aching limbs, resignation, bravado were documented; not smiling, not joy. Joy is what marks Predator Free 2050 as distinct.

Predator Free 2050 amplifies suffering. Boswell (2017) calls it *deathworlding*: the creation of spaces in which extermination is not only authorised but celebrated. Major (2024) goes further, documenting how online possum-killing communities mobilise dark humour to frame cruelty as fun. Terms like "rippers", "blitzes" and "slayers" circulate alongside images of grinning hunters. The pleasure is not incidental; it is curated.

Recent commentary has begun to expose the scale and affective architecture of this strategy. A *Wall Street Journal* feature estimated the cost of Predator Free 2050 at up to NZD6 billion and highlighted its deepening reliance on toxins and kill technologies (Cherney, M. 2024). A *Spinoff* article questioned whether complete eradication is even the goal, or whether the campaign functions as a permanent system of managed killing, dependent on funding churn and sustained social licence (Mathias, 2025). These reports point not just to technical challenges but to a public culture increasingly desensitised to violence.

Worse still are efforts to expand that social licence. A recent research project (Dickie & Medvecky, 2023) exposed the emotional and rhetorical structure underpinning Predator Free 2050, one built not on ethical engagement but on managing perception. This study of young adults' attitudes to Predator Free 2050 framed public ambivalence towards poisoning and eradication as a communication problem. The goal, it suggested, was to improve support for lethal control through targeted messaging, particularly around toxins and gene

editing. There was no space for suffering. The article backed DOC and Predator Free 2050. It did not question killing; it aimed to make it acceptable to young people. This was social marketing as propaganda.

Predator Free 2050

This article is offered as a modest interpolation, between animal studies and policy studies, between ANT and affect, between ethics and ecology. The animals make themselves felt in the analysis, and once they do, the smiling becomes harder to ignore.

There are three logical and moral appeals for limiting the campaign to eradicate all non-native mammals from New Zealand. First, a socio-technical assessment of Predator Free 2050, grounded in its implementation documents, funding structures and scientific evaluations, shows that the campaign is not only technically unfeasible but conceptually incoherent. It promises totality but delivers contradiction. It is, in short, an impossible policy. Second, the question of suffering and its measurement. Drawing on the concept of dolorimetry—the measurement of pain—the campaign produces an imbalance of cruelty. The animals it targets are capable of distress, fear and pain. That capacity should matter. If policy produces suffering, it must account for it. Third, ecological sanctuaries are better understood not as wild places but as *simulacra*—curated spaces that resemble wilderness while operating as enclosures. Recognising them as such may provide a more stable ethical framework. A sanctuary that admits its zoo-like character can be more honest than one that denies it.

1. An impossible policy: The socio-technical contradictions of Predator Free 2050

Predator Free 2050 is not merely a conservation strategy. It is a maximalist initiative aimed at the extermination of five introduced mammalian predators—rats, stoats, ferrets, weasels and possums—and, in many articulations, hedgehogs and feral cats. It seeks to re-establish an ecology that predates not only colonisation but human settlement. The Predator Free 2050 initiative, now managed directly by DOC, coordinated with an array of public agencies including DOC, Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research, MPI, the Ministry for the Environment, and others. DOC reported in 2019 that more than NZD150 million per year had been invested in predator management and research, including NZD81.28 million for predator suppression and NZD19.5 million from the Provincial Growth Fund (Department of Conservation, 2019).

Despite this scale, proponents eschew the term 'policy', preferring 'goal' or 'mission'. Predator Free 2050 Limited (2022) compares its task to "Aotearoa New Zealand's Apollo Mission" and claims the projected cost has fallen from NZD32 billion to NZD8 billion. Even this lower figure is extraordinary in proportion to GDP. The cost to the United States of the Vietnam War might offer a more appropriate comparison. That war was lost.

There is little in the way of fiscal transparency. Funding mechanisms are fragmented and sprawling. They stretch across science funding models, departmental budgets and inter-agency collaborations, with minimal discussion of efficiency or trade-offs. When fiscal caution was raised in 2024 by new Conservation Minister Tama Potaka, institutional defenders of the programme reacted as though heresy had been spoken. Potaka's estimate—"hundreds of billions, maybe trillions of dollars"—was not refuted. It was framed as disloyal (Radio New Zealand, 2024).

What complicates matters further is the collapse of the core biological premise. Predator Free 2050 rests on the myth of isolation. The idea that New Zealand remains ecologically sealed is no longer viable. The southward migration of species, enabled by warming oceans and shifting wind currents has already begun (Pecl et al., 2017). Animals and organisms are now arriving without human assistance. The category of "introduced" is being undone by climate change. This shift undercuts the ecological logic of Predator Free 2050. What begins

as restoration ends as nostalgia. It is a politics of the rump, seeking to reassemble fragments of a past that cannot be restored. As noted decades ago: "The departmental search for a return to the pristine conditions of pre-colonisation constitutes a sort of biotic *lebensraum* in which a hierarchy of purity determines the fate of entire populations of species" (Curtis, 2002, p. 100).

Even the programme's terminology lacks rigour. There is no statutory definition of "feral cat". Any cat killed under Predator Free 2050 may simply be declared feral *ex post*. Such discretionary categorisation raises questions about the programme's ethical boundaries, if indeed it has any.

Public patience may also be nearing its limits. Historical campaigns—such as the aerial spraying over Auckland suburbs between 1999 and 2004 to eradicate the painted apple moth—provoked widespread community outrage and urgent inquiry into public health and consent (Hales et al., 2004; Vallée, 2021). The ongoing aerial use of 1080 continues to divide public opinion, with a 2019 national survey revealing significant opposition linked to environmental, health and trust concerns (Kerr et al., 2023). Though Predator Free 2050 is often marketed as clean and humane, critics argue that its cruelty is partially obscured by branding narratives, echoing broader critiques from anti-1080 campaigners (Prüter et al., 2020). The policy seeks to purify, but its mechanisms are impure. It seeks to unify, but fragments its own justifications. It seeks to restore, but cannot account for change. Its promise is national redemption through ecological engineering. Its delivery is contradiction. It does not minimise harm. It maximises cruelty. It is an impossible policy.

2. An imbalance of cruelty: Pain, dolorimetry, and moral accounting

Predator Free 2050 is not only technically implausible, it is also ethically unstable. This article does not dispute the conservation objectives of Predator Free 2050; rather, it questions the ethical cost at which those objectives are pursued. The programme enacts suffering—extensive, systematic and largely unexamined. This suffering is not incidental. It is methodical, sustained and undertaken in the name of ecological protection. Yet that protection comes at a cost, one overwhelmingly borne by the animals targeted for eradication.

Drawing on Peter Singer's foundational work on animal ethics (Singer, 1976, 1979, 1985), this section argues that Predator Free 2050 creates what might be called an *imbalance of cruelty*. That imbalance is quantitative, qualitative and conceptual. Quantitative, in the sheer number of animals killed. Qualitative, in the likely depth of suffering experienced. And conceptual, in its refusal to recognise animal sentience as an ethical constraint on policy.

Begin with the numbers. Thousands of mammals—rats, stoats, ferrets, weasels, possums—are trapped, poisoned and exterminated each year under Predator Free 2050 and its affiliated programmes. These deaths are not incidental. They are central to the mission. Extermination is the policy, not a by-product of it. Meanwhile, the beneficiaries—native birds, reptiles and invertebrates—are fewer in number. Predator Free 2050 offers a reversed utilitarian logic: kill many to save a few. But this logic rests on an implicit moral ranking of animals, based not on sentience but on 'nativeness'.

There is little evidence that public officials have attempted to measure the relative suffering induced by these eradications. Pain itself is absent from most Predator Free 2050 literature. Yet the capacity to suffer is precisely what gives animals moral standing, as Singer long argued. Animals are not mere instruments of ecological function; they are sentient beings, capable of experiencing pain, fear and distress. To the extent that policy ignores this capacity, it risks institutionalising cruelty.

One way to think through this is via the field of dolorimetry, the study of pain measurement. Though still developing, dolorimetry seeks to identify neurological and behavioural indicators of suffering across species. Most approaches begin with the central nervous system. Animals with complex neural architectures,

particularly mammals with developed prefrontal cortices, are thought to experience more vivid, anticipatory and memory-linked forms of pain. This creates a paradox for Predator Free 2050. The very species it targets—mammals—are those most likely to suffer intensely. Their brains support not only reflexive pain responses but also prolonged fear, learned aversion and possibly trauma. Possums, for example, exhibit vocal distress, defensive behaviours and physiological markers of suffering when trapped or exposed to toxins. By contrast, many of the species being 'protected'—birds and reptiles—likely experience pain differently. This is not to deny their suffering but to note that their neurological architecture is less developed in areas associated with memory, anticipation and social cognition. These differences matter if we claim to act in the name of compassion. A policy that kills high-sentience species to protect lower-sentience ones is not just questionable; it is morally inverted.

One response might be to argue that pain is pain, that all sentient life deserves protection from unnecessary harm. But that is precisely why the notion of imbalance is useful. Predator Free 2050 does not avoid cruelty; it redistributes it. It makes cruelty selective, justifiable, even virtuous. In doing so, it obscures the ethical weight of its own violence. Singer's framework remains crucial here. He argued that ethical consideration should extend to all beings capable of suffering, not only those we find culturally appealing or ecologically significant. Predator Free 2050 does the opposite. It enshrines a dualism: natives are to be saved; invaders are to be exterminated. Biology offers no such binary. Possums did not choose to come here. They were introduced by humans for human purposes. They adapted. They reproduced. They did what all species do: survive. The claim that they now deserve extermination en masse, with poison and traps, is not ecological. It is theological. It reflects a myth of purity, a biotic hierarchy in which some lives are sacred and others disposable.

Cruelty in this context is not a side effect. It is a feature. Predator Free 2050 operationalises suffering as a management tool. The more effective the pain delivery—through improved toxins, more efficient traps, more precise targeting—the more successful the programme. This is efficiency in the service of harm. It is what might be called technical cruelty: the rationalisation of suffering through policy design.

If an accounting is to be done, it must begin with this imbalance. We need to weigh the pain of exterminated animals against the presumed gains of native species. We need to ask whether the moral weight of that suffering has ever been acknowledged, let alone justified. We need to question whether the public, whose taxes fund this programme, would support it if the cruelty were made more visible. Predator Free 2050 frames itself in the language of care. It claims to protect native birds, preserve taonga species, and restore ecosystems. These are noble aims. But noble aims pursued through cruelty remain cruel. They are not redeemed by intention. They are judged by outcome. And the outcome, thus far, is a vast system of managed suffering, justified by selective empathy and an ecological fiction.

3. Simulacra, sanctuaries, and the end of ecological originality

Predator Free 2050 rests on a fiction. It imagines a return to ecological originality, a restoration of pre-human, pre-contact conditions. But there is no original to return to. Ecological change is irreversible. What remains is simulation. Ecological sanctuaries such as Zealandia or Sanctuary Mountain do not represent wilderness. They are fenced, curated and intensively managed. They function as simulacra in the Baudrillardian sense: copies without originals. The ecology they depict no longer exists, or never quite did. They are artefacts, not relics.

The survival of selected native species and the destruction of selected introduced species are not morally independent processes. Predator Free 2050 treats extinction as a tragedy when it affects favoured species and as a virtue when it affects disfavoured ones. Rather, it is to suggest reframing. Sanctuaries could be more honest: less as natural havens and more as living museums. A sanctuary that acknowledges its artificiality

might provide a more ethically stable framework than one that insists on its authenticity. By claiming to be wilderness, these spaces obscure the human labour, money and violence that make them possible. They also obscure the constant surveillance, fencing, poisoning and maintenance required to preserve the illusion.

The simulation is not passive. It requires labour. Volunteers log hours, private donors are acknowledged, and DOC contractors are paid. What emerges is not wilderness but an ongoing performance—mistaken, perhaps wilfully, for nature. They also mislead at scale. Sanctuaries represent fragments, not continuities. They are ecological dioramas—parts mistaken for wholes. Yet Predator Free 2050 imagines the country itself as a potential sanctuary. That conceit is untenable. The costs are too high. Sanctuary Mountain (2022) demonstrates the limit of the model. It is properly biodiverse, but expensive, artificial and fragile. Scaling this nationally is fantasy. To the extent Predator Free 2050 aspires to this, it overreaches. At times the sanctuary resembles *Le Hameau de la Reine* for deathworlding, a curated performance of innocence made possible by hidden labour and systemic killing. Instead of milkmaids, we have volunteers. Instead of goats, radio-tagged kiwis. It is peasant theatre recast as ecological virtue. This is not conservation in any traditional sense. It is simulation, rehearsed in sanctuaries and institutionalised through policy.

A more grounded response would accept simulation. It would acknowledge that what we preserve now is not original but residue. In doing so, it might abandon totalising ambitions in favour of ethical clarity. We cannot reconstruct Eden. But we might learn to care for what remains without pretending it is unspoiled or pretending that extermination is compassion. Predator Free 2050 promises a return. But the return is to a curated absence. The cost of that promise is borne by animals whose only crime is to exist where they were placed. To erase them now is not a gesture of decolonisation. It is a transfer of violence—from humans to animals, from settlers to their ecological proxies.

Conclusion: Failed Predator Free, failed rejection of a colonial eco-nationalism

Predator Free 2050 fails on ecological, economic and ethical grounds. And it also fails to reject colonialism. Despite claims to indigeneity, biocultural harmony or a unique national mission, the programme replicates colonial logics of settlement, purification and control—now played out through the culling of naturalised species rather than the displacement of people. Where Alfred Crosby (1986/2004) emphasised the "portmanteau biota"—plants, animals, microbes—that travelled with empire and made colonisation possible, early New Zealand writers took a different view. From Thomson (1922) and Clark (1949) to Druett (1983), acclimatisation was celebrated as part of a heroic settler project. British birds, deer, trout, possums and hedgehogs were not ecological interlopers but welcomed co-colonists. The animals now targeted by Predator Free 2050 (with the exception of rats) were introduced deliberately, cared for, and often protected by law. They were more than feral; they were fellow travellers in the making of Pākehā New Zealand (Curtis, 2002).

To erase them now is not to decolonise but to reframe colonisation through a different lens. Predator Free 2050 offers a form of post-colonial revisionism, in which violence is redirected towards the animal rather than the human, and in which settler guilt is transmuted into ecological redemption. The introduction of mustelids may once have been a mistake, but their eradication becomes a civic virtue. It is not the human settler who must atone, but the ferret. Ginn (2008) documents how botanical gardens presented flora and fauna as a civilising narrative; green museums of empire. Predator Free 2050 extends this logic to the landscape itself, turning forests into curated spaces where only the approved native species may exist. It is an ecosystem as exhibit: a form of eco-nationalism that sanitises history through ecological purity.

Where earlier analyses of settler capitalism (Denoon, 1983; McMichael, 1984) emphasised extraction and accumulation, Predator Free 2050 emphasises control and exclusion. The transition is not from colony to

independence, but from economic colonisation to ecological nativism. Yet colonisation was always unstable. Its ecological forms were never permanent; its cultural logics were never coherent. The vision of a pristine, pre-hhuman New Zealand is itself a fiction, one that erases not only naturalised species but also the entanglements of Māori and settler life over centuries. Predator Free 2050 may appear to decolonise the land, but it does so through a kind of ontological vandalism. This is not conservation. It is simulation, ritualised in sanctuaries and sanctified by policy. If Predator Free represents an impossible promise, it is because it seeks to undo the historical with the technical, to cleanse the colonial with the ecological. In doing so, it transforms complexity into cruelty and history into spectacle.

The argument advanced here has been shaped by an unusual conjunction of traditions. Actor-network theory and its flat ontology refuse the assumption that humans alone matter. They invite us to take animals seriously as participants in assemblages rather than as passive objects of management. Singer's ethics extend that challenge by insisting that suffering itself is morally consequential. Together they force a question that Predator Free 2050 largely avoids: not whether extermination is technically possible, economically affordable or politically popular, but whether the suffering it produces can be justified. Once animals are recognised both as actants within socio-ecological networks and as sentient beings capable of pain, the moral architecture of Predator Free 2050 begins to unravel. The programme appears not as ecological restoration but as an audit-managed system of organised suffering, sustained by a simulated vision of nature and a selective accounting of cruelty. If this article has sought to demonstrate anything, it is that suffering must be counted. The pain of exterminated animals cannot be treated as an externality. It is central to any honest assessment of conservation policy.

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