

Seeking the Sacred Raven. Politics and Extinction on a Hawaiian Island

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BOOK REVIEW

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Seeking the Sacred Raven. Politics and Extinction on a Hawaiian Island. By Mark Jerome Walters, Island Press, 1718 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20009, USA. 2006. 294 pp. ISBN I-55963-090-7. US\$24.95 (paperback).

Review by Thierry M. Work

“Practical politics consists in ignoring facts.” So stated Henry Brooks Adams, historian and great grandson of President John Adams (Bartlett, 1968). The absence of the necessary facts, especially those regarding wildlife disease, to effect successful recovery is usually a signal feature of critically endangered species management. By their very nature, endangered species occur in small numbers, often in inaccessible areas, and are thus difficult to study, thereby making accumulations of facts critical to their management problematic. Lack of facts inevitably leads to opinions being formed by parties who have the “best interests” of the endangered species in mind. Absent emphasis on careful collection of data that could objectively guide recovery, and absent a coalition of individuals that work toward a common goal, the agenda to recover the species in question is often driven by those with the shrillest opinion. These vociferous protagonists will usually be obstructionist and through bullying and sheer pig-headedness, convince decision makers that “their” approach to recover the species is best, disease-and-other-data-be-damned. The end result is that the agency responsible for recovering the species is left holding the bag, and most sadly, the species in question is relegated to a limbo of captive propagation or eventual extinction.

Having participated directly in recovery efforts of endangered Hawaiian mammals and birds (including the ‘Alala), I can affirm that politics and endangered species are inextricably linked. In the rare instances where facts drive the politics and people work together, endangered species recovery in Hawaii has been remarkably successful (e.g., the Nene goose and Laysan duck). Often, however, endangered species politics have

been of the kind where facts are used or ignored to bolster particular camps, a case well illustrated by the demise of the Hawaiian crow or ‘Alala.

Thus, Mark Walters immerses the reader in the politics surrounding efforts to recover the ‘Alala. The book is divided into three parts. In part one, Walters sets the stage for the story by attempting to paint the panoramic background that is Hawaii. Walters introduces us to the topic with a firsthand account of his experience seeing ‘Alala in the forests on the western slopes of Mauna Loa. Walters then provides an overview of the colonization of the Hawaiian archipelago by humans, reciting the well-worn adage about native Hawaiians peaceably tilling the land and exercising a spiritual conservation ethic that kept them at one with nature. In fact, it seems unlikely that clearing vast tracts of land for taro and banana and harvesting thousands of native forest birds to make feather capes and hats did much good for conservation of native flora and fauna. More accurate are the chapters covering Captain Cook’s arrival to Hawaii, the missionaries, and their tragically successful attempts to wean native Hawaiians of their cultural roots. The chapters covering early attempts by European scientists to describe the ‘Alala, and the origins of the word ‘Alala in ancient Hawaii are well written, as is the author’s description of initial documentations of the crow’s decline by early naturalists (Perkins, 1903).

Interspersed throughout the first part of the book are vignettes on the family tree of extant ‘Alala and accounts of occasional mortalities. The last chapter covers reasons posited for the ‘Alala’s decline, including lack of understory (due to excessive cattle grazing), which leaves little cover for birds to escape predation by Hawaiian hawks and mosquito-borne avian malaria. This chapter also introduces the owner of the McCandless Ranch in Hawaii, which harbored the last remaining habitat for the ‘Alala. This ranch and its owner play a pivotal role in subsequent sections of the book.

Early seminal studies by biologists working for the US Fish & Wildlife Service shed light on the behavioral ecology of ‘Alala, and it is they who recognized that the bird was in

danger of disappearing from the wild and that efforts were needed to breed it in captivity (Banko and Banko, 1980). The second part of the book is dedicated to early attempts to propagate the 'Alala in captivity. In a chapter that is somewhat out of place, Walters notes that as recently as the 1970s, vast tracks of forest still existed on North Hawaii that could have harbored 'Alala but that were systematically logged (a section in that chapter on the author's encounter with wild dogs is a bit over the top and self-serving). Eventually, the federal moneys available for breeding of 'Alala were simply too irresistible, and the state of Hawaii took the lead to captive breed 'Alala, an effort that initially took place at US Army lands at Puhakuloa and that was eventually moved to Olinda on the island of Maui. The travails of well-meaning state biologists who attempted to raise 'Alala based on gestalt and emotion rather than science are amply illustrated, as are machinations to acquire more birds once initial efforts had failed. It is here that the author demonstrates the almost missionary zeal of those in charge of breeding crows in spite of the fact that many of these people either did not have the proper backgrounds or means to acquire the necessary skills to effect successful aviculture of 'Alala.

The first seeds of distrust between owners of McCandless Ranch and scientists appear when a researcher studying nesting behavior of 'Alala at McCandless Ranch is accused of causing nest abandonment. It is here that the author reveals the confrontational nature of conservation in Hawaii exemplified by the lawsuit brought against the skeptical owner of McCandless Ranch (one of the few remaining 'Alala habitats) by the Audubon Society requesting that the ranch give access to state biologists for research. This chapter illustrates vividly how the endangered species act can be used as a cudgel against landowners, thus making it counterproductive for endangered species conservation. Eventually, a National Research Council Report outlining potential steps to recover the 'Alala, and the formation of an 'Alala recovery team headed off lawsuits against McCandless Ranch and seemed to put the recovery of the 'Alala on a path that would be governed by reasoned discourse based on systematic accumulation of facts (sadly, that is not to be). A final chapter dedicated to Walter's visit with locals from Kona and his attempts to have them recall the role of 'Alala in Hawaiian culture seems out of place but aptly illustrates how the 'Alala has left the consciousness of the Hawaiian public at large.

The arrival of The Peregrine Fund (TPF) to the scene opens the last section of the book,

and Walter's hagiographic descriptions of that event clearly reveal that his sympathies throughout the book lie ultimately with TPF and McCandless Ranch. The author's vivid description of his stay at the fine koa wood-paneled rooms at McCandless prompted me to ponder just how much 'Alala nesting habitat (koa trees) was lost to make this room (along with other logging activities at the ranch). Walter's treatise of continued unexplained mortalities of released crows and TPF's messianic arguments that breeding and release must, nevertheless, go on, do a good job of illustrating the one-sided mentality of some in the captive breeding community. Interestingly, Walters completely glosses over the fact that disease was playing a prominent role in the decline of this endemic Hawaiian species. It is in this section that the author has a field day trashing the reputations of various scientists on the 'Alala recovery team (the formation of which he lauded in the previous section). Scientists attempting to shed light on the critical question of why 'Alala are dying in the wild are portrayed as venal bunglers only interested in their particular agendas or stealing jobs from TPF. All the while, the TPF and the owner of McCandless Ranch are well-meaning but hapless victims of government subterfuge who simply want to get on with the job at hand (pumping more crows into the wild) and not concern themselves with onerous details as to why releases are failing, a viewpoint Walters heartily endorses. A final section on disputes and lawsuits between McCandless Ranch and other landowners is a sad and pathetic testament to the confrontational nature of land management in Hawaii. The book closes with the acquisition of the future Kona National Wildlife Refuge (comprising portions of the McCandless Ranch) by the Nature Conservancy.

Resonating throughout this saga is a steady drumbeat of mortalities of crows, yet the author never really evinces any curiosity as to why releases into the wild were failing so consistently, a point that would seem critical to me. Walters completely overlooks the very significant fact that collaborative efforts between veterinarians at San Diego Zoo, US Geological Survey, the state of Hawaii, and the US Department of Agriculture revealed that a major cause of mortality in 'Alala was toxoplasmosis (Work et al., 2000). Furthermore, this finding was made possible only after the US Fish and Wildlife Service started placing radio transmitters with mortality sensors on released crows thereby permitting recovery of diagnostic specimens suitable for necropsy.

By focusing on hearsay and overlooking

data, Walters has missed an opportunity to provide the reader with informed and interesting material as to why crows died, the deductive process that was used to arrive at these causes of mortality, and most importantly, show that a wildlife disease (toxoplasmosis) that was a major cause of mortality and release failures of crows could indeed be managed. The author could then have broached a series of pertinent questions: Could feral cats be extirpated from 'Alala habitat, and, if so, why was this not done? Were crows in captivity behaviorally attuned to foraging on the ground (thus increasing their potential exposure to toxoplasmosis)? Did morbidity due to avian malaria and toxoplasmosis make crows more susceptible to predation by Hawaiian hawks? How exactly were crows becoming exposed to toxoplasmosis? Could crows be successfully treated for toxoplasmosis (Work et al., 2000)? Was malaria really the threat to crows as portrayed in the book? (In reality, it was not the only factor.) Had Walters, with his veterinary credentials, taken the time to interview veterinarians directly involved in the recovery efforts and focused a bit more on the science, perhaps a more rounded and enlightened picture may have emerged.

In the end, *Seeking the Sacred Raven* reads more like a compilation from *People Magazine*, replete with salacious tidbits about who said what with relatively little meat. As such, it will probably be of little scientific interest for those in the wildlife disease community, but it does provide a good lesson in how wildlife disease is often overlooked in recovery efforts of endangered species. The focus on political friction at the expense of facts serves little else than to

shed heat on a topic that sorely needs more light and transparency. Facts, as uncomfortable as they may seem, are just what is needed to aid in the management of critically endangered species. In the words of President John Adams, great grandfather of H. B. Adams: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence" (Bartlett, 1968). It remains, then for the reader to wait for an impartial and more comprehensive narrative of the Hawaiian crow.

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