Between “Wild” and “Tame”: Placing Encounters with Sirocco the Kakapo Parrot in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

This article explores different dynamics and spatialities of nonhuman animal encounters to illuminate important intersections between place and human-animal relations. The article focuses on Sirocco the Kakapo, an endangered New Zealand parrot, who due to illness as a chick was hand-reared in isolation from other Kakapo. Informed by qualitative research, data was gathered through interviewing those involved in the Kakapo Recovery Programme and from Internet websites and publications featuring Sirocco. Based on this research, it can be demonstrated how Sirocco, unlike his fellow Kakapo, is a bird who can traverse the seemingly clear-cut and spatially inscribed boundaries between “wild” and “tame,” between “human” and “animal,” and between “wild” and “domestic” places. Drawing upon relational theories of space and place in human geography, the case of Sirocco is used to interrogate and inform theorizations concerning the place of nonhuman animals in both spatial and conceptual terms. Sirocco’s story illuminates the complex and heterogeneous relations of encounter that stretch between New Zealand’s wild and domestic places, which in turn rely upon particular notions of wild and tame and prescribed relations between humans and “wild animals” that inhere in conservation practice more broadly.

Keywords

Kakapo, conservation, wild, tame, boundary-making, place-making
Introduction

“He thinks he is human and you can’t blame him because he was hand-reared without other Kakapo…. He’s a little bit confused but he seems perfectly happy” (Jacob-Hoff, 2009, as cited in Gibson, 2009, p. 3). The “he” being referred to is Sirocco, a 12-year-old, male Kakapo parrot (Strigops habroptilus), one of only 125 Kakapo\(^1\) remaining in the world. Kakapo are classed as a critically endangered species of parrot and are endemic to Aotearoa/New Zealand.\(^2\) All known Kakapo dwell on the intensively monitored and carefully protected off-shore conservation sanctuaries of Whenua Hou/Codfish and Pukenui/Anchor Islands off the South West Coast of New Zealand (see Figure 1) (Kakapo Recovery, 2008).

Sirocco, however, as the opening quote suggests is deemed an anomaly within the Kakapo population and, more broadly, within the Kakapo Recovery Programme (KRP). As a consequence of illness as a chick, Sirocco was hand-reared in isolation, which resulted in his imprinting on humans. Sirocco now apparently “lavishes all his attention on people and enjoys sitting on knees and following people about their daily tasks” (Gibson, 2009, p. 3). He also chooses only to voice his mating call (known as booming)\(^3\) in the presence of humans and is thus deemed to be an “ineffectual breeder” by the KRP.

In this article, we explore Sirocco as a mutable boundary creature, a “confused” Kakapo celebrated as a conservation icon by the KRP yet simultaneously denigrated as a cautionary tale of conservationist intervention gone wrong. We assert that Sirocco is a parrot who actively resists categorization into the socially constructed binaries of Kakapo and human, wild and tame, and an individual who actively unsettles the prescribed relations between humans and “wild” nonhuman animals that continue to guide conservation practices in the New Zealand context. Our theorizing in this regard draws from animal geography, a subfield of human geography concerned with the ways in which

\(^{1}\) In the Maori alphabet, the letter “s” does not exist, and therefore Maori words (for instance, Kakapo) do not take on the suffix “s” to indicate the plural form (Keegan, 2007).

\(^{2}\) We have chosen to refer to New Zealand by both its Maori and English names and follow this convention of providing both Maori and English names for other places mentioned in this article. We will refer to Aotearoa/New Zealand hereafter as New Zealand for sake of clarity.

\(^{3}\) The most frequently exhibited mating call of the male Kakapo is known as booming, which under ideal conditions can be heard up to 5 km away. It is thought that booming may stimulate and synchronize sexual activity in both the male and female Kakapo in addition to signaling the location of the male Kakapo (Merton, Morris, & Atkinson, 1984).
Whenua Hou/Codfish Island is situated 3 km off the western coast of Rakiura/Stewart Island, while Pukenui/Anchor Island is situated in Dusky Sound, South West Piopiotahi/Fiordland.

(Source: Connelly, 2009)
nonhuman animals\(^4\) are incorporated into and cohabitate various contexts and spaces with humans including urban or city environments (Thomson, 2007), zoos (Anderson, 1995), and domesticated households (see for example Franklin, 2006; Power, 2009).

These recent explorations of animals situated at the borderlands of nature and culture have contributed to blurring the boundary between humans and animals (Wondrak, 2002). According to Michel (1998), the awareness of blurred boundaries between humans and animals in such contexts provides a framework within which to examine the identities of animals (and humans) as “products of interrelations between distinct human and natural entities” (p. 168). According to Philo (1995), animals should therefore be regarded as a “marginal social group” affected by and “enmeshed in complex power relations with human communities” (p. 655). Animals are thus understood to be a very important part of daily encounters, networks, and negotiations who warrant their own investigation in and of themselves (Hobson, 2007). This encourages the reframing of animals such as Sirocco as active subjects with their own agency as opposed to static objects without agency (Haila, 2000; Davies, 2000).\(^5\)

We further suggest that Sirocco’s liminality is entangled with and coproduced by the varying places in which Sirocco can be encountered. To this end, we draw upon Massey’s (1994) understanding of places as particular moments in intersecting spatialized social relations, some of which are “contained within the place, others [which] stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too” (p. 120). Thus, places are made actively and continuously through both the action of human and nonhuman phenomena including animals (Raffles, 2002).

This theoretical perspective highlights the importance of understanding the interrelationship between locality and the embodied situated encounter, in this case between humans and Kakapo. To this end, we explore differences in how Sirocco is received in what is ostensibly his “natural” home (Whenua Hou/Codfish Island) by staff of the krs, in contrast to Sirocco’s presence on

\(^4\) Throughout this article we have chosen to refer to nonhuman animals simply as “animals” and refer accordingly to human-animal relations. This distinction is not meant to imply or reinforce a dichotomous relationship between humans and nonhuman animals, as in line with the work of scholars such as Philo and Wilbert (2000), we view such categories as relational constructs.

\(^5\) See Baker (2001), Berger (1980), and Burt (2001) for further reading on the representation of animals as a form of spectacle, and Malamud (1998) and Chambers (2007) on issues concerning the relational politics of watching animals.
a virtual site of encounter, the Internet site www.spokesbird.com. Exploring the different dynamics and spatialities of Sirocco’s encounters provides an interesting case study through which to illuminate important intersections between place and human-animal relations. We argue that placing encounters with Sirocco matters because they have the capacity to shape not just human relationships with animals, but also to reveal how animals like Sirocco play an active role in defining human relationships with the animal world.

We begin by providing a brief overview of Kakapo conservation efforts to date before moving to a detailed analysis of two key places in which people and Sirocco can “meet”: the intensively managed and protected Whenua Hou/Codfish Island reserve off the South West Coast of New Zealand and the virtual spaces of the spokesbird.com website and its associated links to YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Data for our analysis was gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted by M. Main when she was working as a feed-out volunteer for the KRP on Whenua Hou/Codfish Island in 2009. Fifteen staff members participated in 14 interviews over a 4-week period, which was then coded according to key themes (see Main, 2009). Secondary data were obtained by analyzing KRP and New Zealand Department of Conservation publications describing Kakapo conservation initiatives and Internet sites featuring Sirocco.

Kakapo in the New Zealand Conservation Context

Scientific narratives suggest that New Zealand’s isolation from Gondwanaland over 80 million years ago was key in the evolution of New Zealand’s unique, yet

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6 In 2010, Sirocco was appointed the official Spokesbird for conservation to coincide with the International Year of Biodiversity. The website (www.spokesbird.com) was fully operational throughout 2010, but it is no longer operational. However, it is still possible to keep up to date with Sirocco’s blogs on Facebook and Twitter, as well as the Department of Conservation and Kakapo Recovery Programme websites.

7 YouTube is a popular online video community that allows people to watch and share original videos. According to the homepage, “YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe” (YouTube, 2010).

8 Facebook is a social-networking website where people create their own personal profiles and share this information with selected friends and fans. According to the website homepage, Facebook helps you “connect and share with the people in your life” (Facebook, 2010).

9 Twitter is a real-time information network. On the homepage, Twitter encourages the viewers to “find out what’s happening, right now, with the people and organizations you care about” (Twitter, 2010).
highly vulnerable, endemic species (Ginn, 2008). The effects of this evolutionary isolation are particularly evident in the unique biology and ecology of the country’s endemic avifauna whereby birds have developed in the absence of significant land mammals (Ginn, 2008). Without the necessity to escape predation by land mammals, many endemic bird species have evolved with reduced predator escape responses, for example, the loss of flight and a larger than average body mass (Duncan & Blackburn, 2004). As such, the inability to fly, gigantism, and longevity are prominent features of New Zealand’s avifauna (Ginn, 2008).

Given these unique characteristics, New Zealand avifauna were particularly vulnerable to the introduction of mammalian predators that accompanied the Maori and European settlements 650 and 150 years ago, respectively (Lloyd & Powlesland, 1994). Predation, followed by habitat destruction and hunting that accompanied human settlement have been the main causes of avian species decline in New Zealand (Elliot, Merton, & Jansen, 2001). Over this time, the acclimatization of introduced predators has led to the extinction of 32% of New Zealand’s bird species (Ginn, 2008).

Kakapo are a prime example of a vulnerable bird species, as they are unable to fly, have a larger than average body mass, exhibit a naturally low fecundity, and breed irregularly every 2 to 5 years (Elliot et al., 2001). These characteristics combined make the parrot easy prey for introduced mammalian predators to New Zealand such as rats and members of the weasel family (Lloyd & Powlesland, 1994). Kakapo eggs and chicks are especially vulnerable to the threat of predation since nests are laid on the ground and left regularly unattended for long periods at night while female Kakapo forage for food (Elliot et al., 2001). Furthermore, while the nocturnal habits and cryptic coloration of Kakapo would have historically assisted them in evading predation by larger endemic avifauna, such as the now extinct Harpagornis moorei eagle, these features are ineffective against introduced mammalian predators that easily identify and locate Kakapo due to their distinctive odor (Cometti, 1986; Lloyd & Powlesland, 1994).

The rarity and iconic nature of the Kakapo was recognized by European settlers of New Zealand as early as 1895, when the first official Kakapo conservation initiative was undertaken. The first conservation efforts were focused on the translocation of mainland Kakapo to Tau Moana/Resolution Island in Piopiotahi/Fiordland in order to remove the birds from the threat of predation.

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10 Prior to human settlement, New Zealand had no endemic mammalian species other than two species of bat, who posed no threat to the Kakapo (Elliot et al., 2001).
from introduced mammals. Since then, Kakapo conservation has continued and intensified (Jansen, 2006). Kakapo conservation practices now include predator control; artificial insemination; the artificial incubation of eggs and hand-rearing of chicks; translocations to predator-free, offshore islands; and supplementary feeding.

Currently, every living Kakapo has been individually named and is referred to by his or her name by staff members in the field, throughout the various sections of the KRP website, as well as in media coverage of the bird. Following the Kakapo population reaching a critical low of just 51 individuals in 1995, an urgent review of Kakapo conservation was initiated, which led to the development of more intensive conservation practices (Elliot, et al., 2001; Jansen, 2006). At the center of this substantial review were the establishment of the Kakapo Recovery Plan and the formation of the National Kakapo Team (NKT) (Clout, 2006). The NKT includes 10 full-time Kakapo rangers who maintain a continual presence on both Whenua Hou/Codfish and Pukenui/Anchor Islands, where all remaining Kakapo are currently located.

Due to the threats posed by introduced mammalian predators to New Zealand’s flora and fauna, endangered species have been protected from the threat of predation on New Zealand’s mainland by relocating to vegetatively-restored, predator-free environments in the form of offshore islands (Clout, 2006). Offshore islands are deemed to be relatively easy and cost-effective to maintain predator-free compared to in situ conservation reserves on the mainland (Lloyd & Powlesland, 1994; Watts, Stringer, Sherley, Gibbs, & Green, 2008). Whenua Hou/Codfish Island, as a result, is an island of both national and international conservation significance (Middleton, 2007). The island is protected by the Department of Conservation and access to the island is restricted to those people involved in Kakapo management and research, with no unauthorized entry permitted (Kakapo Recovery, 2008).

As we detail below, the Department of Conservation maintains that restricting access to the island is necessary, as every human visitor to the island is understood to increase the risk of reinvasion by mammalian predators and other pests as well as to increase the opportunities for the entry of weeds and disease. What can be understood from this brief review of Kakapo conservation history in New Zealand is that conservation practices not only serve conservation goals, but also construct and respond to particular ideas concerning where and how people and endangered species such as Kakapo should interact (West & Brockington, 2006). The continued efforts of conservation staff and support of the New Zealand Government for Kakapo conservation further suggest there is something unique about Kakapo that has made them worthy
of such intensive conservation and management efforts. In the next section, we place Whenua Hou/Codfish Island in the context of Kakapo conservation efforts and examine the boundary-making practices that have served to construct this island as Sirocco’s home.

Placing Whenua Hou/Codfish Island

While moving Kakapo to predator-free, offshore islands such as Whenua Hou/Codfish Island is justified based on the need to separate Kakapo from the threat of predation, these translocations can be understood as boundary-making practices (Power, 2009) that serve to inscribe spatial and conceptual distinctions between Kakapo and people. The krp website, for example, describes how ideal Kakapo habitat requires “thinking about offshore islands—protected areas of natural vegetation free from introduced mammals. A refuge, and hard to visit” (Kakapo Recovery, 2008). While it is assumed that the description of offshore islands as being “hard to visit” refers to introduced mammalian predators, it also suggests that offshore islands should be difficult places for people to access as well. The notion of “refuge” further suggests a place of safety or retreat for the animal, again building upon the idea of necessary boundaries between places for people and places for Kakapo.

The need to physically inscribe a separation between humans and endangered species is common in conservation practice, as endangered species management is still largely premised on the practice of spatially confining endangered species in bounded areas (Head & Muir, 2006; Whatmore & Thorne, 1998). There is extensive literature on the connections between conservation practices and historically and culturally mediated notions of natural or wild places. Philo & Wilbert (2000), for example, describe how “unoccupied” lands beyond the perimeter of human settlement, conceptualized as “the wilderness,” are commonly envisaged in Western conservation narratives as appropriate places for wild animals. The work of Cronon (1996) has deconstructed the concept of wilderness in the American West as a culturally and temporally specific idea, something that embodies what Slater (1996) defines as nostalgia for unspoiled origins and romantic notions of pristine isolation and wonder.

The power accorded to the notion of wilderness in Western conservation discourses has led conservationists to aim for a natural world untainted by, and separate from, human influence. The “trouble with wilderness,” according to Cronon (1996), is precisely in this false aim. Suchet (2002), writing about the Australian conservation context, asserts how notions of wild and the wilderness “romanticise the illusion of a wild based on originality and authenticity,
prior to and external from human control and interference” (p. 152). In the New Zealand context, these ideas of natural or wild spaces as being that which existed prior to human contact hold strong sway with many conservation efforts aimed at attempting to restore or preserve that which existed before human arrival to the islands (Ginn, 2008). This romanticized illusion of wild spaces as being external from human influence is reflected by the construction of Whenua Hou/Codfish Island as being suitable Kakapo habitat that is not appropriate for humans to freely enter.

The boundary-making practices that serve to define and separate Whenua Hou/Codfish Island and other places of conservation extend to the enforcement of strict quarantine practices that regulate entry to the island and further discipline people with regard to their interactions with the species once they are in place. In the following interview with Ranger A, he explains his views on the intensive quarantine procedures:

Because the island is fully quarantined and only people who are invited can go down there. Because you’ve been in the outside world, anything that’s been on your shoes or on your clothes if it came onto the island and say, you’re going to see the [Kakapo] chicks, so if you came in contact with them and you hadn’t cleaned your clothes that could be disastrous. So everything is quarantined going on the island and you will realise that we take it fairly seriously.

Embedded within Ranger A’s explanation of why he deems quarantine procedures as an integral component of Kakapo conservation is the understanding that people present a high risk to the secured and predator-free habitat of Kakapo. This understanding leads Ranger A to frame the New Zealand mainland as a world that is “outside” the protected Whenua Hou/Codfish Island environment. By defining the mainland and consequently people as an “outside world,” Ranger A depicts Whenua Hou/Codfish Island as an exclusionary “pure” space that is constructed as securely bounded and separate from the mainland. As Muller, Power, Suchet-Pearson, Wright, and Lloyd (2009) suggest, however, the boundaries inscribed between the mainland of New Zealand and Whenua Hou/Codfish Island are not necessarily as “natural” or secure as they might seem:

The practices of quarantine and quarantining are a key way in which borders are constructed as exclusionary markers. These practices are crucial in defining what belongs and what does not belong, and in restricting and surveying movement in order to protect a space against a range of
impure and unwanted invaders. Viewed this way, quarantine borders are not natural markers of difference but reflect particular ideals and values. (p. 782)

Indeed, although the framing of the island as a “refuge” suggests the absence of people, KRP and Department of Conservation staff are present on the island year-round with rangers, staff members, and volunteers immersed in monitoring and interacting with Kakapo on a daily basis. Nevertheless, for those who do receive permission to visit the island, there are strict quarantine procedures that control what is allowed on the island. These involve cleaning all clothing, shoes, and gear with disinfectant; having all clothing and gear inspected for dirt, insects, soil, seeds, and plant material; and transporting gear to the island in special “quarantine bags” (M. Main, personal communication, June 29, 2009). Once they are on the island, people are further disciplined through the regulations of the KRP with regard to their interaction with the Whenua Hou/Codfish Island environment.

For example, the track to the bathroom facility on the island is permanently boarded on both sides by large pieces of wood in an attempt to prevent Kakapo and other wildlife from entering this designated space during the evenings (see Figure 2), and the deck of the Department of Conservation hut on the island is cordoned off with large wooden boards to prevent Kakapo from entering the vicinity of the hut and other facilities utilized by people. We suggest that these efforts serve to discipline both the visitors and Kakapo and demarcate human and Kakapo spaces that are both physically and conceptually maintained. As we go on to explore, these boundaries have important implications for the manner in which the behavior of the Kakapo Sirocco is received.

Placing Sirocco

Sirocco is unique among his fellow Kakapo. As noted in the introduction to this article, his uniqueness is at least in part due to the hand-rearing that resulted in his imprinting on the human staff responsible for raising him. Sirocco’s ensuing preference for people has been utilized by KRP staff in particular ways, which we go on to explore in the latter half of this article. On Whenua Hou/Codfish Island, however, Sirocco appears to be regarded in an ambiguous manner by KRP staff despite this location being constructed as his “natural” place of dwelling. We suggest that this ambiguity is a consequence of reading Sirocco’s preference for humans as an act of resistance not just against the desired “normal” behavior of Kakapo but, most significantly, against what
Philo and Wilbert (2000, p. 22) cite as the constructed “spatial orderings” upon which the KRP operates and structures its practices on Whenua Hou/Codfish Island.

We suggest that these spatial orderings highlight important ideas about “proper” human-Kakapo interactions and, indeed, what it means to be a “normal” Kakapo in the context of the KRP. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) state, “that the anomalous is the borderline makes it easier for us to understand the various positions it occupies in relation to . . . the multiplicity it borders” (p. 43). In other words, the manner in which Sirocco is described by KRP staff illuminates and simultaneously problematizes the relational placings of wild

**Figure 2** Illustrated in this photograph are the wooden boards that permanently border the track up to the bathroom facility in an attempt to physically keep Kakapo and other wildlife out of this space utilized by humans.

(Source: Main, 2009)
animals, and the associated notions of appropriate comportment between humans and animals that are deemed necessary for “successful” conservation to proceed in the New Zealand context.

The problematic nature of Sirocco’s behavior is hinted at on the Spokesbird website, where in a lighthearted style that suggests Sirocco is reporting on his actions, it is noted that:

Sometimes the rangers send me [Sirocco] on “holiday,” especially if they’re really busy, and I go to other islands to hang out for a while. Sometimes they try to take me on big hikes to the other side of the island, but I always turn up back at the hut! (Spokesbird, 2010)

In an interview with Ranger A, similar aspects of Sirocco’s behavior were highlighted and framed as being unusual in comparison to other Kakapo:

Sirocco doesn’t think he’s Kakapo, he thinks he’s human. That’s the general gist of it. He’ll see another Kakapo in the bush and he probably wouldn’t know what it was. He thinks he’s human, he wants to mate with humans, he set up his [mating] bowl\textsuperscript{11}10 m from the Department of Conservation hut, he nearly speaks human, he tries to mimic your behaviour so yeah there are definitely some problems.

According to Ranger A, Sirocco’s displays of “humanity” are troubling. Although ostensibly dwelling in his “natural” environment, Sirocco’s spatialized preference to spend the majority of his time near the rangers’ hut and situate his mating bowl close to the bathroom facility on the island is suggested by the Ranger as blurring the boundaries between Kakapo and human. This sense of Sirocco’s ability to trouble familiar binaries of Kakapo/human, wild/tame, and wild/domestic was commonly raised as a negative facet of his character in a manner that made Sirocco appear to be “incomplete.”

Staff Member C spoke of Sirocco as being “just a bit stuffed because he got brought up by himself and thinks he’s a person,” a “phenomenal freak,” and a “mutant.” Staff Member A described Sirocco as “a problem bird . . . because he’s not a wild bird anymore,” and Ranger D framed Sirocco as “mucked up,” “completely buggered,” and “an abnormality in the whole system.” These

\textsuperscript{11}A bowl, or mating bowl, is part of the courtship behavior of the Kakapo. The male Kakapo excavates depressions or “bowls” in the ground, which are used to emit their booming sound (as described at the beginning of this article) and for display in the presence of female Kakapo (Merton et al., 1984).
descriptions suggest that Sirocco does not fit neatly within established ideas of what it means to be a Kakapo and that this lack of “normal” behavior is considered a deficiency as much as it is a loss.

We suggest that these descriptions of Sirocco’s behavior as “out of place” locate Sirocco as a “transgressive boundary creature” (Instone, 2004, p. 37), a hybrid forged from specific interactions and relations with a “messy impure heterogeneous world” (Castree & MacMillan, 2001, p. 211). Transgression is a concept that has been widely utilized and debated in the context of animal geography literature (Philo & Wolch, 1998). In the context of our arguments outlined here, we draw upon the definition of transgression suggested by Cresswell (1996), which states that “transgression...does not...rest on the intentions of actors but on the results—on the ‘being noticed’ of a particular action” (p. 23, emphasis in original).

As Philo (1998) suggests, transgression is thus utilized to signal the “crossing of social boundaries...leading to...‘out of place’ phenomena” (p. 52). The concept of transgression is important, as it encourages the acknowledgement of Sirocco as a dynamic subject, actively participating in and shaping the contours of the human-Kakapo encounter, particularly in the context of Whenua Hou/Codfish Island. His transgressions challenge the spatialized norms that appear to be integral components of the goals of the KRP.

Encountering Sirocco on Whenua Hou/Codfish Island requires the renegotiation of widely held notions concerning the parameters and characteristics of wild places in New Zealand: places where humans, or indeed quasi-humans like Sirocco, are not supposed to belong (Cronon, 1996). These encounters further draw into question dynamics of wildness, as translated by the KRP staff’s (implied) expected behaviors of Kakapo. Encountering Sirocco is never a passive relationship, with Sirocco recognized as playing an active role in placemaking in the context of Whenua Hou/Codfish Island and troubling the binaristic framework within which conservation in the New Zealand context is assumed to proceed (Power, 2009). As Wolch (2002) argues, “animals have their realties, their own worldviews—in short they are subjects not objects” (p. 203, emphasis in original), which illustrates the need to recognize the mutual roles played by animals in shaping the relational places and dynamics of encounter (Philo & Wilbert, 2000).

Although an apparent “failure” of the KRP, Sirocco’s preference for people has encouraged KRP staff to use him as the public face of Kakapo conservation efforts. Sirocco now regularly travels around New Zealand to appear at conservation events, most recently moving into a national role as a “spokesbird” for conservation activities New Zealand-wide. This decision to use Sirocco as the public face of the KRP and conservation activities more broadly in New
Zealand is significant. It suggests that there is something about Sirocco’s history and character that deem him suitable to travel beyond the carefully patrolled boundaries of the Kakapo’s usual home.

It further suggests, in line with the careful demarcation of Whenua Hou/Codfish Island as a wild place, that this is not an appropriate place for the majority of New Zealand’s public to encounter a Kakapo. As the following quote from an interview with KRP Staff Member A articulates, Sirocco’s lack of “wildness” has been used in an almost instrumental manner; his inability to serve the KRP as a breeding bird on Whenua Hou/Codfish Island is offset by his ability to serve the KRP in different ways and in different places:

[Sirocco’s] a problem bird in a way because he’s not a wild bird anymore, and well, he has never been I guess. But in another way he’s really good because we can take him to Ulva [Island] and do tours, and the public can enjoy the bird and he loves it. And there’s a lot of people that say ‘why do we save the Kakapo because I never get to see one or touch one?’ and a bird like Sirocco is ideal because we can at least show him off and people can relate, like ‘okay, that’s what we’re spending our money on and they are quite cute.’ It’s really important now that we are starting to have more birds, we can afford to have the hand-reared one, we don’t need him in the gene pool now.

This statement reveals the intersections constructed between ideals of wild animals, their appropriate places, and the conservation goals of the KRP. It further suggests how varying the spaces of encounters with Sirocco has the ability to shape the manner in which Sirocco is valued, which in turn has the capacity to influence support for Kakapo conservation initiatives more broadly. The perceived benefits of displaying Sirocco to the public have resulted in a number of opportunities for Kakapo encounters, for example, those offered by the Ulva Island Trust (see www.ulvaisland.co.nz).

Paradoxically, despite the tensions that surround the belief that Sirocco is not wild outside of the Whenua Hou/Codfish Island context, he is viewed as an appropriate ambassador for his species. Most recently, the KRP via the Department of Conservation have started to utilize virtual tools and mechanisms to enable the public to relate to Sirocco and by extension, Kakapo, by seeing him on the Internet. In the following section, we interrogate these sites of virtual encounter to understand what it means for the manner in which the public is encouraged to engage with Sirocco and what the possible consequences are.
Virtual Encounters

In contrast to the strict rules that govern access to Sirocco in the carefully controlled space of Whenua Hou/Codfish Island, anyone with Internet access can encounter Sirocco simply by logging on to the spokesbird.com website. As “the world’s first feathered Spokesbird for conservation” (Spokesbird, 2010), visitors to Spokesbird are encouraged to connect with Sirocco by reading a blog of his exploits on the Spokesbird homepage highlighted with his stylized cartoon image. Through Spokesbird, users are encouraged to “meet” Sirocco by visiting him on Facebook, where on his official page he has over 12,000 fans.

Sirocco also has a Twitter account, where “he” regularly posts updates. He is featured in numerous YouTube clips, where his encounter with Mark Cawardine and Stephen Fry on the BBC program “Last Chance to See” had more than 700,000 views in one week. Through Spokesbird, Sirocco’s fleshy presence is distributed through a new topology of encounter (Whatmore & Thorne, 2000) where his transgressive nature and un-parrot like fascination with humans is actively celebrated and used as a means of further endearing Kakapo to the general public and bird lovers alike. The “transmedia ecologies” (Lorimer, 2010, p. 240) that circulate around Sirocco through his involvement in these virtual networks suggest new possibilities for the public to engage with Sirocco and the conservation practices for which he is a Spokesbird.

The use of virtual means to facilitate connection to the nonhuman or natural world is increasingly common. As Davies (2000) articulates, however, different forms of display and encounter have consequences for the “ontological and epistemological status of animals” (p. 245) and as such require careful interrogation. The use of the Internet as a tool of connection builds upon the popularity of other technologies of viewing as a means to foster and facilitate intimate connections between (human) viewers and the animals on display (see for example Mitman, 1999). As Lorimer (2010) notes:

Moving images have become the primary media through which we make sense of the world . . . These new, distributed, transmedia ecologies are inhabited by diverse virtual nonhumans and constitute the spaces in which most people encounter distant peoples, organisms and landscapes. (p. 240)

The utilization of Internet technology as a means to facilitate encounter with rare birds like Sirocco thus serves to actively mediate the types of encounter between the human viewer and the animal subject, and it has important
implications for the status of the animals involved and also for the relationships that are encouraged as a consequence.

According to the Department of Conservation, the Spokesbird website was set up to “showcase Sirocco” and publicize the work that the organization performs for Kakapo and other conservation activities in New Zealand. As a parrot, Sirocco cannot write or speak, and yet the website is constructed in such a way that visitors are encouraged to read the material as coming directly “from the beak” of Sirocco. For example, the website homepage features blogs “from” Sirocco peppered with parrot-like “Skraarks!” and a light-hearted first-person narrative of Sirocco’s latest exploits.

On the main YouTube clip featured prominently on the website, there is an interview with the current New Zealand Prime Minister, John Key, who explains in a candid manner that Sirocco was “an obvious choice [as Spokesbird], he’s media savvy and has a worldwide fan base … they hang on every squawk that comes out of his beak.” These anthropomorphisms actively play upon the notion of Sirocco as quasi-human with this facet of his character reified as the main element of emphasis and attraction. In this context, Sirocco’s quasi-human transgressions are not cause for concern, but rather a key element of the bird that is celebrated and strategically utilized as a tool for garnering public interest in both Sirocco and the work of the KRP.

Indeed, much of the website and associated links specifically emphasize this element of Sirocco’s character to elicit positive emotional responses from users of the website; the various blogs posted by Sirocco are lighthearted and humorous, and the images of Sirocco selected for display are both endearing and compelling. Comments on Sirocco’s photoset on Flickr,¹² for example, include statements from members of the public such as “I’m in love!” and “He’s adorable!” Spokesbird, then, can be seen to “catalyse different logics of affect” (Lorimer, 2010, p. 241) that circulate around the strategic depictions and representations of Sirocco chosen for display on the website.

The capacity for human users of such websites to be affected by animals such as Sirocco is an important element of the success and popularity of this type of virtual encounter. Using Sirocco as a spokesbird is both a strategic and astute choice by the KRP, which builds upon the attractive appearance of the Kakapo (see Figure 3). As Hunt (2003) summarizes:

Kakapo are superstars! People fall in love with their owl-parrot faces, their soft green feathers, their exotic perfume and their quirky, determined

¹² Flickr is a photo-sharing website that exhorts visitors to “share your photos. Watch the world” (Flickr, 2010).
personalities… they stand for all that is beautiful and precious about the New Zealand bush and the creatures still living within its leafy walls.

(p. 17)

In his encounter with Stephen Fry and Mark Cawardine on “Last Chance to See,” Sirocco’s “Victorian gentleman face” was given particular mention, although it was Sirocco’s attempt to “mate” on Mark Cawardine’s head that perhaps best demonstrated Sirocco’s “quirky, determined” personality (see http://www.doc.govt.nz/sirocco). Horowitz & Bekoff (2007) make particular reference to how animal species who are aesthetically appealing and have identifiable features such as large eyes, soft skin, fur, or feathers promote a certain “cuteness” or “cuddliness” that a smaller-eyed or “less charismatic” endangered species would not. The work of Levinas (discussed in Jones, 2000) also asserts that the face is a key element in garnering (ethical) consideration from humans (see also discussion in Lorimer, 2010).

Encountering Sirocco in the virtual space of Spokesbird facilitates and signals a new type of connection between people and Sirocco. It suggests that despite the physical distances that stand between Sirocco when he is “in place” on Whenua Hou/Codfish Island, there is still the capacity for people to get close to, connect with, and learn about both Kakapo and the conservation activities for which Sirocco is figurehead. As New Zealand’s current Minister for the Environment, Kate Wilkinson, states in another interview featured on the website, Sirocco is “a great ambassador because he does love people, he loves humans and so he can traverse that gap between humans and birds.” As Wilkinson’s comments indicate, Sirocco’s apparent preference for people serves as the glue in a network of affective relations that connect Sirocco and humans and enables Sirocco to have “effect… at-a-distance” (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, p. 2).

We suggest, however, that the space of Spokesbird facilitates contradictory outcomes. As a technologically mediated form of encounter, Sirocco’s virtual presence on this website, while detailed and accessible, remains paradoxically distantiated. Despite aiming to “[traverse] that gap,” the “nearness” these websites suggest is arguably deceptive. One key element of this can be seen in the emphasis that is placed on the visual consumption of Sirocco through the websites. On Spokesbird, the possibility for different modes of sensorial interaction are severely constrained, with the overriding emphasis placed on visual consumption of the bird (Davies, 2000). Furthermore, although the Spokesbird website increases Sirocco’s “reach,” the power relations that structure his presence on this site arguably serve to maintain a particular human-animal relationship; while Sirocco’s “skraarks” are reported, it is the voice of the KRP
translating and interpreting Sirocco’s actions and displaying his images on the website.

As Davies’s work on electronic zoos has demonstrated, it is what she cites as the “corporeal presence of animals,” as experienced, for example, by KRP staff in the previous section, that serves as an important “reminder of [an animal’s] subjectivity and agency” (Davies, 2000, p. 260; see also Chambers, 2007). Although users of Spokesbird and associated social-networking sites appear to have no trouble connecting with Sirocco through this space of virtual encounter, it is worth considering how easily these spaces enable Sirocco to connect with his human audience and further, what elements of Sirocco’s character are omitted or overlooked as a consequence.

The typology of encounter facilitated by Spokesbird, then, is inescapably power-laden and facilitates a complex network of relations that are not reliant on the physical proximity between the human viewer and animal subject (Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Sirocco’s presence on Spokesbird is not simply another means to show Sirocco to the public, but serves to actively (re)shape the
networks and dynamics of encounter of both humans and animals. Although presented as accessible and familiar, Sirocco himself remains, in more ways than one, far away.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored how Sirocco is formed and shaped by the relations and networks in which he is enrolled, where place and character are coproduced and relationally constituted (Whatmore, 2002). By focusing on two particular spaces where it is possible to encounter Sirocco, Whenua Hou/Codfish Island and the Internet website Spokesbird, we have highlighted the importance of interrogating the intersections between place and the tenor of human-animal relationships. Through our analysis, we have demonstrated how Sirocco is enrolled in a complex network of human-animal relationships that are spatialized in that they occur in particular places, and spatializing in that they shape the quality and dynamics of encounter. In both places of encounter, Sirocco actively resists simple categorization, moving between the varying spaces of KRP conservation practice in a way that unsettles the seemingly clear boundaries between wild and tame, and human and animal, upon which the KRP program is based.

As we have demonstrated, however, this binaristic framing fails to capture the complex series of relations that exist between humans and the more-than-human world, which the story of Sirocco so ably demonstrates.

Encountering Sirocco in different places, moreover, shifts the manner in which his quasi-human character is read. In the actively constructed wild space of Whenua Hou/Codfish Island, Sirocco is encountered as a conservation failure, a bemusing yet charming anomaly who does not quite fit into either spatial or conceptual norms of the KRP. By contrast, on the Spokesbird website, it is precisely Sirocco’s mutable nature that is emphasized as a charismatic and endearing element of attraction. Sirocco is, as a consequence, enrolled into a web-based network of encounter which takes him, albeit in a virtual sense, beyond the confines of his island “home.”

In both places, however, there are important implications for how it is that Sirocco’s agency is recognized and acted upon. On Whenua Hou/Codfish Island, despite the strict rules that govern both human and animal access and behavior, Sirocco appears paradoxically better able to carve out his own “beastly place” (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, p. 13). In this place, there is a shared physical field of encounter between KRP staff and Sirocco in which Sirocco plays an active role in defining the character of his human-animal interactions.
By contrast, on Spokesbird, although Sirocco’s quirky nature is the object of attention, the power relations that permeate and structure this network limit the scope of encounter.

Despite the positive gains achieved by Sirocco’s ability to “traverse the gap between humans and birds” (Spokesbird, 2010), the structure of the encounter arguably restricts Sirocco to a subject–object relationship between human viewer and animal on view. Overall, “placing” Sirocco illuminates the manner in which dynamics of encounter emerge out of complex and inescapably power-laden human-animal relationships that are inherently bound up in the negotiation of place. It further demonstrates how both place and human-animal identities are never entirely stable; rather, they are always in a state of active negotiation in which both humans and animals like Sirocco play integral roles.

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