

Big Cats and Dead Sheep: An Overview of the Folkloric Phenomena of Big Cats in the Australian Bush

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ABSTRACT: Since the late 19th century there has been a persistent strand in Australian folklore, one claiming that the bush is inhabited by mysterious cat-like predators. A wide array of origin myths and behavioural claims around the death of stock and claimed sightings is pervasive amongst the inhabitants of rural Australia, these flaring into panics and reaching the attention of the mainstream media every few years. Despite this, there seems to be little in this instance of the usual manifestations of folklore in song, literature and art as compared to say that for Bunyips or Yowies.

This preliminary study looks at the overall pattern of Big Cat folklore in Australia as part of an ongoing project evaluating associated mythology in relation to Anglo-Australian attitudes to the bush. This paper considers the culture and folklore surrounding big cats in the Australian bush and the means by which people formulate the stories.

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During the week an escaped lion has been seen by several people on Mr G. Codderington's property, Moulton, five miles from Harden. Efforts to get close enough to shoot the animal have failed. It appears to roam the country between two roads. Farmers have missed sheep which it is believed the animal has killed and eaten. (*The Western Argus*, 14 February 1933, p. 17.)

Claims of reclusive big cats lurking in the Australian bush and feeding on livestock have a history which extends back to the nineteenth century. Tales such as the Tantanoola and Queensland Tigers gained public notoriety during this period—these combined with others that escapees from private menageries and circuses were feeding on livestock. Since then sightings and occasional panics regarding big cats in the bush have been common, with reports reaching a high point in the early nineteen-eighties with the publication of the Deakin University Grampians' puma study, the rise of *forteana* in popular culture world-wide, and the formation of several organizations dedicated to the cataloguing of strange or rare animals—Peter Chapple's ARFRA being perhaps the

most influential. However, since then, stories, anecdotes and media reports have continued and remain pervasive amongst the rural population, coalescing around prominent legends such as the Grampians Puma, the Gippsland Panther, the Emmaville Panther and the Nannup Tiger amongst a wealth of other names.

Prior to the second World War, stories and sightings tended to revolve around claims of the bush being inhabited by lions and tigers escaped from circuses and menageries, whereas, in the post-war period, such general descriptions and themes have focused on pumas and panthers—with a subcategory of those who are sure the bush is inhabited by some kind of unidentified marsupial predator such as a descendant of *Thylacoleo carnifex*.¹ That being said, despite there being a long and widespread history of folklore surrounding big cats in the Australian bush, there has been little in the way of systemic academic study into the culture behind it, outside of the Deakin University study of 1977 and its revision in 2001.²

While the folklore surrounding big cats is widespread amongst the rural population and is regularly reported on in the media, there is a dearth of such focussed place names, folk songs and artwork surrounding the stories—as is found in the British folklore surrounding phantom black dogs,³ or indigenous Australian myths of Bunyips or Yowies. In this sense the folklore is phenomena- and media- driven, rather than derived from traditional notions of folk culture, as in the case of British folklore and its focus on pre-industrial connections to heritage. Big cat claims tend to originate with individuals having peculiar experiences with sightings, unidentified footprints and dead stock or wildlife, thus fuelling the stories that are then taken up by media and literature which helps to contextualise the experience as a big cat event.

The stories then filter into the folklore of the populace and thus become a vehicle for people to interpret their adjacent experiences. In this sense the folklore tends to emerge every few years or so in a

¹ This is clearly evident through a media search of reports of Big Cat sightings and attacks on stock since the late 19th century. Prior to the second world war the dominant theme is claims that an escaped Lion or Tiger from a circus or menagerie was attacking local stock (often with claims that it was being used as a cover for sheep rustling by local police after the scare had receded), whereas, after the war, the claim shifted to the argument that US servicemen had abandoned Pumas or melanistic Leopards (panthers) in the bush. Some specific claims and legends on this front will be discussed later.

² Henry, John, *Pumas in the Grampians Mountains: A Compelling Case?: An Updated Report of the Deakin Puma Study* (Geelong, Vic: Deakin University, 2001).

³ The author has engaged in extensive research into the folklore surrounding Black Dogs in the British Isles and their legacy in popular culture. Please see Waldron, David, and Reeve, Christopher, *Shock the Black Dog of Bungay: A Case Study in Local Folklore* (Herts: Hidden Publishing, 2010); and Brown, T., 'The Black Dog', *Folklore*, 69.3 (September, 1958), 175-192.

localised panic or furore, which is taken up by local media only to fade into the background after a few weeks. And yet this pattern is stubbornly persistent in the local discourse of the bush.⁴ Adding to this interaction of media and folklore are the numerous cases of known Pumas, Panthers, Lions and other big cats which had escaped in the bush only to be, mostly, shot some time later. Perhaps the most famous being the St Arnaud's Puma of central Victoria which escaped from Perry Brother's Circus in 1924, was shot some time later by Mr S. Bray and proudly displayed through Australia's newspapers in photographs.⁵ These stories would have to have had a major impact on the development of Big Cat folklore and local narratives.

An example of a localised panic was the claim that a puma was living on the slopes of Mt Warrenheip in Ballarat in 1995-1996. This event follows the typical structure of a big cat scare. The story first came to my attention when I came across it in the appendix of Mike Williams and Rebecca Lang's book, *Australian Big Cats: An Unnatural History of Panthers*. It was in the form of a letter, written to them by a Ballarat local who was the son of the manager of a local amusement park. In the letter he claimed that when the park had big cats on display for visitors, they found that when the Puma was on heat they would hear return calls from up the mountain. Similarly, when he and his brothers were spotlighting for rabbits during these periods, they would often see a puma-like creature in the region and commented that, when working as a security guard, he would occasionally see the cat on the premises.⁶

Knowing the family and people from the nearby township of Bungaree, just out of Ballarat, I decided to follow up this report and see how it was represented and interpreted in the local community. I found many parallel stories from individuals in the town and the Bungaree historical society, including a story from the same period that stragglers from the Bungaree Football Team, running up the mountain, had heard a crashing from the undergrowth only to find a Wallaby charging across the track pursued by a puma. There was also the story that the park had lost a puma and the claims that a puma was living on the mountain were a means of covering up poor security and care for the animals. Similarly, I heard complaints from local farmers that a big cat was preying on their

⁴ A media study of Big Cat Panics such as the Goulburn Lion Scare in February 1933, the Tantanoola Tiger Scare of the 1870s and the Emmaville Panther scare of the late 1950s indicate that this pattern is fairly consistent. Less well-reported but local scares round Avoca, Maryborough and Ballarat follow the same pattern of a rash of sightings associated with dead stock that enter into local folklore. Interestingly interviews with locals and former residents of the Grampians town of Mafeking in Victoria indicate that the US servicemen story of abandoned Puma mascots was already well-established by the late 1950s.

⁵ *The Argus*, Tuesday 24 June 1924, p. 7.

⁶ Williams, Mike, and Lang, Rebecca, *Australian Big Cats: An Unnatural History of Panthers* (Hazelbrook: Strange Nation Publishing, 2010), p. 334.

sheep both then and now at irregular intervals, particularly in August/September, accompanied by calls and screams in the night.

Later, in an unrelated interview with a former Maryborough journalist who was sympathetic to big cat stories, it was claimed that the park manager had approached him in 1995 to investigate if someone was playing recordings of a Puma on the mountain as a practical joke or hoax, as he was concerned that the park could be held responsible if there was a Puma on the mountain. I asked the daughter of the former animal keeper at the time if she had heard of the claims that a puma had escaped from captivity. She confirmed the story written in the original letter to Mike Williams and Rebecca Lang and further added that all her life she had heard similar stories from Creswick State forest. She was quite angry over the claim that an animal had escaped and been covered up as her father 'just lived for those animals and loved all of them dearly'. She then proceeded to tell the story of how, during a moral panic regarding the care of big cats in captivity during the mid 1990s, the castle came into conflict with animal rights activists and the local council.

At the end of the legal conflict, the park was given 48 hours to remove the animals. She said that her father could cope with the loss of the animals as they were told they were being sold to a circus. However the next morning when they came in to work, the animals were laid out in their storage area dead, having been shot the previous night, and ready to be sent to a taxidermist, an event which left her father distraught.

But the Meaning of the Last Events?

I am unsure what to make of this story and the many like it encountered in my study of the legacy of big cat folklore. There is certainly a sense of trauma associated with the loss of the park's cats and the emotional anguish suffered because of the chain of events. The claims, at face value, seem quite legitimate and earnest in the retelling, yet they also include traditional bush yarns, like the story of the football team which are now part of local folklore as is the puma itself. What is clear however is that the story, whilst in the background of local folklore, has deeply pervaded the community in Bungaree and is now a fundamental part of how they interpret the countryside. I have found that most people interviewed in rural Victoria have either heard a story from a close friend or relative, or that they can relay their own experience. Yet, at the same time, there is an anxiety and ambivalence about the stories and concerns over ridicule.

Another Personal Experience

Perhaps this anxiety is best typified by an encounter with an individual in Roses Gap who runs a recreation centre/camping ground there. I was hiking through the bush along the river there when I came across him looking for local kangaroos. He asked if I had seen any and I replied that I had seen dozens of kangaroos.

‘No I mean dead ones. We’ve had 6 of my semi-tame roos die in the past few days. Heads bitten off and slit right up the middle, so like you’d reckon a scalpel had done it.’⁷

I mentioned in passing if he thought it was the Grampians Puma.

‘No, this is serious. The Parks and Wildlife people didn’t have a clue. Its giant foxes though. Huge, like this big.’ He indicated half way up his thigh. ‘Me wife’s seen them slinking about round here at dusk. Can’t seem catch the b*****ds.’

I found it intriguing how the suggestion of a Puma was met with ridicule, but giant foxes were perfectly acceptable, despite them being perhaps even less likely than Pumas.⁸

A Mix of Sources for the Details?

This interaction between local folklore, oral transmission of stories surrounding people’s experiences and accompanying documentation was noted by John Henry in his Puma study of 1977. In particular, he noted that the very act of having a large scale University-based research project worked to legitimate the stories and so further the momentum. Outside of the increased profile given to the phenomena by the study, he noted that the very act of making a study worked to validate and vindicate people’s experiences and legitimated the folklore in the public mind.⁹ This pattern

⁷ The phrase, ‘Like a scalpel had done it’, is significant in that it comes up time and time again in U.S. studies of Satanic Ritual Abuse panics. Here, veterinary and forensic scientists noted that the phrase had entered the public lexicon as a means, by activists, to claim human or supernatural agency when people seemed unable to tell the difference between cuts by a sharp object and the shearing effect of the sharp teeth of a coyote or fox.

In this sense it was taken as a term which, in effect meant, that person had suffered an uncanny or horrific emotional response from finding the corpse. See Hicks, Robert, *In Pursuit of Satan: American Police and the Occult* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), pp. 332-333; and the FBI page dedicated to the subject containing the original reports accessible online <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/ufoanim.htm>

⁸ Another side to this phenomenon of Big Cat sightings and stock kills is associated exaggerated claims of known and existing animals beyond normal behaviour. Apart from the example here of giant foxes, I have come across claims of a wedge-tailed eagle killing a ewe and depositing it in a nearby tree, giant foxes acting in packs to bring down a ram, and giant feral cats acting as a team to kill large farm animals and macropods.

⁹ Henry, John, *Pumas in the Grampians Mountains: A Compelling Case?: An updated report of the Deakin Puma Study*. (Geelong, Vic: Deakin University, 2001), p. 61.

further worked to entrench the folklore in the public mind, as does the pattern of media flare-ups whereby stories reach media attention and lead to a considerable cat panic over several weeks, until the profile rises to the point where people start to see big cats everywhere and eventually the phenomena loses credibility. Often, however, the original flare-up, research project or report becomes seemingly lost in the public mind, leaving only the memory of the original uncanny experience of big cats manifested through sightings, prints and dead stock.¹⁰

Dead Stock and Wildlife

Anxiety over dead stock and wildlife is a major component of the big cat phenomenon, notwithstanding animal sightings and apparent paw-prints. We have a long history of public anxiety surrounding dead stock, which has also manifested itself on many occasions in panics over local wildlife such as thylacines, wedge-tailed eagles and dingos; these have led to many of these alleged predators being hunted to extinction, or at least to slip to a severely threatened status. There are also claims of human agency during the Satanic Ritual Abuse scares of the 1980s, as surrounding bizarrely configured dead animals located near or around dwellings. This is a phenomenon paralleled in the United States which reached the point of large scale investigation by the FBI during the late 1980s and early 1990s, linked to claims of Satanic or Voodoo sacrifice and even UFO cattle mutilation claims.¹¹

It also forms a central part of the narrative in Tim Winton's fictional account of a big cat scare in his gothic horror novel, *In the Winter Dark*, in which the death of a pet dog, a goat and some poultry by a panther-like predator becomes the catalyst for tragedy, psychological turmoil and fear of the bush.¹² Similarly, Mike Williams and Rebecca Lang's book on big cats starts with the 1997 panic surrounding a horrific epidemic of

¹⁰ I found parallels with this pattern in my research into the folklore of surrounding the Black Dog of Bungay in Suffolk, UK. The focus on the uncanny aspect of the experience, i.e. the Black Dog, was so overwhelming in the media and folkloric narrative that the means by which it came to public attention and became a symbol of civic identity in the 1930s was almost completely lost outside of the recollections of the elderly, town council notes and local media from the time.

This problem is exacerbated with the Australian big cat phenomenon in that, given the dearth of historic or academic attention very little is recorded and much of it is extremely fragmented and localised in nature. For further reading please see Waldron, David, and Reeve, Christopher, *Shock!: The Black Dog of Bungay: A Case Study in Local Folklore* (Herts: Hidden Publishing, 2010), pp. 100-115.

¹¹ Hicks, Robert, *In Pursuit of Satan: American Police and the Occult* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), pp. 332-333.

¹² Winton, Tim, *In the Winter Dark* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1988).

sheep attacks in Woodside then and linked to Big Cat sightings. Many sheep, often still alive, had their faces seemingly bitten off.¹³

The claims in this case are typically that of animals which have the skin peeled back and are picked clean in a matter of hours or, alternately, of selective feeding on their key organs like liver, genitals and heart with little mess. Some stories relate an animal which has had its neck broken or nose crushed, with little of the typical worrying associated with dog attacks. One spate of sheep deaths blamed on a cat-like predator from a farm near Avoca in central Victoria in September 2010 was accompanied by stories of animals left with a sliced-open belly and organs removed, broken necks left rotated 180 degrees and, in some cases, grass still in their mouths.¹⁴

It is an eerie image and one difficult to come to terms with emotionally, but also one with a strong cultural resonance. Similarly, a human observer seeing an animal with its genitals removed or heart eaten out, will suffer a strong emotional response given the powerful symbolic properties associated with these organs in the human imagination. However, a body of lore has emerged amongst Victorian farmers surrounding deaths attributed to big cats as opposed to wedge-tailed eagles, dingos, wild dogs and other predators. Outside of the aforementioned deaths by suffocation or clean broken necks, without and worrying or other form of nipping damage, key indicators of associated phenomena have been put to me as—

The reaction of the other animals in the paddocks after it has been through. Are they scared or anxious or grouped up defensively in a corner?

Are there a pair of large canine holes in the brisket?

Is the nose of the sheep broken?

Have the whites of the eyes haemorrhaged?

Look at the skull and feel it for broken bones i.e. a click when gently manipulated.

Lift the shoulders and see if the head flops, i.e. a broken or dislocated neck. Look up the nostrils for blood, foam and signs of windpipe damage.

Are their eyes punctured to the brain?

What's the core temperature ...to ascertain how long its been dead?

¹³ Williams, Mike, and Lang, Rebecca, *Australian Big Cats: An Unnatural History of Panthers* (Hazelbrook: Strange Nation Publishing, 2010), pp. 1-3.

¹⁴ Private interviews.

Are there signs of selective feeding, or is it freshly picked bare?

Often the body will have token coverings like grass, leaves or sticks over the carcass.¹⁵

There is a widespread movement of people engaged in trying to hunt down or find definitive evidence of big cats in the Australian bush with a wide variety of approaches. For example, former zoo keeper and field naturalist Simon Townsend along with hunter John Turner are investigating big cat sightings from central and Western Victoria from an environmental science perspective, collating stories, investigating stock kills and the like and running a website to collate and present information.¹⁶ A similar project was initiated by cameraman Mike Williams and journalist Rebecca Lang which culminated in a recent publication of their collated letters, stories, photographs and other assorted materials over the years.¹⁷ Methodologies range from trail cameras, sound recordings, animal tracking, dissecting dead livestock, to media searches and collecting stories. Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects I have found when engaged in anthropological field work with people looking for big cats is a love of the bush. In sitting at night watching trail cameras or listening to the sounds via a directional microphone one gets a sense of deep immersion in the bush and the wildlife which you simply do not experience in traditional hiking or camping. The sense of developing tracking skills and seeing the interaction of echidna, kangaroo and other animals leaving tracks in the bush gives a unique sense of connectedness to the bush, as does the sense of mystery the pursuit of an exotic animal generates. I am quite sure this sense of engagement with the wilderness is a powerful and pervasive undercurrent in Big Cat folklore¹⁸

¹⁵ Private interview with a Nerrina local.

¹⁶ Interviews and email discussions with Simon Townsend and John Turner. Their website is located at <http://bigcatsvic.com.au/>

¹⁷ Williams, Mike, and Lang, Rebecca. *Australian Big Cats: An Unnatural History of Panthers* (Hazelbrook: Strange Nation Publishing, 2010).

¹⁸ A strong future line of research in this project is going to be the re-enchantment of the bush and developing a sense of belonging of the kind espoused by Peter Read and David Tacey in their research into developing a sense of Anglo-Celtic identification and spiritual connection to the land. I also draw attention to the fact that, in the various narratives associated with big cats, indigenous people seem to be conspicuously absent—although preliminary interviews with Ballarat indigenous people indicate a wealth of local folklore on the interaction of native wildlife with huge feral cats as a malignant predator to be hunted at any cost and I have come across stories of, for example, thylacines in Creswick State Forest and near Mt Wombat.

Origin of the Predators?

One central aspect of Big Cat folklore is the development of ‘origin myths’. Perhaps most well known in this context is that of US servicemen abandoning mascots in the Australian bush during the Second World War, a claim investigated in some detail by John Henry in his 1977 Puma study. He argued that the US servicemen genesis story serves a useful foil to sceptics’ questions of where the animal came from and this works to legitimate and help validate people’s experiences and the concomitant body of folklore. The US personnel stationed in Nhill, Ballarat and Mt Gambier had an enormous impact on local culture for the few months they were stationed there in large numbers during 1942. They came with vast quantities of equipment and supplies and the allegation of foreigners importing dangerous creatures into the country has struck a nerve with the Australian population. There was a culture of regimental mascots (ignoring Australian’ Servicemen’s own tradition of exotic animals as regimental mascots¹⁹) and a fixation on big cats, like pumas, in flight groups and (on) regimental insignia amongst US servicemen.

Moreover it is a perfectly plausible story, perhaps best illustrated by a recorded interview with Irene Addinsall in 1989. She had claimed that, whilst working with the Land Army near Hotspur in 1942-43, a group of US soldiers stationed nearby possessed a pet puma with four cubs. The puma was increasingly becoming unmanageable, due to the cubs getting hurt and the alien environment, and so the troops were subsequently asked to get rid of it. They were later driven to the Grampians late at night by a local where they released the puma. John Henry’s own study found two other residents of Nhill who employed as guards at the US airbase who also claimed to have seen a puma at the airbase in 1942, from which they claimed a cub was abandoned on the Horsham/Hamilton road.

Research into the records and recollections of US servicemen however did not prove as fruitful, with no responses or recollections of mascots beyond common animals like dogs and donkeys and claims that, in the desperate situation of the retreat from the Philippines, there was neither room nor time for a large predator to be concealed amongst the supplies.²⁰

¹⁹ Articles from *The Argus*, 17 November 1942 and 10 of October 1940, discuss Australian Soldiers and Airmen and their regimental mascots with great enthusiasm, including a wide variety of exotic animals and notably a tale by the pilot of a Canberra bomber that he never goes on a mission without his pet lion cub.

²⁰ Henry, John, *Pumas in the Grampians Mountains: A Compelling Case?: An updated report of the Deakin Puma Study* (Geelong: Deakin University, 2001), pp. 45-49; and Healy, Tony, and Cropper, Paul, *Out of the Shadows: Mystery Animals of Australia* (Chippendale, NSW: Ironbark, 1994), p. 83.

And from Private Zoological Collections?

Other ‘myths’ as to exotic animals being released that I have come across are that Sir Samuel Wilson of the acclimatization society imported a pair of pumas during his time at Longernong Station, in order to keep down the population of sambar deer, kangaroos and rabbits. This is a claim vigorously denied by his biographer Dr Anne Beggs-Sunter who argued that given his passion was for fish and songbirds and expressed anxiety at the introduction of foxes due to their predations on lambs, it was very unlikely he would import a large predator such as a puma and furthermore there was no evidence or documentation supporting the claim. Similarly, origin myths prior to the Second World War tended to focus on circus and zoo escapees, of which there were many in the 19th century, as well as remnants from private menageries. Indeed the sale of exotic animals including tigers, leopards and lions was quite common amongst private collectors, especially during the post goldfields era, and advertisements in the classifieds of the *Argus* for their sale occur several times during the 1850s-1870s era.

Another claim I came across was that Chinese diggers on the Goldfields imported big cats from Asia as symbols of prestige and to guard diggings at night around Ballarat, to keep white people out of their choice mines by letting them run through the tunnels and shafts.²¹ I have also often come across the claim that the bush is inhabited by gigantic feral cats. I believe this to be a derivative of Mahood’s influential but heavily contested findings that feral cats were increasing in size and weight at a massive level, leading to significant changes in behaviour and prey which has filtered into the public mindset. Certainly the belief that feral cats are attaining enormous sizes in the Australian bush has quite cemented itself amongst the Australian rural population, contradictory studies in environmental science notwithstanding.²²

At their core, many of these stories serve as convenient intellectual vehicles in which to rationalise experiences of the bush which are uncanny and difficult to reconcile with established acceptable discourse of the wilderness. As in Tim Winton’s novel, *In the Winter Dark*, they also serve as the focal point of fears and anxieties surrounding the

²¹ Stories collected via interviews with private individuals.

²² I have come across completely contradictory points of view on whether Australian feral cats are reaching enormous sizes of as much as 16kg and more. It certainly seems to be pervasive amongst hunters, farmers and many environmental scientists yet as often seems to be treated as completely discredited. The origin of the giant feral cat mythos seems to be outside of the private experience of hunters, environmental sciences and forestry workers, Mahood, I.T., *The Feral Cat* (Sydney: Post Graduate Committee in Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, 1980), 53, 447-456.

For a contrasting perspective see, Dickman, Chris R., *Overview of the Impact of Feral Cats on Australian Native Fauna* (Sydney: Institute of Wildlife Research and School of Biological Sciences, 1996).

countryside. In the wake of eerie unexplainable stock deaths, the scream of a vixen or koala can become terrifying and a potent symbol of the unknown, even by people normally familiar with the sounds of both animals.²³ This type of response follows on in the line of a long tradition of Anglo-Celtic conceptions of the Australian bush as a hostile, dangerous and eerie place. Similarly, the bush also becomes a site of mystery and wonder inhabited by strange unknown animals.

Yet, given Australia's history of mass introduction of species, it is interesting how the claim of yet one more animal is the focal point of such anxiety. Irrespective of whether there are small numbers of big cats, the cultural and folkloric legacy is significant and is a major component of popular wisdom and conceptions of the Australian bush. The other side of this is, as John Henry noted in his study of the Grampian's Puma legend, the extent to which social desirability plays an enormous role in how people define and quantify their experiences and appropriation of their/any local folklore. How people position themselves in relation to (localised) folklore and stories says a great deal more about how they socially position themselves in relation to the Australian bush, the rural community and environmental science than it does about 'the big cats' themselves.

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²³ I have obtained a steadily growing collection of bush sounds which I have played to a variety of individuals. The divergence in responses is quite extraordinary, with some people reacting in terror, others reaction with intrigue and mystery, still others quickly leap to an animal (right or wrong) to rationalise it to people who do not hear anything unusual.

One respondent employed in environmental science at a university did not notice anything unusual in the screaming which had so unnerved other people yet was tremendously excited by the sounds of rare frogs in the background. The responses to the sounds have been quite telling with regard to attitudes towards the bush.

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