

The wise thylacine

In presumed extinction the thylacine continues to be a source of wonder. Does the adoption of an extinct species for logos, badges and advertisements provide an insight into our island's psyche? A few years ago there were jibes that it was an ideal image for what was then considered an economically moribund, backwater province.

With our new-found prosperity has the thylacine now become a symbol of our returning from the economic brink? Sometimes I imagine out in the bush there are wise thylacines in calm concealment, amused at the scrabbling European human beings who are only now beginning to realise the value of their recently adopted island. Are they waiting to reward us with their presence when we better understand? Are they hiding in the Styx or wandering the Wandle River valley? (The Wandle is where my father saw them regularly up until the 1920s.)

You could hardly blame them for keeping their heads down. The thylacine was singled out for unique treatment: the only animal to have been deliberately eliminated from the planet. Other extinctions were the result of thoughtless over-hunting and habitat destruction. Has there been anywhere else where a bounty was still payable when the animal was already on the brink of extinction?

Yet many believe the thylacine lives on. There are always rumours of sightings, but I fancy the wise thylacines out there are not yet ready to show themselves.

There is a serious proposal to resurrect the animal by cloning from alcohol-preserved pups. I wonder what the bush thylacines would make of that?

Then recently there was an account of a computer model – a modern miracle that concluded that all things electronically considered, the thylacine is or could be unextinct! At last, a mammal for the twenty-first century. A virtual thylacine? Of course, a cybercine!

I wonder what the bush thylacines would make of *that*?

Maybe, however slender, there is some real hope. A surprising number of animals have returned from apparent extinction, not all of them small and inconspicuous. In 1965 workers on Kawau Island (near Auckland, New Zealand), attempting to control a plague of introduced tamar wallabies were astonished to discover that some of the pests were not tamar wallabies at all, but miraculously, a surviving population of parma wallabies – a species long thought extinct.

Parmas were captured with a view to saving the species and re-introducing them to Australia. Rekindled interest in the animal soon produced another surprise. In 1967 the parma was “re-discovered” in the forests of the Great Dividing Range near Gosford, New South Wales.

And consider the great Tasmanian fox-hunt. We know foxes are present and in some numbers. We know because some bloody fool or fools deliberately introduced them a couple of years ago. The release of the Wildely uneatable by the unspeakable. Yet since their release there have been no sightings of live foxes, and for all the attempts to poison or trap them, there is as yet no 1080-induced corpus delicti de fox.

So just maybe our beautiful, enigmatic thylacine is still with us. Were to appear again it would be interesting to see our response. I'm sure there would be an enormous stimulus to tourism. Our prosperity would leave the Asian tiger economies for dead. Can you imagine the Tasmanian tiger economy?

I wonder what the carefully concealed, wise thylacines are thinking out there in 2003?