

Resurrection Conservation: The Return of the Extinct?

Sandra Swart

Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine trees, and he who understands it aright will rather pre serve its life than destroy it.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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Sometimes dead is better.

STEPHEN KING, *Pet sematary*

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The quagga was one of the very first animals afforded formal protection by the colonial state. Alas, by then it had already been extinct for three years.¹ The Cape Colony (in act no. 36 of 1886, 'Act for the Better Preservation of Game') prohibited their being hunted without special permission from the Governor.² It was hardly necessary. The quagga had vanished from the wild for a decade

1 This chapter has brought older research back from the dead by back-breeding existing essays, hybridizing with younger research. So some paragraphs are drawn directly from S. Swart, 'Zombie Zoology: The quagga and the history of reanimating animals', in S. Nance (ed.), *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse, 2015) and Sandra Swart, 'Frankenzebra: Dangerous knowledge and the narrative construction of monsters', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 30:4 (2015).

2 The Act gave special protection to the quagga and to hippo, buffalo, and others – but the closest hippo was over 500 km away, and the few remaining buffalo in the area had learned to become elusive denizens of deep bush. See E. Couzens, 'The influence of English poaching laws on South African poaching laws' (MA thesis (Environmental Law), Universities of Natal and Nottingham, 2001), 51. See also, for how slow the state was to act on endangered wildlife, M. S. Steyn, 'Environmentalism in South Africa, 1972–1992: an historical perspective' (unpublished MA thesis, University of the Orange Free State, 1998).

and from zoos for three years before the authorities accepted its extinction. In fact, the first 'conservation NGO'³ was established nine days after the last known quagga died on 12 August 1883. On an unseasonably cold damp morning, the keepers did their rounds at Amsterdam's *Natura Artis Magistra* ('Nature is the teacher of the arts'), the oldest zoo in the Netherlands. They found the old mare lying dead on the cold stone floor of her cage.⁴ She had become a popular exhibit since her arrival in 1867,⁵ a refugee from a sustained campaign of slaughter against the quagga. The quagga disappeared from its once-extensive range by the mid-nineteenth century. The last relict population in the Orange Free State was wiped out in the 1870s and the last quaggas died out in the wild in 1878.⁶

Unlike the lonely old mare, her fellow striped horses had wandered the grasslands of the southern parts of Africa – the Karoo and the southern Free State – in huge herds. The name 'quagga' (/Xam! or San-Bushman / *Habba*; Khoikhoi *quácha*; isiXhosa *iqwara*; Afrikaans *kwagga*) was perhaps onomatopoeic – capturing their bark or 'shrill, barking neigh, of which its name forms a correct imitation'.⁷ William Cornwallis Harris (1807–1848) who embarked on an extended hunting trip across the Orange River found their numbers overwhelming, comparing the din of their hooves 'to nothing but to the din of a tremendous charge of cavalry, or to the rushing of a mighty tempest. I could not estimate the accumulated numbers at less than 15,000 [of quagga and gnu]; a great extent of country being actually chequered black and white with their congregated masses'.⁸ At mid-century they still seemed to exist as 'interminable herds ... Moving slowly across the profile of the ocean-like horizon, uttering a, long files of Quaggas continually remind the early traveller of a rival caravan on its march ... Bands of many hundreds are thus frequently seen during their migration from the dreary and desolate plains'.⁹ But quaggas were increasingly hunted for their hides and

3 The Natal Game Protection Association was set up by sportsmen determined to prosecute those transgressing game laws and to negotiate with the state to further extend protection.

4 'Too few reserves result in too little habitat', *Fiat Lux* (3 March 1984).

5 A. C. Van Bruggen, 'Illustrated notes on some extinct South African ungulates', *South African Journal of Science*, 55 (1959).

6 B. J. Weddell, *Conserving living natural resources* (Cambridge UK, 2002), 46; R. M. Nowak, *Walker's mammals of the world* (Baltimore, 1999), 1024–1025.

7 W. C. Harris, 'Sporting in Southern Africa', *Quarterly Review*, CXXVII, June (New York, 1839), 113.

8 Harris, 'Sporting in southern Africa', 113. See also Charles Williams, *Narratives and adventures of travellers in Africa* (London, 1859).

9 In *Guide to the gardens of the Zoological Society of London*, (London, 1867), 27.