Encounters on the Frontier:  
Banteng in Australia’s Northern Territory  

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Abstract  
This paper considers the case of an introduced species that resides in what is now a jointly managed national park in the north of tropical Australia. Banteng (Bos javanicus) are a peculiar feral nonhuman animal in that they constitute a potential environmental threat within the domestic conservation goals of the park, but they also hold the prospect of being a major genetic resource in the international conservation of the species. Thus, perspectives on the use and management of these animals are varied between different actors in the park landscape, and are subject to fluctuations over time, especially in response to wider social and political circumstances. This paper argues that seemingly objective views of these animals are actually a series of subjectivities, which have less to do with any concrete aspects of the animals themselves and more to do with the way that particular people orient themselves toward, and within, the landscape.  

Keywords  
joint management, feral animals, landscape anthropology, safari hunting, national parks, conservation, Cobourg Peninsula, Aboriginal people  

[There is a] tension between, on the one hand, the argument that for humans, ‘nature’ can only make sense through the various filters of ‘social construction’ and, on the other hand, the argument that nature has an irreducible positivist reality outside human interpretations. (Darier, 1999, p. 3)
Places are inherently laden with meanings. From the seemingly simple act of naming, to complex negotiations over sovereignty, places become places through the accretion of layers of social meaning. Distant and recent history (and the multiple perspectives inherent in any “history”), oral traditions, archaeological evidence, personal experience, myths, and legends—these are just some of the ways that places undergo the transformation from undifferentiated space to socially constructed place (Gerber, 1997; Harvey, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991). As individuals experience and imagine places from their different perspectives and over multiple generations, places come to acquire diverse and sometimes conflicting meanings. These meanings often continue to accrue invisibly, until a critical event illuminates the presence of these layers.

This paper considers one such situated set of meanings: those surrounding the banteng (*Bos javanicus*) of the Cobourg Peninsula, Australia. Cobourg’s scenic qualities, diverse vegetation communities, abundant wildlife, and important marine resources have contributed to its historical role as one of the most significant areas for conservation in Australia’s Northern Territory, and preserving these key values underpinned the decision to declare the area a national park in 1981. But the park is in some ways better known not for its native species, but as the launching point for several significant species of feral nonhuman animals, some of which currently pose the biggest animal management challenges in the Northern Territory.

One species in particular has become peculiarly situated: the banteng, a species of sexually dimorphic wild cattle similar in size to dairy cattle. Within Australia, banteng are considered a feral animal (that is, a species introduced for human use which now survives and breeds outside of captivity). Internationally, however, they are endangered in their home range through Southeast Asia. In fact, the park’s current herd may represent a significant resource for the ultimate conservation of the species, as there are believed to be over 10,000 animals on the peninsula (making the park home to the world’s largest remaining wild herd) (Bradshaw et al., 2007).

This paper considers the multifaceted relationship between banteng and people in the landscape of the Cobourg Peninsula, through the lens of two temporally located junctures. The first of these occurred nearly 200 years ago, when the banteng were introduced to the peninsula during the British colonization of northern Australia. The second juncture captures a recent timespan surrounding the development of a management plan for these animals, which

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1 The banteng are also known as tembadau or Bali cattle. The terms “banteng” and “tembadau” refer to purebred wild stock of *Bos javanicus*, whereas Bali cattle are a domesticated hybrid, and therefore are of less interest to the biological conservation of the species.
included a definitive assessment of their genetic identity and the implications of that identity for their use and management within a jointly managed national park. Both of these events constitute a set of encounters with the banteng within a particular “frontier” landscape, an examination of which reveals how people, places, and animals interact within what is ultimately a mutually constitutive landscape (see Hirsch, 1995, for further discussion of landscape, space, and place).

**Year Zero**

The story of the banteng in northern Australia begins in 1838, when the Cobourg Peninsula became the site of the first major British settlement in tropical Australia (there were two short-lived attempts previous to this: Fort Dundas in 1824 on Melville Island, and Fort Wellington in Raffles Bay in 1827, both of which were abandoned by 1829). Victoria Settlement was established by a detachment of Royal Marines, in order to demonstrate British sovereignty over the area and in the hopes of establishing trade links with the Macassans who came to the Cobourg coast annually to harvest sea cucumber (*bêche-de-mer*). There was also a larger intention that the settlement would quickly expand beyond a naval outpost to become a fully functional colonial community and ultimately become the “new Singapore” and serve as a trading center for the region (Spillett, 1972). However, the settlement did not prosper, and indeed suffered numerous profound problems—a lack of sufficient drinking water year-round, two devastating cyclones, numerous outbreaks of malaria, and poor garden productivity (due in part to the fact that the officer assigned to maintain the settlement’s gardens was actually a botanist from the Kew Gardens who in fact knew little about horticulture, as his main task was to collect and preserve botanical samples) (Spillett, 1972).

Along with the settlers and their ships came animals to provide labor and food for the outpost. These animals also had a distinct role in the overall transformation of the wild frontier of coastal northern Australia into civilized colonial possession:

Moreover, that future settlers might not be under the necessity of eating salt-junk: he left, poultry,—a boar and several sows, in a place where it is likely they will thrive and increase, being a swamp, abounding in fern and other roots, of which they are fond;—also a bull and three cows; and (ever attentive to the convenience and ease of future sojourners) a Timor
Among the animals introduced at Victoria Settlement were the banteng, brought from Bali to be used as plough animals but who proved to be useless as labor animals, as they ran off shortly after being brought ashore. This incident is in some ways typical of the mishaps and disasters that befell the settlement over its entire lifespan, the cumulative effects of which contributed greatly to the settlement’s rapid demise. After only 11 years at the settlement, the order came to abandon in 1849, and within three weeks the settlers had departed for Sydney. When they departed, they left behind their distinctive physical legacy captured not only in their Cornish chimneys and stonework walls, but also in the animals they had intentionally introduced.

Contemporary accounts of this period of early settlement demonstrate some of the multiple meanings Victoria Settlement holds for people today. An older white man I spoke with summarized the settlement days by saying that the British were worried about the Dutch and French in the north of Australia, but the place itself was too rough—according to him, it was the cyclones and about 100 deaths from tropical diseases that eventually did the settlement in. A senior Aboriginal landowner told me that when he was younger, he was told that the drinking water went salty at Victoria Settlement, so the British all ran away and started Darwin (the current capital of the Northern Territory). If this had not happened, he believes that Darwin would have been built on Cobourg instead.

For most white observers, the overall view of this first serious colonial outpost in the far north focuses on the glorious nature of the settlement, perhaps best captured by the image and narrative of the settlers forging on in woolen uniforms despite the heat, and thus refusing to relinquish the symbols of civilization in their efforts to keep foreigners off the soil of the Empire. The civilizing force of the Empire was unable, however, to conquer this wild and “forsaken” place (Spillett, 1972; see also Schaffer, 1990, for discussion of the construction of Australian national identity in relation to overcoming the adversities of the Australian landscape).

From an Aboriginal perspective, though, the settlement is interpreted according to different understandings of place. The idea that the drinking water “went salty” is usually explained in terms of British ignorance—not knowing this place properly, they dug for water in the wrong place (and according to some contemporary Aboriginal landowners in the area, put the settlement on the wrong side of the natural harbor). Many current residents believe
that if they had asked for the assistance of Aboriginal people, the British would have ultimately been successful in establishing a city of global significance. This view reinforces Aboriginal beliefs in the inherent goodness of their land (country); it was not a defect in the place (as the counter narrative of cyclones and disease suggests), but a defect in how they used it, that caused the settlers to endure their string of problems.

While the ruins of Victoria Settlement continue to attract tourists to the park today, the main lasting legacy of those early days has been the subsequent increase and spread of the many animals they introduced. Buffalo, pigs, and banteng, all deriving from introductions during these early settlement years, have indeed gone on to become a dietary benefit as originally hoped for by the settlers. But that benefit now flows to an unintended audience: the Aboriginal residents of the area. In fact, those introductions that were made on behalf of the state, and thus made sense to the needs of the state in the 1830s, no longer make sense to it today, as the animals are now regarded as invasive pests within a conservation-focused national park, and many land managers would gladly see them completely removed. Thus, this first encounter between whitefellas (as agents of the state), Aboriginal people, and banteng on the colonial frontier of the Cobourg Peninsula in the 1830s did lead to a transformation of the frontier. But the colonial intent of the transformation was unsuccessful—to the white observer, the place is not more civilized, but has actually become more “wild,” and the feral banteng who remain confined to the peninsula are an instant symbol of the ambiguous outcomes of that first attempt by the state to control Cobourg.

**When Worldviews Collide**

Rather than approach representations of nature and place as separate and distinct intellectual concepts, they are viewed here as dialectically linked, mutually reinforcing and politically charged notions. . . . Deciding what place is has much to do with determining how nature is represented, and hence managed. (Wilson, 1999, p. 6)

After the short-lived settlement in Port Essington, the Cobourg Peninsula faded from importance for the central government for a while, but it soon reappeared as a flagship site of a new emphasis for the state: the conservation of natural resources. In 1924, the area was declared the first reserve for the protection of flora and fauna in northern Australia. This status remained somewhat at odds with the traditional Aboriginal ownership of the area until 1940,
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When Aboriginal rights were first recognized, and part of the peninsula was removed from the sanctuary and reserved for the use of Aboriginal people. Beginning in the 1950s, the Welfare Branch adopted a policy of relocating Aboriginal people, and people were urged to move to Oenpelli and Darwin, so that the children could attend school and people could receive social services. There was a great deal of resistance to these efforts, but by 1970 the last Aboriginal person had left the peninsula, with most going to neighboring Croker Island.

That the removal of Aboriginal people coincided with the newfound focus on conservation on the peninsula is not surprising, given the prevailing attitudes and approaches of conservation work both within and beyond Australia at that time (and to some extent, to this day) (e.g., Braun, 2002; Harvey, 1996; Neumann, 1998; Viner, 1984). Cobourg continued on this trajectory of being at the frontier of conservation work both nationally and internationally, and in 1974, Cobourg catapulted onto the international conservation stage when it became the first ever area declared a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

However, while the Aboriginal traditional owners (TOs) of Cobourg were gone from the peninsula, they had certainly not forgotten their homeland (or country, as it is glossed in Aboriginal Australia), and in 1976, the TOs gave notification that they were proceeding with a land claim on the area. This land claim process and the resulting document (Peterson & Tonkinson, 1979) give some insight into Aboriginal ways of relating to the landscape, and the claim book highlights the challenges inherent in translating one system of “law” into a completely foreign one. Indeed, across Australia more generally much difficulty has arisen from the fact that Aboriginal conceptions of ownership, use rights, and actual residence do not necessarily overlap. There are flexibilities and inconsistencies within Aboriginal land interactions that have often frustrated white attempts to understand Aboriginal land ownership (Hamilton, 1982; Morphy, 1995; Myers, 1986; Povinelli, 2006).

Aboriginal understandings of country are incredibly complex, and sometimes incomprehensible, to those who exist outside of them. Even my own small understanding, pieced together from various encounters and conversations I have had during the course of my fieldwork and in my subsequent work with sacred sites, is difficult to convey. In some ways, it is the seeming alienness of the beliefs that makes them hard to explain without causing outright disbelief (from a Western perspective). Povinelli’s (1992) experience is typical of how uncomfortably Aboriginal beliefs about country sit with others: “Belyuen people’s claim that they create the countryside when they pass through it is regarded with scepticism by the government” (p. 198).
This idea that people and their country exist in a mutually constitutive relationship has profound implications for people’s need to maintain access to, and control over, their ancestral lands. There is an inherent power vested in land, not just in its resources, but on and under its surface, in its waterways, and its natural contours and formations. There is not just a sacred topology to be understood, but an interactive maintenance that is required. Failure to maintain country properly can have catastrophic consequences, as in the case of unseasonably heavy rains in May of 2004 that were said to be caused by the sinking of a pearling boat at a Dreaming site off the coast of Cobourg.

This ability of country to assert its own will, what Bradley (2001) has called the “sentient landscape” (p. 295), can have both positive and negative effects. I was told by several TOs that the goodness of the area was evident in the abundance of bush foods. One TO explained to me why banteng had remained confined to the Cobourg peninsula in the years after their introduction, and even prior to the construction of the fence across the neck of the peninsula. Even though some stray banteng have been found along the East Alligator River nearly 100 km from his country, he explained, “they can’t stay in that place, that country won’t let them stay.” This country though, this place called Cobourg, had “made its own way” and decided to allow banteng to remain.

The prepared land claim precipitated the compromise agreement that resulted in the Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land and Sanctuary Act in 1981 (the Act). The Act officially created the national park (now called Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, or Garig for short), and the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary Board, responsible for overseeing the management of the park. This eight-member board has an Aboriginal majority and is comprised of four members from the traditional landowning groups (with one of these members designated Chairman) and four members from government. This was the next step along the frontier of conservation for the park, as it was the first national park to be jointly managed by the Northern Territory government and the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land, and the board system of management set up with the founding of the park has continued to be a model for joint management across the Northern Territory.

In anticipation of the land claim, the Historical Society of the Northern Territory (1980) prepared a brief response. That document chronicled a list of sites of historical significance on the peninsula outside of Victoria Settlement and included only a handful of minor sites including Record Point (where a record in a bottle was buried in 1824), Orantes Reef (where a ship ran aground in 1838), and Smith Point (the site of a beacon) (Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1980). The list reads as an almost desperate attempt to make the mark of the colony on the landscape, while simultaneously denying...
Aboriginal people any ownership of “history” in the region through the notable absence of even a single site associated with Aboriginal occupation or use on the list.

What underpinned this counterclaim, then, and what still persists to the present day in the various plans of management prepared for the park, is the tension between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views of the landscape of Cobourg. This also manifests in the dispute over the conservation values of the park in general, typically framed by people I spoke with in terms of the contrast between action taken with regard to “real” conservation values and actions motivated by political expediency. When the peninsula was declared the first Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in 1974, some people were opposed to the designation, with one former ranger telling me that Cobourg is not even a wetland; rather, according to him, the most important factor in the decision was that it had secure land tenure at a time when Australia needed to nominate land for that labeling. He claims that Cobourg is “not really a spectacular wetland but [Ramsar designation was] a good excuse to make the place a park.” Others pointed out to me the history of the area as a sort of playground for political elites of the Northern Territory, suggesting that the decision to designate the area for protection was motivated by their desire to preserve the area as their own private fishing grounds.

What the banteng provide in this complex field of interrelations is both a distillation of the tensions over multiple views of the landscape, and a frame within which to understand the sometimes paradoxical status of the park and its management as a whole. The banteng are a feral herd, having established themselves as a wild population on the peninsula after the initial introduction of less than 50 banteng at Victoria Settlement (several of which escaped captivity almost as soon as they got off the ship). The presence of some 10,000 non-native, large land mammals in a national park is clearly problematic, yet they are likely the largest wild herd of banteng left anywhere in the world.² They are a declared endangered species in their home range in Southeast Asia (and are considered rare enough to have been the subject of successful cloning in the United States), and are protected only in small numbers in a few national parks in Indonesia and Malaysia.

In Cobourg, however, they are not afforded the same protections as they are in their home range, and since 1981, safari hunters have been able to hunt

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² There are believed to be less than 5,000 pure-strain banteng surviving in their native range, with the largest herds numbering below 500 individuals each. Bradshaw et al. (2006), Bradshaw et al. (2007), and Choquenot (1993) discuss the genetics and demography of the Cobourg herd, and its context internationally, in greater detail.
banteng within the park through two providers. The banteng is one of only two big game species sought in the Northern Territory, and Cobourg is the only place in the world to hunt wild banteng legally. (There is a small operation elsewhere in the Northern Territory where captive banteng can be hunted, albeit within large fenced paddocks.) They are said to be prized for the quality of the hunt and their fine skins, as well as the impressive horns on the trophy bulls that are the main target of international hunters. The total take in Cobourg is limited to 30 animals per year, at a trophy fee of about $2,700 per animal, creating a small revenue that is divided amongst the TOs each year.

Banteng are not exclusively a whitefella hunting resource; in fact, they are directly consumed by TOs, especially when it is too windy to engage in the central subsistence practices of fishing and marine hunting. But they are also indirectly consumed by the safari hunters who travel across vast distances at great expense, to capture a rare, exotic animal in a rare, exotic landscape. The safari providers go to great lengths to sell Cobourg as pristine, wild, exclusive, uninhabited: in a word, other. They manufacture a series of encounters with the landscape and the animal, including purposely going where they know banteng will not be found for the first day or two, and deliberately placing the hunter far away from the animal when spotted and then tracking them on foot, all in an effort to create an impression of scarcity and to increase the thrill of the hunt. As a former associate of one of the safari providers told me, “there is only so much excitement in hunting what is basically a cow.” A safari provider explained things to me in slightly more romantic terms: “hunters are there for the whole experience... they want to hunt on foot, to hunt the animal wild and free” (which they can only do in Cobourg since they are protected elsewhere in the world).

The safari providers have a view of banteng that is clearly driven by their own monetary considerations and do not speak of the banteng as anything but the economic potential they represent. One former provider lamented the small number of trophy tags that the park awards each year, saying that “the resource is just dying, being wasted,” despite being aware of Aboriginal use of banteng for subsistence. In his view, shooting an animal to eat him or her is not making “use” of the “resource,” but shooting him or her solely for his or her head is an adequate “use” because of the tangible, monetized return the animal produces.

Most TOs I spoke with were supportive of the safari hunting, as long as it does not adversely affect the stability of the population as a whole or people’s ability to move across the country freely. Their concern for the well-being of the banteng population stems from their perception that the banteng are a naturalized component of the landscape, and people explained to me that
country (as a sentient landscape as discussed briefly above) has decided to allow them to stay. Thus, many TOs see their role with regard to the banteng as no different from their role vis-à-vis any other animal—they have a duty to look after country in the proper ways, and follow ancestral law, and country will ensure the continued provision of food, water, and other basic needs for its people, flora, and fauna.

This view stands in stark contrast to the concerns raised by a number of park staff during the course of my research. One such concern was that banteng may be responsible for erosion in the park, especially along the sensitive dune areas, which are one of the main vegetation communities the park seeks to protect. The tracks that banteng use as they move between shady swamps where they spend the day, and the coast where they come to graze in the evening, may be responsible for saltwater intrusion in coastal swamps and wetlands, which is a particularly sensitive conservation target given the park’s Ramsar status. The animals also create a visible browse line on the trees in areas where they eat and are often found lying beneath these trimmed trees in a shady “camp” (as one TO called it). The browse line does not seem to adversely affect the overall survival of the trees, but it can be seen as an unsightly modification in what is meant to be a wild landscape.

These concerns all stem from (and reinforce) the basic perception of banteng by park staff; namely, that they are not a part of the natural landscape, but rather a feral pest causing potentially significant environmental impacts. Park staff expect Cobourg to be “park-worthy,” and in need of scientific land management that operates on very general (and generalizable) principles. Ultimately, to a trained park ranger, the specificities of place do not matter, and land management practices are rooted in generalized scientific principles derived from research in a number of different places (rather than being intimately linked to specific places and their inherent qualities, as is the case with Aboriginal land management). Thus, for many park rangers, and scientists more generally, landscape is an attractive, but in some ways unimportant, backdrop, of interest mainly in terms of its function as habitat for wildlife.

Indeed, one important original intention of the park was to preserve the banteng, as their uniqueness within northern Australia was considered sufficient grounds to view them as an animal warranting protection. A few years after the park was established, bureaucratic leadership shifted to a view of the banteng as an environmental “problem.” More recently still, the pendulum has begun to swing back toward preservation, and a critical juncture where the changeability of views became apparent occurred during the last few months of my research project, affording a unique perspective on the flexibility of seemingly firmly grounded perspectives.
In 2004, a project to definitively assess the genetic identity (and thus the conservation importance) of the banteng of the peninsula was undertaken (Bradshaw, et al., 2007), and I was able to discuss the possible outcomes of that research with a range of park “stakeholders.” Perhaps not surprisingly, the Aboriginal people I spoke to felt that the results of the DNA tests would not necessarily change anything about their view of banteng in the local landscape, but could change their economic status by making them more valuable if they turned out to be genetically pure. Also somewhat unsurprising were the views of the safari providers, who were more wary of the genetic identity being definitively identified. Their situation of being able to sell the animals as the authentic rare and endangered banteng, without having to worry about the laws that protect endangered animals in their home ranges, was an ideal “best of both worlds” scenario, and they feared the loss of either the status or legality of their hunts depending on the specific findings of the research.

But it was the views of park staff and non-Aboriginal board members that turned out to be the most susceptible to surprising changes in light of new genetic evidence. Below are statements made to me by a senior park staff member and two board members (respectively):

If the herd is genetically significant, we might have to pursue a strategy to remove pigs, because they are a disease vector or could otherwise impact on the herd. If the herd is pure, the board needs to start thinking in terms of minimizing the risks to the herd in order to manage them for conservation outcomes.

If they are pure, then culling them could cause a huge international furor; they are internationally endangered, and are a conservation resource.

The genetic results of this project might end up shaping a management plan with a strong conservation aim that might eventually produce animals to send back to their home range.

Clearly, the tangible impacts of banteng on the environment of Cobourg, which were so often stressed as a fundamental concern of park staff and non-Aboriginal board members, are unlikely to change whether the banteng are genetically pure or not. The animals themselves will no doubt continue their daily movements between swamps and the sea, leaving visible tracks and browse lines along the way, and perhaps creating channels for saltwater to flow into freshwater wetlands. What does change, though, is the way the costs and benefits of banteng are conceived of by these individuals.
My research suggests that the economic benefits that accrue to the TOs of Cobourg, both in terms of indirect dietary intake and direct revenue from safari hunting, are not sufficient to outweigh the perceived environmental costs of banteng impacting the landscape in the eyes of park staff. Yet the potential conservation benefits that would arise internationally (and only internationally) should the herd be proven genetically pure are sufficient to outweigh the environmental costs of banteng within the park and transform the banteng from an environmental pest to a conservation asset in the eyes of many non-Aboriginal stakeholders.

In an interview with a senior park staff member, I was told that from the perspective at that time, there was no need for a management plan, but that “a lot will depend on what the genetic reality of the herd turns out to be.” That same staff member (plus another) drew a distinction between keeping the animals in the park because of international conservation implications and keeping them because TOs want to. They noted that the research project might end up shaping a management plan with a “strong conservation aim” that could eventually produce animals to export back to their home range, which they supported. But these staff also addressed rumors that some TOs want to manage the banteng as a herd and “domesticate” them, which they did not support (saying that cattle stations have become the norm in Cape York but that they would be against the same thing happening in Cobourg, as the definition of a national park does not sit well with paddocks).

However, both of these propositions are really cases of the same thing—managing a herd of animals for potential export. It is only the view of the landscape as dissociated backdrop, that comes through the lens of Western conservation, that makes one option a positive and the other a negative; the “reality” of the environmental impacts under either of these schemes is likely to be incredibly similar to the current reality of impacts of the banteng. It is hard to see, then, how the park is trying to “balance the need to look after the natural and cultural values of the Park, and maintain a commercially sustainable future,” as is professed in the current plan of management (Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary and Marine Park Board, 2002). Rather, the park operates like other parks the world over, where “much of the approach of environmental protection is to strike a balance between the traditional uses of resources by the owners, and new uses of them as required by the central government whose first priority is the nation as a whole, not local interests” (Viner, 1984, p. 342). As one traditional owner put it to me, “policy, not science, decides what is native and what is feral.”

Ultimately, the imagined futures of banteng on the peninsula are a form of “historical future”: a trajectory that has as much to do with how history is
imagined and framed as it does with the accessible facts of the present. At the heart of this duality is the perceived fundamental difference between processes in the world that happen without human intervention (nature/biology) and processes that are somehow linked to humans (society/history). This false dichotomy masks a dialectic; biophysical processes, while theoretically independent of human intervention, are in fact influenced and shaped by human action all the time, while the biophysical environment itself influences human perception and action across the full range of stakeholders. That is, biology and history, nature and society, all are necessarily mutually constitutive and inextricably intertwined. While human history brought the banteng to Cobourg, biology allowed them to thrive on the peninsula while preventing them from spreading beyond it, and created an exclusive population that various humans perceive to be an economic resource or an ecological pest, a rare trophy or a routine component of the landscape.

Discussion

The Cobourg Peninsula has been, and continues to be, subject to different readings of the landscape—whitefella readings of the plants and animals glossed as wilderness, pristine, and biodiverse, and Aboriginal readings of landscape forms and conditions glossed as homeland, ancestral embodiment, and inalienable possession. These multiple readings exist not only for the same spaces, but also for the same exact events. Whites associate Victoria Settlement with the glory of exploration and early conquest of frontier, while Aboriginal people associate Victoria Settlement with the failure and folly of white men. These divergent interpretations are not always immediately evident; they may lay dormant until a critical event suddenly illuminates the complexity of the gaps that separate the various individuals involved in life on the peninsula.

The banteng afford a clear frame to separate out and view some of these gaps. Aboriginal people, who are often portrayed by their non-Aboriginal counterparts in joint management to be self-centered, shortsighted, and inconsistent, have actually held the more consistent view of banteng even in the face of the changing politics surrounding the animals. This consistency is very much in line with their own epistemological framework of knowledge as being based in unchanging ancestral law. In contrast, park staff (and others) who claim to have the most objective view by virtue of their grounding in science and data turn out to have the most flexible view of banteng. Further, this flexibility fits directly into Aboriginal views about whitefella law, which is often
perceived to be characterized by people always changing their minds (as opposed to their own ancestral law, which they say is permanent and immutable).

In the case of the banteng, the genetic purity of the herd has precipitated a serendipitous convergence of views, as it brings everyone into agreement on the goal of managing the park’s herd as an accepted and desirable resident in the park. However, the serendipity surrounding the circumstances of this agreement must not be forgotten or brushed aside if anything is to be learned from this case. This convergence did not occur because different parties learned to listen to each other, came to see the value in other ways of understanding the landscape, or came to a mutual agreement about the needs of one party trumping the needs of another. It came only as a happy coincidence that, for the conservation-minded park managers and board members, the herd’s status as a genetic resource in the international fight against banteng extinction outweighs their local status as a feral pest. Ultimately, this shift has nothing to do with the intrinsic qualities of the animals themselves and highlights instead the inherently social nature of place. The Cobourg Peninsula has been the site of varied regimes of contact and colonialism, all of which have contributed to the formation and ongoing management of the park, and the lived lives of humans, banteng, and others within that space (Morphy, 1993, p. 207).

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