

Book reviews

ALBATROSS

By Graham Barwell

2014. Published by Reaktion Books, London, UK. 208 pp., colour and black and white photographs and illustrations. Paperback, US\$19.95, ISBN 9781780231914.

Firstly, I should declare that I remember suffering from *mal de mar* together with the author in choppy seas off eastern Australia. Like him, I became familiar with albatrosses from monthly pelagic trips off New South Wales and, before moving away, I rarely missed these regular opportunities to observe these most majestic of birds. With this common background, I was intrigued to read Barwell's book on the evolving relationship between albatrosses and human societies.

Albatross is part of the *Animal* series, which explores 'the historical significance and impact on humans of a wide range of animals' (www.reaktionbooks.co.uk, accessed 7 December 2015). True to this descriptor, the introduction to *Albatross* briefly explores Barwell's changing relationship with albatrosses, from his early days in New Zealand, where he achieved only distant glimpses, to the opportunities for close encounters on the pelagic bird watching trips. He parallels his experience and his sense of awe to that of Western explorers first encountering the near mythical albatross. The introduction continues with a brief treatment of the evolution of the albatross and sufficient basic information on their diversity, distribution and biology to provide a background to the later chapters.

The first written description of albatrosses by sailors from northern Europe opens the first chapter, which goes on to describe the growth of scientific interest and the attitudes of sailors and early travellers towards albatrosses. Barwell explains that even during these early voyages, our reaction to albatrosses was paradoxical and conflicted. Some were 'struck by their mastery of flight' (p. 20) and their ability to 'glide effortlessly close to the water' (p. 20). Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*, described his first albatross as 'an archangel' (p. 34). Other seafarers simply noted the welcome source of tasty, fresh meat and the stupidity of the birds, which apparently made them easy to kill. Understandably, wrecked seafarers used albatrosses as a source of food; in these cases, the killing was less flagrant, as the seafarers recognised that their survival depended on the continued availability of birds. This chapter includes a remarkable account of wrecked sailors in the Subantarctic who attached inscribed metal bands to the necks of live albatrosses in the hope that the birds would aid their deliverance.

The theme of adoration and exploitation continues in the second chapter, which explores the influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. The source of the phrase 'an albatross around one's neck' (to describe a burden or guilt), this poem promoted the superstition that killing an albatross would lead to bad luck. However, as Barwell reflects later in the book, 'while the poem had a profound effect on language, metaphor and beliefs about the consequences of killing an albatross, it did not much affect the way people treated the actual birds' (p. 125).

The third and fourth chapters describe how the albatross was used – first by the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific and second by non-indigenous peoples. Although these chapters are loosely coupled by several common practices, such as the use of albatross feathers for adornment, the scale of exploitation by these two groups of people seems barely comparable. The photographs that illustrate the extent of feather and egg collecting that occurred in the Pacific are both staggering and pitiful. It is difficult to comprehend that over a 7-month period in the early 1900s, a band of 23 men killed ~300 000 Laysan and Black-footed albatrosses, largely for the millinery trade.

The final two chapters turn to the development of a new relationship between albatrosses and humans – one that discards exploitation and embraces continued wonderment and conservation. Barwell recognises that the Judaeo-Christian traditions promise 'dominion' over the natural world but notes that religious texts also caution 'those taking eggs or chicks not to kill the female bird as well' (p. 122). Thus Barwell returns to our conflicted relationship with albatrosses, recounting tales of passengers on emigrant ships feeling 'an overwhelming desire to shoot the albatrosses', while others wonder why some find such killing so agreeable when 'ordinary men are not devils' (p. 122). One sea captain mused that 'killing birds for food was acceptable, but the right to kill for sport was less certain' (p. 124).

Barwell explains that it was changing attitudes to fashion and the plumage trade, as well as the rise of bird preservation societies such as the Society for the Protection of Birds and the National Association of Audubon Societies in the early 1900s, that led to the first protection for albatrosses. He also acknowledges the influence of 'powerful advocates' such as Virginia Woolf, who wrote that 'money-hungry men were just as responsible for the [feather] trade as vain and thoughtless women' (p. 128). Dedicated naturalists also had a profound effect on our changing attitudes and Barwell highlights New Zealander Lance Richdale's role in protecting the Royal Albatrosses of Taiaroa Head and Japan's Hiroshi Hasegawa for his determination to save the last and tiny population of Short-tailed Albatrosses on Torishima Island.

Following the protection of breeding colonies in the 1960s and '70s, a new threat arose through the expansion of high-seas fishing operations and the accidental killing of albatrosses on 'longlines'. Albatrosses attracted to baited hooks get snagged and drown as the line sinks. Although some fisheries have modified their gear and fishing practices to reduce seabird by-catch, many albatross populations are still adversely affected. Barwell spends little time on this topic, which is an opportunity missed. Like the rise and fall of the millinery trade, longlines involve tales of wanton destruction and the dedication of a few who fought to stop the carnage.

I was captivated by this book about albatrosses, the sea, adventurers, shipwrecks and the wild Southern Ocean. It is about the redemption of the most magnificent of birds. In my view, the book is weakest when it reads like a catalogue of where the word 'albatross' appears in books, foods, ships and naval airbases, and strongest where Barwell's deep knowledge of historical literature provides an intriguing narrative on our evolving relationship with these birds. Here, perhaps, he could

have drawn parallels with our similar conflicted and evolving relationship with other marine animals such as seals, penguins and whales.

Throughout, Barwell modestly refrains from inserting his views into the text so it is not clear whether he predicts that our relationship with albatrosses will continue to change for the better. As some populations recover, 'sustainable use' and 'acceptable levels of by-catch' may become publicly palatable –

or perhaps we will value these birds highly enough to fight for their absolute protection. Perhaps that's a conversation for the next time the author and I share a ship's railing.

Michael Double

Australian Marine Mammal Centre
Australian Antarctic Division
Kingston, Tasmania, Australia

SEARCHING FOR PEKPEK: CASSOWARIES AND CONSERVATION IN THE NEW GUINEA RAINFOREST

By Andrew L. Mack

2014. Published by Cassowary Conservation and Publishing, New Florence, PA, USA. 235 pp., colour photographs, maps. Paperback, AU\$35, ISBN: 9780989390309.

Foremost, *Searching for Pekpek* is an adventure story – a story of possibly the last opportunity on our planet for a trained biologist to immerse themselves in an ecosystem where plants and animals remain largely unstudied by formal science. It is set in the late 1980s, at a time when westerners were a rare sight in the vast wilderness of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and cultures existed with little influence from the outside world. It is the story of a highly motivated graduate student who sets out eagerly and innocently to complete post-graduate studies far removed in every way from a university campus and the associated luxuries.

Pekpek is the local word for cassowary droppings, which can contain thousands of seeds from rainforest plants. While this story is motivated by studies of seed dispersal by the dwarf cassowary (*Casuarius bennetti*), it is more about the author (and his sidekick, Deb) and his encounters with the people, the forest, the culture and the many obstacles he must overcome to pursue his research and conservation goals. I am confident that I am not spoiling the ending by saying that the author achieves his initial research goals and continues on to strive to implement conservation in PNG by funding and mentoring young local biologists.

As suggested by the subtitle, this is a story about conservation – in particular, the need for urgent action as the world discovers the mineral riches of PNG. The author describes the challenges of introducing the western world's concept of conservation to a tribal society. Mack's aversion to the entrenched approach to conservation in developing tropical regions is clear. This approach involves a procession of 'Big Conservation' organisations, operated by foreigners in large western cities, throwing large amounts of money at PNG from afar. Mack explains why this hasn't worked in a country such as PNG, where tribalism and family connections control every aspect of local people's lives, particularly when it comes to issues of land tenure. Mack also goes to great lengths to justify his alternative approach, which relies on involving local people and developing a local research community. Via this approach, the locals make important conservation decisions for their own country.

The author makes it clear that the sole intent of his early expeditions into the depths of the PNG forests was to seek a suitable research site, commence his post-graduate research and establish himself as a scientist. However, in this book, Mack never delves deeply into scientific design or ecological concepts. Instead, he conveys his passion for his research through tales of adventure. He mentions only briefly the successful results of his initial research and refrains from listing his other research achievements. I would recommend that interested readers of this book conduct a quick search of Mack's PNG publications, particularly his 1995 publication on seed dispersal by the dwarf cassowary, which emerged during a growing interest in tropical seed dispersal research and partly motivated cassowary research in Northern Australia.

My only criticism of the book lies in the writing style. The first few chapters are not in chronological order, leaving the reader mildly confused as to which stage of the adventure they are in. However, this is not a great issue, and I enjoyed revisiting the start of the story at a later stage. Of some frustration were the later chapters of the book, in which the author moves from his initial field research towards exploring permanent solutions for conservation in PNG. Some sections read as repetitive ramblings covering topics that are addressed previously. However, the reader is compelled to persevere, as Mack's lessons are valuable for anyone interested in conservation planning, and the views expressed are those of an author with vast experience and success in conservation.

Photographs are used sparingly throughout the book and feature charming images of PNG locals. I would like to have seen a few more photographs of the forest fruits, *pekpek*, cassowaries and general wildlife that Mack so enthusiastically describes.

Has the author achieved an effective blend of science, conservation and adventure in this publication? Yes. Undoubtedly, good science must underpin conservation decisions in PNG – but the science emanating from the forests of PNG (which can be easily accessed by a quick online search) is not the focus of this book. While the author's opinions on conservation in PNG may be a little repetitive at times, his clear views are supported by a working life immersed in local cultures. I was particularly satisfied by the chapter late in the book that outlines the achievements of students who have passed through the field stations and field courses established by the author. Many of these people have moved into academia and other professions that influence decisions regarding PNG's natural assets. Finally, this is simply a good adventure story that evokes in the reader a desire to see the author overcome the

multitude of barriers he faces. Mack's passionate portrayal of his love for PNG and its people, and the researchers and acquaintances that have touched his life, is moving. His descriptions and reflections about the forest, the nation, and day-to-day life in PNG make for an enjoyable read.

*Matt Bradford
CSIRO Land and Water
Atherton, Qld, Australia*

Reference

- Mack, A. L. (1995). Distance and non-randomness of seed dispersal by the dwarf cassowary (*Casuaris bennetti*). *Ecography* **18**, 286–295. doi:[10.1111/j.1600-0587.1995.tb00131.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0587.1995.tb00131.x)