# THE GREAT FERAL CAT CON JOB:
# THE UNGENTLE ART OF SCAPEGOATING AND SCAREMONGERING

**By Frankie Seymour**

## A recognisable pattern

Recently, I re-read the historical novel, *Daughter of Time*, by Josephine Tey. The title is from an old proverb – "Truth is the daughter of time". In other words, history is whatever the people who lived afterwards say it is.

The novel, *Daughter of Time* has absolutely nothing to do with (non-human) animals. In it, a modern (well, it was written in the 1950s, so relatively modern) police detective, while confined to a hospital bed, re-examines the story of the murder of the two young sons of Edward the Fourth the late 15th Century.

The story of these murders is probably less well-known to Australians than to veterans of the British education system – but, even here, most people who have heard anything at all about the smothering of those two small children in their beds half a millennium ago still assume that their uncle, Richard the Third, was the murderer.

Henry the Seventh, who deposed and killed Richard (even though his own claim to the throne was minimal), seems to have been Richard's first accuser. The canonised Sir Thomas Moore, writing to please Henry the Eighth (Henry the Seventh's son), gave the story credibility. Shakespeare, writing to please Elizabeth the First (Henry the Seventh's granddaughter), fixed it into the public consciousness with his play, *Richard the Third*, in which he depicts Richard as a monster of an order considerably less admirable than MacBeth. Generations of high school history text books have repeated the slander.

Tey's fictional detective, Grant, demonstrates beyond all reasonable doubt that Richard, who seems to have been a kind and much-loved king, couldn't have been responsible for the murders – he did not even have any motive (Richard only came the throne after Parliament had passed an Act declaring the boys to be illegitimate) and, indeed, it appears certain that the boys were still alive when Richard died. Grant concludes that the much more likely suspect was Henry the Seventh himself – even illegitimate, the boys' claim to the throne was better than Henry's. Grant thinks he is onto something with his discovery – that his work is original – only to learn that several historians have already published the same conclusions. But, somehow, the revelation of Richard's innocence has never been able to shift the weight, the sheer inertia of the established lie.

Perhaps the reader of this article will now have glimpsed the relevance of this story to the "feral" animal debate.

## Taking rights as read

When Claudette asked me to write this article, she wanted an article about the rights of feral cats. I said I couldn't see myself spending a whole article finding new ways of saying that the right to live proceeds from the fact of being alive, that the right to

be free to pursue joy and avoid suffering proceeds from the capacity to enjoy and to suffer. Or explaining that those rights do not change with the shape, size or species of the body you happen to born (or hatched) in, or how intelligent you are, or how long your ancestors have lived in the continent where you were born (or hatched), or whether or not you are fortunate enough to have an "owner".

I can only really say any of these things once. Rights, both animal rights and human rights, are not really things you can debate. You either accept them or you don't. Rights are difficult to argue because they are so bleeding obvious – and how on Earth do you fix whatever damaged synapse in the brain stops people from seeing the bleeding obvious?

So I'm not going to argue that feral cats - and other animals that have been introduced to the Australian environment and established wild populations - have as much right to consideration and compassion as "owned" cats, native animals or, indeed, humans. I will take those blindingly obvious facts as read.

What I will talk about is the massive con job that has been perpetrated against "feral" cats – and naturalised species more generally.

So, let's start by reviewing the evidence. How do we know it's a con job?

**The alleged environmental impacts of naturalised species**

First and foremost is the almost total lack of scientific research that actually supports the view that naturalised species are a serious environmental threat.

When I first began work on environmental issues twenty five years ago, the pressures of introduced species that had returned to the wild and become naturalised were recognised for what they are: a marginal extra, potentially, in some really extreme circumstances (when added to all the other things humans are doing to the environment), the straw that breaks the camel's back – but still nothing more than a straw in their own right.

Very little original research has appeared since the 1980s that sheds any new light on the impacts of naturalised species. Indeed, what research has emerged, even when it has been funded by farmers and the "pest" control industry, has had to work hard to draw any connection at all between naturalised species and environmental damage. However, this difficulty hasn't stopped wild cats, foxes, goats, rabbits, pigs and, most recently, "exotic" rats on off shore islands, from being declared Key Threatening Processes (KTPs) under the Australian Government's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999*.

While vast swags of well-proven human impacts on the environment remain undeclared as KTPs, this small group of highly visible introduced vertebrate animals have been included as KTPs, on the basis of very sketchy evidence indeed.

Declaration of a KTP under the EPBC Act triggers the development of a Threat Abatement Plan (TAP). The Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH) has therefore been required to develop a TAP for each of these

naturalised species. TAPs for rabbits, foxes, cats, goats and pigs are completed and available on-line. (The TAP for rats is still being developed.)

Ironically, it is in developing these TAPs that the Department has compiled all available research on the impacts of each of these animals – and has thus revealed to anyone who wants to go look, how astonishingly little evidence there is of any threat at all!

The "Threat Abatement Plan" for "feral" cats, states that:

> *Convincing evidence that feral cats exert a significant effect on native wildlife on the mainland, or in Tasmania, is scarce…. There is no evidence of feral cats causing extinctions in mainland Australia or Tasmania*. (*DEH website, accessed June 2006)*

Cats, incidentally, are suspected of being implicated in local extinctions on some off shore islands. I will talk more about the off shore island issue later.

The situation for the other animals declared to be KTPs is much the same as for cats. Of more than two dozen studies of the impacts of "feral" pigs, compiled for the development of the pig TAP, the Department found only one, on Flinders Island in 1987 (an offshore island again!), that was able to demonstrate an unambiguous negative impact from feral pigs *(DEH, 2003).* For goats and foxes, the story is similar. None of these animals - cats, foxes, goats or pigs - is considered, in any of this compiled research, to have caused any extinctions in mainland Australia.

<u>This is the Australian Government's own attempt to justify the Australian Government's decision to declare these creatures to be "key threatening processes" – and this is the best it can do!</u>

**Naturalised species in modified ecosystems**

The rabbit TAP is the exception - rabbits, we are told, may have caused some extinctions in arid Australia (*DEH website, accessed June 2006).*

The rabbit example is important because it unpacks another layer of the deception. The conclusion of the TAP is that rabbits may have caused extinctions in arid Australia. But rabbits are not desert animals – they absolutely have to have water. So how come they have even survived in arid Australia?

The answer is quite simple: humans have modified arid Australia by providing huge quantities of surface water, for the purpose of watering "livestock". We have changed the arid environment into something about as pseudo-European as a desert can get - and we have done so for the express purpose of creating a tolerable environment for European animals such as sheep, cattle – and, of course, rabbits.

In the light of this, can we seriously even speculate that it was the rabbits who caused the extinctions in arid Australia? Can we be sure it was the burrowing of rabbits, rather than the hard, heavy hooves of sheep and cattle that damaged the fragile soils? Can we be sure it was the over-grazing of prolifically breeding rabbits, rather than the

browsing of the young trees by overstocked cattle or the close grazing of ground cover by sheep, that devoured the sparse vegetation and out-competed some of the small desert mammals?

And have we even begun to study any of the other complex ecological impacts of throwing millions of tonnes of surface water at an environment where all endemic life was adapted to having very little water?

The answer is, of course, no. "Rabbits may have caused extinctions in arid Australia" is stated as though it were a reasonable conclusion from the weight of evidence. In fact, it is an assumption that could only be supported by studies which somehow remove the other variables: the water, the sheep, the cattle. Such studies have never been attempted and, in today's vastly changed arid Australian ecosystems, it is now too late for them to ever be done.

There are studies (two examples can be found in *Garnett et al, 2002*) which show that, in places where naturalised species have proliferated, native species have declined – and such "evidence" is often used to support the case against "feral" animals. But, when you look a little more closely at any of these studies, what you find is that the expansion of naturalised species and the decline of native species have occurred only in highly modified environments, environments that have been intentionally changed to favour introduced species and to disfavour native species. How then can it be argued that it is the introduced species, rather than the modification of the environment, which caused the decline of the native species?

**And what about the environmental role of naturalised species?**

In addition to the stunning lack of evidence that naturalised animals are a serious problem for the Australian environment, we also have an even more complete absence of any research into the ecological role assumed by introduced species when they become naturalised. There have been no studies of the potentially negative consequences for an ecosystem of removing them – especially from environments which have been intentionally modified to be as pseudo-European as possible.

A single escapee – a lion from a zoo, a finch from a cage – is unlikely to be ever be a problem for the environment. The lion may eat a few people and sheep and kangaroos in the course of completing its allotted span on Earth, but eventually it will die and nothing much will have changed. It is only when escapees succeed in breeding in the wild, and only when their descendents also breed, and only when a stable or expanding population is well established, that the species may become a problem.

What all the current research fails to recognise is that, in establishing itself in an ecosystem, a new species becomes a part of that ecosystem. Even if you had enough information to conclude that, on balance, the ecosystem would be better off without it, you cannot take a naturalised species out of the ecosystem without some negative consequences for those who have become dependent on its presence. If an introduced predator out-competes native predators, it will obviously also take over their role in regulating prey populations. If an introduced prey animal out-competes native prey animals, it will obviously also take over their role in the food chain.

What studies we do have suggest that cats and foxes play a critical role in regulating rabbit populations *(Pech et al 1992, Newsome et al 1989),* and that rabbits now provide 90 per cent of the diet of some native raptors *(Australian Museum Online, accessed June 2006*). What we don't have is any studies of the role of cats and foxes in regulating native prey animal populations where native predators have declined, or the role of rabbits, rats and mice in providing food for the full swag of native predators where native prey species have declined, or the role of rabbits in regulating native plants following the removal of native herbivores, or any of the other multiple interactive complexities of ecological relationships.

Not only do no such studies appear to exist – no-one is even bothering to tell governments that they are needed. A perfect example is the advice provided to the Australian Government in relation to the most recent animals to be scapegoated as a KTP under the EPBC Act – "exotic" rats on Australian offshore islands. As usual, the advice (*DEH website, accessed June 2006),* identifies (bizarrely!) one of the adverse impacts of "exotic" rats on island ecology as the fact that they provide a food source for predators. However, the critical role of "exotic" rats in providing such a food source, especially for birds such as the endangered Lord Howe Island Pied Currawong (*DEH website, accessed June 2006),* is not even mentioned in this advice. Neither is the role of rats, as predators themselves, in limiting the spread of the European garden snail (*Recher et al, 2000*).

It is important to understand that ecosystems on off shore islands are notoriously volatile. On Lord Howe Island, for example, in 1919, there were 15 species of land bird. In 1972, there were still 15 species of land bird, but nine of them were new species not present in 1919 (*Recher et al, 2000*)!

Certainly, a sudden influx of one species, either native or introduced, could potentially have a devastating effect on a spatially limited population of another species – but so could a bad sea storm, a bushfire, or a frost out of season. Off shore islands are continually losing entire species to minor disasters or slower attrition and, at the same time, gaining new species by sea and air. Sometimes the new species are "native" Australian species, sometimes they are "exotic". It can be argued that, on off shore islands, the terms "native" and "exotic" are meaningless – the island takes whatever it can get and runs with it.

Cats and rats have been escaping from ships and shipwrecks onto off shore islands since the Age of Exploration, while goats and pigs were intentionally introduced to islands by passing ships as a food source for later. These species have been naturalised on these islands for a very long time – and, in some cases a naturalised population may have been present longer than a "native" population because the native population has been wiped out numerous times and then reintroduced by wind or wave years later.

Some islands have provided refuges for species that have disappeared elsewhere, or have bred their own unique variants of a species – and some of these species are in decline. Of course it would be nice to protect these plants and creatures from the thousand natural (and anthropogenic) shocks that islands are heir to. But we have to recognise that you cannot wrap any ecosystem, and especially not an island ecosystem, in cottonwool and protect it from its own essential nature. These endemic

species have survived the presence of rats, cats, goats and pigs for hundreds of years. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that some of these threatened endemic species are only still axtant because "exotic" species have provided a food source, or helped maintain a food source, or controlled a competitor or modified the effects of a predator.

The one thing ecosystems are not is simple. Even when there are relatively few species involved in an ecosystem, such as on some offshore islands, the interactions between those species are vast in number. The more complex the ecosystem is, the more resilient it is – and the ecosystems of mainland Australia are among the most complex on Earth. But it is also true that the more complex an ecosystem is, the harder it is to predict how many species you can add or remove without seriously compromising its integrity. The interrelationships between species, including new species, in Australia are extraordinarily complex and any notion that you can "fix" anything by removing an introduced species is so childishly naive you have to wonder if its proponents ever made it out of primary school. Anything resembling systems thinking seems to be absent from Australia's hysterical response to the naturalisation of introduced species.

**Yet another flaw in the indictment**

But even this - the lack of evidence of "feral" animals causing a problem, and the complete lack of consideration of the ecological consequences of removing them once they are naturalised – is not the end of the mental laziness you encounter in this debate. There is another really obvious flaw in the logic of "if-it's-feral-kill-it" mentality.

The final population at which any species, native or naturalised, stabilises is absolutely governed by the number of available niches. Any individual who doesn't find a niche simply dies. Most young born to most species everywhere on Earth die without reaching adulthood. Only the fittest survive.

Now here's an interesting thing: everyone – governments and their pet scientists, farmers, "pest" controllers – all now seem to agree that, once a species is naturalised on the Australian mainland, it is impossible to eradicate it – the best you can do is exercise "sustained control" (for which read "mass murder in perpetuity"). This is because the species that are likely to become naturalised tend to be fast-breeding species, quickly spreading to fill all available niches. Clever as humans are at killing things, we just haven't yet found have any way of killing a fast-breeding species fast enough to get them all before their next breeding cycle – at least not without killing everything else in the vicinity at the same time.

When you exercise "sustained control" of a naturalised population, all you are doing is emptying niches so that young animals who might, or might not, have succeeded in dispossessing the incumbent in any case, inherit those niches without a fight. Since most naturalised species are fast-breeders, every niche you have emptied is re-filled very quickly. For example, in the case of any population of pigeons, six months down the track from a mass slaughter, the population is very likely to be 10-15 per cent higher than it was prior to the slaughter *(PICAS website, accessed 2006)*. This is because the reduction in population makes more food available to the survivors and

pigeons can produce up to six times more eggs when they are well-fed than when food is scarce.

What is more, when you kill animals to control their numbers, you are constantly culling for individuals who are clever or fast or strong enough to thwart your attempts to kill them - and they pass those faster, smarter, stronger genes (as well as their experiential knowledge) on to their offspring.

This is basic Darwinianism – survival of the fittest – yet the thought of it does not seem to have entered the heads of those who advocate lethal control of "feral" animals.

**The ungentle art of scape-goating and witch hunting**

In addition to the remarkable absence of any actual science supporting the popular beliefs (a) that introduced wild animals are a huge environmental problem (b) that removing them from the environment (were it possible) would be a good thing and (c) that the way to deal with the problem is to kill as many of them as possible, there are a number of sociological hallmarks that also give the whole business away as a con job – and, indeed, as a classic witch hunt.

One hallmark is the targeting of cats themselves. European culture has a long history of demonising cats. Dogs copped it too, but never to the same extent as cats. Demonising the pets of single, propertied women was just one of a number of standard ploys for proving the women were witches so that the State could seize their property. You just decided a woman's dog or cat was a familiar and there you had it, instant proof. By the late Middle Ages, cats in Europe had been hunted, hanged and burned almost to extinction.

Then, of course, the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) arrived in Europe and 25 million people (as well as unimaginable numbers or rats and other susceptible animals) died in five years because, for several hundred years before, there hadn't been enough cats to keep the rat population healthy (*Buckingham, 1995*). For the next couple of centuries after "the Death" – centuries which just happened to coincide with the Age of Exploration - cats became popular again. Ships travelling to Asia and Africa were particularly vulnerable to pick up Plague – so cats on ships were considered lucky and necessary.

That is how cats first came to Australia, as survivors of shipwrecks – perhaps as early as the 14$^{th}$ or 15$^{th}$ Century *(Wagner, 1995)*. Then, in the 16$^{th}$ and 17$^{th}$ Centuries, there were further spates of witch burnings in Europe – government coffers were obviously getting low again and women have this nasty habit of outliving men and inheriting their property. So the cats, as well as the women, copped it again – but there were also intermittent recurrences of the Plague, so it never got as bad for cats again as it was before the Black Death.

Witch hunts had another purpose besides stealing property from defenceless women. Witchcraft beliefs, even in pre-literate and non-Christian societies, exist for no other purpose than as a mechanism for blaming someone else, someone who can't defend themselves, for one's own failures. As such, throughout history, they have been used

by those in power to distract attention from the failures of the State to fix the problems of the people.

Single women (along with their cats) and Jews, have been the two traditional scapegoats of successive European governments. Once you have used a particular group as a scapegoat once, it seems to be easy to use it again, even hundreds of years later. From the time of the fall of Jerusalem, the Jewish refugees who fled to Europe were blamed for anything that went wrong. Thousands of Jews were burned alive, drowned or otherwise murdered in the 14th Century because they were blamed for the Black Death. The precedent was well established – ergo it was easy for Hitler to blame them for Germany's post-WW1 woes and murder six million more of them.

The recent demonisation in Australia of cats specifically, and "feral" animals more generally, has equally well-established precedents, and the process is entirely recognisable.

The underlying motive of gaining or maintaining wealth or power is the same as ever. Australian governments have found themselves in a no-win situation. They cannot fix a problem their electorates expect them to fix (in this case the environment) without either disadvantaging a large portion of their support base (in this case, "Rural Australia") or else paying vast amounts of taxpayers' money in compensation. So they revert to a tried and true strategy: choose a scapegoat, whip up community hysteria and then have a nice therapeutic "witch hunt" – and hope, when the madness has run its course, that the original problem will have gone away - or at least that they will have got safely through the next election.

**So how is the con job perpetrated?**

You begin by picking your victim – someone relatively powerless: a minority like the Jews (or any other group or race of refugees will do), or a politically and socially disadvantaged group like single women (or female single parents may be more familiar as a scapegoat group to latterday Australians), or a predator like cats, or a "disease carrier" like rats, or something ugly and poisonous like cane toads, or something too damned good at making fools of us like rabbits, or a dead King you want to discredit like Richard the Third.

Then you just choose the lie you want to tell and you tell it, every chance you get. It helps to invoke the rhetoric of warfare or murder or disease. Sooner or later other parties, especially those with a vested interest - politicians wanting to look like they are doing something without actually doing anything, farmers still trying to squeeze profit out of a dying landscape, scientists desperate for research funding - will notice your lie and start quoting it as if it were true, at every opportunity.

Before long everyone is quoting it – and everyone else just assumes it's true because no-one can be bothered going back to primary sources and checking for themselves.

Not even Sir Thomas Moore. Not even Shakespeare.

**And how do we fight it?**

The truth is, I don't know how to turn back the tide of the lie that has been whipped up against these defenceless animals. Ten years ago, I myself assumed that "feral" animals really were an environmental problem because everyone, including people who genuinely cared about the environment, said they were. That, of course, did not mean they had any less right to consideration than any other animal – and, even then, I realised the obvious Darwinian truth about lethal control. But, I confess, I did believe the assumption that they were a serious problem for the environment.

Then, when I took on the role of Introduced Wild Animals Divisional Representative with Animals Australia, I went away and checked the facts – and I was mind-blown to discover the revelations I have attempted to share with readers in this article.

Ever since then, I have been trying to get these revelations out to the world at large and the animal rights movement in particular. I don't ask anyone to take my word for it – I just ask people to go and check – with a degree of intellectual rigour - the facts for themselves, instead of just accepting the lie, the con job, behind this latest witch hunt.

We have to believe that, if a lie can become history just by being told often enough, maybe the truth, if it is told often enough, can ultimately unravel it.

But whether or not we succeed, we have to try.

Richard the Third is long dead and never lived to hear the horrible lie that history told of him. But millions of animals alive now and perhaps billions yet to be born will die horrifically – of poisons, traps, gas, gunshot, disease and all sorts of other unimaginable cruelty – unless we can find a way to expose this latest con job.

What's more, as long as governments have an innocent scapegoat they can blame, they will be able to continue to avoid doing anything about the real issues that are destroying our global environment. There will be no electoral backlash for this avoidance because the electorate has been deluded into thinking governments really are doing something – after all, they're killing those nasty, evil, unnatural "feral" animals.

So, in the end, it may not just be these victimised animals themselves who depend on us to reverse this lie. It may be all life on Earth.

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