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## Fight for the Wild: emotion and place in conservation, community formation, and national identity

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyses the documentary series, *Fight for the Wild*, examining how emotional engagements with place facilitate a complex nexus of conservation practices, community formation, and feelings associated with national identity. The documentary charts the progress and challenges of the 'Predator Free 2050' campaign which seeks to eradicate Aotearoa New Zealand of all introduced predators and protect endangered native fauna and flora. The documentary portrays how the campaign is constituted through networks of scientists and conservation workers, community groups, and institutional and political leaders, spanning a diverse geographical spectrum from areas of wilderness to urban environments. The study argues the conservation work portrayed in the documentary, and indeed all environmental activity, derives from emotions generated by an individual's experiential relationships with an environment. Such an argument declares that human assignments of environmental value originate from experiential engagements with an environment, and the accompanying emotional recognition of the affordances of that environment, and that cognitive, social, and representational engagements with environments *follow* such a process. The article's significance derives from a demonstration of how this process of subject formation individually informs and connects the scientific processes of conservation work, local community engagement, and more broadly the invocation of a national identity.

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## Introduction

*Fight for the Wild* is a high-profile, award-winning documentary and podcast series that charts the progress and challenges of the 'predator free 2050' campaign which seeks to eradicate Aotearoa New Zealand of all introduced predators (specifically stoats, rats, and possums) and protect endangered native fauna and flora. The documentary is a four-part series with episodes titled: Loss, Defiance, Battle, and Hope. The series tells the story of the historical introduction of predators to the country and the incredible damage that was done in subsequent years with many birds and other animals now reaching endangered status and at risk of extinction. It presents the Predator Free 2050 campaign as a national

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project intrinsic to the collective identity of 'kiwis' as it also details the widespread conservation work of scientists, environmental advocates, and local communities at different sites across the country as they engage in trapping, native bird protection, and land restoration. The programme blends western scientific and Māori processes and philosophies as it records the challenges and failures, and also the successes and joys, of conservation work in an assessment of the viability of the campaign.

*Fight for the Wild* has received critical acclaim, winning the Natural World Award at the Association of International Broadcasters 2021 Awards, as well as the Best Factual Series and Best Original Score at the 2022 New Zealand TV awards. It is also a highly popular series: the first episode of *Fight for the Wild* has received over 340,000 views on YouTube. The popularity of the series derives from several factors: the high production values, which contribute to a visually and aurally appealing viewing experience; its focus on the important public issue of national biodiversity levels; and New Zealanders' obsession with their indigenous bird life (McClure 2023). News broadcasts on the national broadcaster start with individual native bird calls and the annual Bird of the Year competition garnered over 52,000 votes in 2022, complete with 'campaign teams' for individual birds. *Fight for the Wild* was produced by Fisheye Films and received public funding from the Radio New Zealand (RNZ) RNZ/NZ On Air Innovation Fund. The series also received support from other public and philanthropic bodies. *Fight for the Wild* played on RNZ's video platform and then subsequently on the government-owned commercial television network (TVNZ) in May of 2021. The analysis derives from a study of the television documentary series.

The documentary series presents an evocative representation of the landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand and its unique indigenous bird life, together with a powerful portrayal of the passionate determination of New Zealanders to maintain the existing biodiversity of the nation. There are different features of the documentary series that are worthy of critical investigation, such as the representation of science, the uses of innovative technology, the political economy of conservation work, and audience responses to the series, but the focus here is on the way that individual empirical engagements with specific places and the resulting production of emotions are the foundational experiences which motivate the diverse range of social actors portrayed in the documentary series. The study also makes a connection between such specific instances of emotion production and resulting centrifugal instances of intersubjective, community, regional, and national associations that yield the emotional investment that is necessary for the conservation work. In addition, the study notes how the particular grounded *emotions* which are generated through the conservation work are also informed by an *affect* of regional and national identity which is linked to place and identification with the indigenous fauna and flora.

The study initially outlines the theoretical framework that informs the analysis. The character of wildlife documentaries and the relationship between emotion and reason are briefly discussed before the foundational significance of the connection between emotions and environment is explained. This understanding of a 'sentient ecology' (Ingold 2011, 25) challenges the conventional belief that emotions are independently generated and possessed phenomena and underlines the foundational connection between emotions and environmental contexts, including the affect that resides around a sense of dwelling at a regional and national level. The study then demonstrates how such theoretical understandings elucidate the meanings and communicative significance of *Fight for*

*the Wild*. The analysis provides examples of individual environmental engagement and emotion production, as well as an account of the different kinds of emotions that are expressed throughout the series – ranging from despair and grief through to excitement and joy. The next section reveals how such ‘grounded’ emotional formation is mobilized in the various communities that are represented in the series. The discussion here outlines how the emotional basis of conservation work gives the communities their identity and motivates their activities. The analysis finally investigates how the series, and the campaign it portrays, is fundamentally informed by the invocation of a broader public affect linked to regional and national identification with the native fauna and flora. As such, the structure of the article seeks to demonstrate that both the *Fight for the Wild* series and the Predator Free 2050 campaign work successfully because of the way place-based emotions provide linkages between the specificity of scientific conservation work and the broader societal contexts within which the work occurs.

The methodological basis of the study is a critical reading of the documentary series, **where** a range of cultural and communicative theories – relating to topics such as emotion production and place formation – inform the specific textual analysis. As such, the analysis is a qualitative textual analysis, broadly located in the cultural-critical paradigm where ‘the focus is on how meaning is revealed and experienced, with an emphasis on sense-making, description, and detail’ (Smith 2017). The textual analysis is based upon **four** successive viewings of the series (with many subsequent revisiting of scenes) where foregrounded themes of emotion, community, and national identity were noted. While reference is made to forms of visual images, sound, and narrative, the analysis focuses on the sense-making process of the documentary series where discursive rationales are offered for the motivation and the value of the conservation work. The represented subjects often articulate a sophisticated understanding of such a sense-making process, reflecting astutely on the intersections between science, history, culture, economics, and politics in the task of predator eradication, and in this sense this study aims to elucidate such knowledge and trace it back to the character of foundational environmental experiential and discursive engagement.

### Emotions, environment, and place

This study argues that the conservation work portrayed in the *Fight for the Wild* documentary, and indeed all environmental activity, derives from emotions generated by an individual’s experiential relationships with an environment (Ingold 1992, 2011; Milton 2002). As such, it is posited that human assignments of environmental value originate from experiential engagements with an environment and the accompanying emotional recognition of the affordances of that environment, and that cognitive, social, and representational engagements with environments *follow* such a process. That is, we need to prioritize how we *sense* the world before and as we make sense of it (Ingold 2011, p. xvii). This argument, which is explored and exemplified in this study, has important ramifications for the field of environmental communication **and cultural studies more broadly** where, in accord with humanities and social science verities, there tends to be a privileging of the cognitive and representational frameworks that govern our approach to the study of the environment.

The production of emotions in a wildlife documentary series like *Fight for the Wild* is nonetheless a multi-faceted process and many textual features of the programme facilitate the involvement of the audience and the fostering of an emotional orientation towards the subject. The audience is interpellated frequently throughout the series and attributed with potential agency through the first-person plural mode of address, as in the question: 'Are we going to watch these species disappear or are we going to save them?' The series does not employ an omniscient narrator and instead individuals speak directly to camera, often attributing viewers as national subjects, as in the statement: 'New Zealand is the country in the world with the highest proportion of native species, endemic species, but we're also the country that has the highest proportion of our native species that are at risk of, or threatened with, extinction.' Visually, the series is characterized by spectacular sweeping images of mountain landscapes and wilderness which generate a sense of awe and wonder. Emotional affiliation with the environment has long been established through the sublime (Brady 2013), and wildlife documentaries often exploit the emotionally communicative power of spectacle by conjoining it with the authenticity of factual representation (Scott 2003). In *Fight for the Wild*, the landscape images are employed as establishment footage which usher viewers into scenes where the scientists and environmental researchers go about their business of reading and emotionally responding to the environments and the state of the wildlife.

Wildlife documentaries are recognized as a complex genre where the factual presentation of biological and ecological issues is significantly conjoined with an understanding of the social character of conservation and the emotions and affect that accompany enquiry into the subject (Ainsworth and Burns 2020; Castillo-Huitron et al. 2020; Lockwood 2016). Prioritization of rational arguments by scientists and conservation workers both submerge their own emotional investments in their work and also are at odds with the emotional interest of the public. Successful conservation communication, and environmental communication more broadly, is best served by an 'identity-based' approach which foregrounds the emotional states involved in conservation work, and resulting forms of pro-environmental behaviour arise from the highlighting and mobilization of the positive emotions that informed the engagement of the subject (Lockwood 2016). While there has been increased recognition of the importance of emotions and affect in environmental communication (Milton 2002; Norgaard 2011), the study here outlines the particular way that emotions directly derive from material engagements with environments, with resulting social production of emotions, and it is argued that it is from this theoretical understanding that we can identify and explain the communicative power of *Fight for the Wild*.

In accord with this outlined character of wildlife documentaries, *Fight for the Wild* is both a profoundly emotional text while also foregrounding scientific practices and naturalistic forms of representation which work to highlight a milieu of rationality and, as such, we need to outline the understanding of the relationship between emotion and reason that is deployed here in the analysis. It is a common, everyday perception that emotions are distinct from rationality and that the thought processes essential to the production of sound knowledge are often impeded by the intrusion of emotional concerns. There are different schools of thought regarding the relationship between emotion and rationality (Barbalet 1998) but the understanding which informs this research is the radical approach that sees emotion and rationality as distinct features of a nonetheless singular and continuous evaluative process

(Barbalet 1998). The radical approach maintains that all rational thought is motivated thought that is necessarily guided and informed by emotions and that rationality itself is constituted by a particular emotional orientation.

The analysis of the *Fight for the Wild* series that is offered here is based upon an understanding of the development of the self that prioritizes our direct environmental engagements and perceptions. This is an embodied, sentient process whereby we encounter and pick up information from our immediate surroundings or material environments, which includes interactions with human others. It is from this direct, experiential process that we recognize over time the affordances offered by the environments in which we are immersed and the knowledge we generate is a practical knowledge, grounded in our physical encounters with our surroundings. This understanding of the development of the self represents a fundamental challenge to conventional ideas that are based upon the *a priori* autonomy of humans and their *disengagement* from their environments, with the corresponding belief that we act in the environment only after we have processed the sensory data we have received from our environmental encounters. The understanding of the development of the self which is offered here does not deny the complex infrastructure of knowledge, social structures, cultural practices, and representations that cumulatively arise out of human engagements with nature but it argues that the dominant Cartesian privileging of cognition over action has prevented us from both fully understanding the prior and foundational understanding of how 'persons and environment are mutually constitutive components of the *same world*' (Ingold 1992, 51, author's italics), and also that it has been the means by which humans have been able to render nature as an object, presaging all the tragic environmental consequences that now threaten to overwhelm us. As such, this study is informed more by a philosophical tradition that derives from the ideas of Spinoza, whose work challenges Descartes' assertion of the independence of the mind from the body. For Spinoza, our 'senses cannot give us pure, "objective" knowledge of things outside us, because our experience of external things always involves the "subjective" experience of our own bodies at the same time' (Lord 2010, 66) and the production of reason is importantly generated through engagements with the world and with others.

This outlined framework of the experiential development of the self provides us with the means to understand subsequently the role of emotions in environmental engagement. It is argued that our senses of self are facilitated by our emotions which are foundational, necessary expressions of our responses to our experiential engagement with our environments. That is, emotions are not internalized and independent phenomena but rather they arise from our material interactions with environments. A succinct summary of this argument, and the broader ramifications of such a process, is made by Milton (2002, 100):

As we engage with our environment we perceive meanings in it; this is how it becomes known to us. It is the meanings which give things their value. In other words, we value things by perceiving meanings in them. These meanings become known to us through the emotions they induce, which we then experience as feelings. In other words, meanings literally 'make themselves felt', and in doing so they make themselves known. Thus the process of valuing things in the world is inseparable from the emotions and feelings they induce in us; without these emotions and feelings there would be no value.

Two important conclusions follow from such discussion. Firstly, emotions *are*, fundamentally, environmental phenomena. When we consider issues of the climate emergency, or issues of conservation, or environmentalism more generally, we cannot conceive of emotions as ancillary features, however powerful, of an otherwise rational, systematic approach to the environment. Secondly, emotions, not only arise from, direct, and express our physical relations with our environments but they are also intrinsic to knowledge production. The meanings that we attribute to observable environmental phenomena cannot be disassociated from the emotions and feelings that attribute value to such phenomena. This provides us with a different orientation towards scientific ecological work from the conventional portrayals of conservation scientists as exclusively rational agents, objectively scrutinizing their object of study.

This discussion has outlined the character and formation of emotions, highlighting their physical and environmental foundations, but emotions also share a complex relationship with affect. As Marinelli (2019, 28) notes, a formal distinction between affect and emotion does not occur until the seventeenth century but in more contemporary theory affects are distinguished from emotions by an emphasis on the autonomy of the former and the indebtedness of the latter to physical and social manifestations. Attempts to outline the character of affect prioritize desire in formations of judgements and logic, while also giving affects greater independence from reason and also emphasizing the broader, more structural roles of affect in economies, art and politics, recognizing the ways that the energies and connective capacities of affects facilitate the communicative powers of media technologies, politics, and collective assemblages (Papacharissi 2015). While much discussion of affect has sought to distinguish it as a phenomenon from emotions, the research here identifies their complex co-existence in environmental campaigns. As Papacharissi (2015, 15, author's emphasis) notes, 'Affect precedes emotion and drives the intensity with which emotions are felt. Emotions may be understood as the *consciousness* of affect . . .'. That is, while this analysis focuses on the role of emotions, given they more directly capture and express the physical, experiential states of conservation work, it is also recognized that much of such work derives from an affect that circulates around matters of place, identity and belonging.

There is, then, a complex relationship that exists between emotional orientations and environmental contexts, from the joys of specific conservation work to the pride of broader senses of national identity. As outlined in the account of sentient ecology, and as we will see in the subsequent analysis of *Fight for the Wild*, it is the different engagements with places, and scales of place that yield a related range of emotional responses. Places are, of course, integral to identity formation and the production of the cultures we inhabit, to the extent that Escobar (2001, 143) can declare that: 'We are, in short, placelings.' The importance of place is only exacerbated in responses to processes of globalization that yield increasing processes of deterritorialization and spatial homogenization although we should also be cognizant that all places, even 'traditional' local places, are always defined through ongoing negotiations of spatial and temporal contexts and that places are experienced differently by different people (Massey 1994). That said, the process of dwelling in places does often generate powerful emotional dispositions and the resulting explicit linkage between human and environmental welfare that arises from such an observation is captured, for example, in the concept of bioregionalism. As Berg (1991, 6) states, a bioregion 'refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness – to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in



that place.’ Informed by a range of ecological, anthropological and spiritual impulses, bio-regionalism is a counter to modernist conceptualizations of places as ‘containers’ of space that are often ‘arbitrarily’ delineated through the establishment of borders (Young and Young 2000). As Terence Young (Young and Young 2000, 47) declares, bio-regionalism understands regions as cultural and ecological phenomena: ‘as “home” – the “lived-in-place” that nurtures, shapes order, provides meaning, and grounds identity – and ecosystem, the biological basis to life.’

### Emotions in *Fight for the Wild*

The sketching of the theoretical territory of emotions, environment, and place provides us with the means to elucidate the complex production and articulation of emotions that occur across the episodes of *Fight for the Wild* as they are deployed across different but related environmental contexts, spanning the immediate ground upon which people work, the local communities and communities of conservation work, the represented regions across the country, and the nation of Aotearoa New Zealand. Initially, we can note the way that emotion works *in conjunction* with reason throughout the series and this is reflected in the possible readings of the series title where ‘Fight’ is both a straightforward description of the conservation work that is occurring and also a provocation, a call for action that is based upon a passion, an emotional investment. The opening statement of the series – ‘What actually defines New Zealand is this amazing biodiversity that is found nowhere else in the world’ – encapsulates the way naturalistic scientific inquiry is fundamentally motivated and driven by an emotional ‘interest’ and engagement and sense of wonder. While the analysis here focuses on the relationship between emotion and place, we should not glide too easily over the significance of this conjunction of reason and emotion. As the field of environmental communication grapples with the significance of emotional responses to the climate and biodiversity emergencies we see here evidence of the way that emotions cannot be considered a supporting or subsidiary feature of such responses but rather necessarily *constitutive* features of our human engagement with our surrounding world.

The outlined sentient ecology and emotional production from human and environmental engagement, with accompanying subsequent knowledge generation, occurs frequently throughout the series, and is articulated by a number of represented subjects, both Māori and Pākehā (non-Māori person, usually of European descent). The series opens with a kiwi researcher from the Department of Conservation walking through remote mountain countryside with a tracking device. Coming upon a kiwi burrow, he expresses initial confusion, then surprise, and finally happiness, as he learns that a pair of adult kiwi had ‘adopted’ a chick. ‘Well, that’s something I didn’t know happened,’ says ranger Tim Raemaekers. ‘It is bizarre. I think that their chick has been killed and this one has wandered into their territory and they found each other, which is pretty cute really.’ In addition, *Fight for the Wild* also portrays how mātauranga (Māori knowledge), through engagements with flora and fauna, expresses a sentient ecology. Dr Ihirangi Heke, a Māori health consultant, states in the first episode that: ‘If we lose biodiversity we lose language and traditional environmental knowledge that’s connected to that plant or that animal. We lose all of the messages that we’re supposed to pick up about how to conduct ourselves as humans.’ In the second



episode, viewers are introduced to a predator-free zone, named Zealandia, which has been established over thirty years, in the urban contexts of the capital city, Wellington. The programme introduces the zone with slow motion footage, overlaid with evocative music, showing people walking through the bird sanctuary with cutaways of indigenous birds, such as tūi and tīeke (saddlebacks). Zealandia Te Māra a Tāne chief executive Paul Atkins says about the zone: 'What this place has enabled is that idea of the proof of concept. Rather than me talking to you conceptually, about well imagine what we could achieve if we did this, I can simply bring you here and say look this is what it feels like, listen to it, come and have a look.'

Throughout the *Fight for the Wild* series there are multitude expressions of different emotions that derive from engagements with place, and the conservation work associated with particular environments. There is a substantive emotional narrative arc to *Fight for the Wild* that is captured in the titles of the episodes, spanning the movement from historical 'Loss' to future 'Hope', and it is the diversity of emotions, from grief and hatred through to joy and happiness, that cumulatively yield a sense of the value of the represented biodiversity and the mahi (work) of those who engage with that biodiversity. Sadness and grief are frequently expressed throughout the series, not least through a number of instances where wildlife rangers come across the remains of birds that have been killed by predators, leaving tracking devices clinging to carcasses. In the second episode, a couple who have been involved a project trying to save the mountain parrot, the kea, express sadness after discovering recent losses of chicks: 'I guess we just love the idea of kea flying around our mountains. All those trips in the past that we've done in the hills where the kea visited us and enriched our world and the hills and the mountains. Yer. Part of our being really.' The expression of emotions in *Fight for the Wild* cannot be simply demarcated as different experiences of 'negative' and 'positive' emotions but there is rather often a composite of emotions that can derive from the complex experience of killing some animals in order to save others. In the third episode, a Stewart Island local resident Jessica Kany talks of her experiences with a rat-trapping project, outlining her excitement about the work, and laughs as she explains her hatred for the vermin: 'Yeah, it is good to catch those rats. I hate them. I actually, really, really loathe them.' The emotional value of the *Fight for the Wild* series does though chiefly reside in the final generation of positive emotions of hope and optimism, happiness and joy, that motivate and express the successful realization of the *fight* that is at the 'heart' of the series. These positive emotions are conveyed across a variety of encounters, from the political or 'bureaucratic' to the more direct successful act of conservation. The former is captured, for example, in a scene that shows the then Conservation Minister announcing a funding project at a local marae (Māori meeting place) after a four-year campaign to get government support. After the ceremony, environmental advocate Tina Ngata says: 'Feeling overjoyed and you know that kind of tiredness you get after a long marathon. And so really happy. It's been a long road to get us here.' The latter expression of positive emotions is powerfully conveyed, for example, in a scene where Ngāi Tahu (South Island iwi [Māori social unit or tribe]) Species Recovery Representative Yvette Couch-Lewis is simply overcome with emotion when some Orange-Fronted Parakeets from a breeding programme in Christchurch are released back into their traditional habitats.

As the preceding discussion illustrates, emotions in *Fight for the Wild* are significantly generated through human engagement with other species, most notably birds. The human

engagement with environments, as outlined in the sentient ecology approach, also includes other species that inhabit experienced environments. Indeed, it is the shared habitation of humans and birds in the same place of Aotearoa New Zealand that is the basis for emotional engagement with the wildlife and the affective investment in the conservation work of Predator Free 2050 project. In one scene where schoolchildren are quizzed by conservation workers about why such birds should be protected one young girl replies: 'Because they were part of New Zealand and we want to keep them part of New Zealand.' The emotional engagement between humans and birds in *Fight for the Wild* is lent legitimacy and rendered authentic partly through its representation in a *documentary*, a genre that prioritizes factuality. Documentaries can have a problematic relationship with reality, not least in a 'post-truth society' (Eitzen 2018), and wildlife documentaries have been criticized for anthropomorphic projections, although as Alex Weik von Mossner (2018, 170) has noted, 'trans-species empathy allows us to see that we do not necessarily have to project human qualities onto nonhuman creatures in order to feel for them; we are biologically equipped to automatically feel – across species lines – with and for the (non-anthropomorphized) animals we encounter in real life and in cultural texts.'

As such, the series seeks, through visual and aural means, to convey the experiential engagement with nature that is at the heart of the sentient ecology approach. The described scenes and moments underscore how emotions are often materially based or sensory phenomena. Expressions of interest and burgeoning excitement, for example, derive from material engagements with the world and with others. Izard (1977, 216) writes interest 'is the feeling of being engaged, caught-up, fascinated, curious. There is a feeling of wanting to investigate, become involved.' Tomkins (1995, 76) goes so far as to argue that interest and excitement pre-empt even the more elemental human drive system. Equally though, the sentient ecology approach has a temporal element which derives from our recognition of the affordances of environments from our prior engagements with those environments which, in turn, inform future actions. Negative emotions, such as fear, may limit future actions while a positive emotion, such as hope, compels us into the future, animating beliefs of potentiality that motivate the becoming of ourselves and our environments.

### Emotion production at the community level

The outlined sentient ecology and process of emotion production refers to our interactions with physical environments and also to our embodied engagements with other humans through which we are shown patterns of behaviour. As such, sentient ecology and the process of emotion production is also foundational to collective formations and expressions of community. While we can note that communities can sometimes be sites of dominance and involve exploitation of other places and resources (Young 1990), the represented conservation communities in *Fight for the Wild* express the ideals of community, such as a commitment to a locale, shared belief systems, and relations of trust. The episodes do represent communities that have varying degrees of solidarity – some groups of people speak of working together over years while other larger groups seem to have collected for specific occasions of conservation work – but nonetheless it is the common engagement with a specific place that generates community formation.

Scattered throughout the episodes of *Fight for the Wild* are representations of a diversity of communities – local, Māori, and institutionally based communities, such as school groups. The processes of community formation not only enable the conservation work of the Predator Free 2050 campaign but throughout the series there are observations that there are health and well-being benefits that arise from such community interactions with nature. In episode two, Jan Hania, Environmental Director of the NEXT foundation, declares: ‘Not only are we restoring the ecology, we’re looking to restore people and communities in that process.’ Equally, of course, within these communities there is a diversity of different types of people who nonetheless are united through their common participation in communities of conservation. In episode two, Paul Ward talks about the group of ‘protectors’ who look after the Polhill Reserve, which is a ‘spillover’ native bird reserve from the nearby Zealandia reserve in Wellington. Ward speaks of the kind of people who participate in the Polhill conservation work: ‘I’m one of the Polhill protectors. It’s a group of kids, grannies, mountain bikers, runners, mountain biking grannies. Community members who are looking after a 70 hectare chunk of their backyard.’ Ward, in turn, speaks of other adjacent suburban communities of conservation that are springing up due to the amplification of the success of Zealandia, and the series also highlights other campaign work across the city of Wellington, highlighting how successful community formation facilitates the broader emergence of conservation as a social phenomenon. That is, there is an explicit centrifugal spread of conservation work, animated by emotional energy and demonstrated successes.

One example of the complexity of community involvement is represented in an extended segment about the Taranaki Mouna Project, which is centred around Mount Taranaki. The segment demonstrates how community affiliation and a sense of belonging to place are manifested in the emotions and affect which arise out of a complex mix of different forms of collective work. The segment initially outlines the policy framework which has enabled the community project as the project developer describes years of negotiations and planning between the local council, the Department of Conservation, local iwi, and the people of Taranaki. The segment shows school students accompanying community volunteers into the bush to learn the technical skill of setting traps while the programme discourse invokes the wāhi tapu, or sacredness of the place. Over fifty schools in the region are involved in the project and the segment also outlines project staff visiting a local school where students are making traps. The pedagogy of the class is enabled by expressions of sadness about wildlife loss, enthusiastic encouragement by the teachers about the student work, and student declarations of desire to save the wildlife. Such emotional discourse motivates the physical work of the making of the traps, and the shared affect of the class is accompanied by individual emotional investments as students name and paint their own traps. As such, the segment exemplifies a sentient ecology where emotions and understanding are generated through the process of engaging with an environment that includes not only the natural world but other individuals who also inhabit that environment, and also illustrates how such a foundational process is the motivation and basis for the delineation of a community identity and infrastructure that is required in order to implement the scope of the predator free project.

The manifestation of conservation work through communities enables the creation of an optimal sense of scale that gives sufficient significance to the work while also managing concerns and fears about the larger scope of the project. Marguerite Vanderkolk, a volunteer at the Tāwharanui Open Sanctuary north of Auckland, explains: 'When we think about what we're trying to achieve in terms of being predator free by 2050 it seems overwhelming, especially when you look at the incredible amounts of possums, stoats, rats. It's just horrendous but I think, for everybody to go, if I can just plant one tree in the back garden or if I can become a member of an organization like Tāwharanui Open Sanctuary, that little contribution becomes part of a bigger success story, and then it just becomes less overwhelming and it's more achievable.'

Conservation, in this sense, is not an atomistic scientific practice, deracinated from broader public contexts. Conservation is always a grounded practice but there is also a complex layering of the constitution of place that occurs through conservation: it is place-specific relating to species and habitats, but it is also animated through the local communities with which it engages (as well as broader national and sometimes transnational publics). *Fight for the Wild* represents and articulates how the science of the conservation work is centrally dependent not simply on public mobilization but more specifically upon a community involvement that derives from emotional identification with place. As Predator Free 2050 Ltd CEO Abbie Reynolds states: 'It's really important that these projects start from the ground up. So much of our connection to this mission is about the place we belong to. And so for communities to feel like they can actually get together and work in service to the species that we all love is really powerful.'

*Fight for the Wild* reveals the centrality of community work to the national conservation project. Jessi Morgan, Chief Executive of the Predator Free New Zealand Trust declares in episode three that: 'Community conservation has really become the backbone of conservation in New Zealand.' The centrality of the community involvement, in turn, provides a moral and social legitimation of the conservation work. James Russell, from the University of Auckland states in episode four that: 'The thing that we've seen since then, which has been by far the most humbling, has been the huge community uptake. It is not going to be possible unless we have people on board with us, unless we have the social licence to do the work. We can develop as many new technologies as possible, but the most important thing is having the community come with us on the journey.' While *Fight for the Wild* does not underplay the scale of the ongoing struggle to implement the goals of the Predator Free 2050 campaign, it also notes the social energy that has been unleashed through the project. In episode three, titled Battle, Lou Sanson, the Director General of the Department of Conservation goes so far as to state that: 'For many predator free no longer is about the outcome. It's about a social movement, of me belonging to a community to achieve an outcome.' This observation, in turn, prompts us to consider more deeply the emotion connected to the regions and nation of Aotearoa New Zealand that drives the project of the Predator Free 2050 campaign.

### Emotion production at the regional and national level

The complexity of the process of emotion formation through engagement with place derives from both the specificity of interactions with particular grounded environments, and associated flora and fauna, and also the engagement with places as regional and

national places. That is, the emotions that are generated through recognition of the uniqueness of places inform not only development of individual selves but the development of broader forms of identification, as a people, and through a national identity. *Fight for the Wild* evocatively represents the nation of Aotearoa New Zealand and this representation takes many forms: the opening credits show a map of the country overlaid with stirring music; there is dramatic footage of the natural landscape, the mountains and forests and wild coasts, as well as the delightful soundscapes of indigenous bird life; and there are also powerful portrayals of human involvement in the environment as helicopters navigate narrow alpine valleys so that conservation officers can relocate endangered birds to habitats they graced in previous decades, and swathes of people work on denuded hillsides planting out native seedlings in bush restoration.

It has long been noted that the 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991; see also Thompson 1995) of nations arise through common access of forms of media and consumption of representations, and the strong invocation of a national identity in *Fight for the Wild* is facilitated through its broadcast to a national public by a national public broadcaster. A national identity is constructed partly but powerfully through a concatenation of narratives, myths, and other cultural tropes (Giddens 1985; Schlesinger 1991; Turner 1994), and the strong symbolic value of Aotearoa New Zealand's fauna and flora is regularly invoked across the series. Indeed, the final comment in the closing episode states: 'They [birds and animals] are us. They are the animals that give us our identity. When you hear a tūi with its two voice-boxes singing in your backyard, you get why our Tui music awards are called the Tui's, when you pick up a log in your backyard and you've got a big ugly wētā staring up at you, you get why our film effects company is called Weta Effects, and yer, fundamentally we are kiwis, you know. So, I think it's about looking after who we are.'

Emotional identification with place in *Fight for the Wild* occurs across a graduated scale, from local communities, to regions, and finally to the nation. Across the four episodes, the series portrays a number of regional case studies where different groups of people are engaged in pest eradication and environmental restoration. The distinctiveness of this regional work nonetheless works to cumulatively portray the scale and singularity of the national project. The regions as places are variously represented across the series. Sometimes regions are scientifically identified through physical geography, as when the rivers of the Perth valley on the South Island are identified as 'natural' borders that can help facilitate larger scale pest eradication projects. In other instances, regions are understood and portrayed in a way captured by the bioregional understanding of regions as ecological and cultural phenomena, linked intrinsically to identity and belonging. This understanding is evocatively captured by Iwi representative Hemi Sundgren who speaks of the personhood of the mountain that defines the Taranaki region: 'Right from the start we've sought to ensure that our maunga (mountain) is seen as a person . . . We're intimately connected through whakapapa (genealogy). We're intimately connected through our connection to place and so that's why we've sought to place him at the centre of the things that we do here.' These different philosophical approaches to place are nonetheless harmoniously incorporated within the series and it is suggested that it is the emotional investment of fighting for the wild that facilitates the presentation of such a unity of purpose.

In addition, the production of grounded emotions is supplemented with an emotional energy, or affect, that drives the national task of predator eradication. Emotions and affect associated with national identity are foregrounded in *Fight for the Wild* quite simply

because the Predator Free 2050 campaign is a national campaign but it is the size and scope of the task and the promise it offers that provokes a range of emotions. The episodes outline the extent of the devastation and the impact there has been on the ecological fabric of the country, with expressions of grief, regret and despair, along with acknowledgements that the general public had not realized until recently how much of the nation's bird and animal life had been lost. It is here that the temporality of emotions informs and highlights a sense of the nation as a *temporal* phenomenon as the series charts the journey from the historical context of the conservation tragedy through to the hope that the following generations will still be able to enjoy the country's fauna and flora. A predominant feature of *Fight for the Wild* is an emotional energy, or affect, that is associated with the national Predator Free campaign described as 'one of the most exciting things we've ever embarked on in this country.' In the second episode a television presenter intones: 'It is a plan so audacious in scope it has been called New Zealand's Apollo project' and Abbie Reynolds, Chief Executive Officer of Predator Free 2050, says: 'We can't afford to be any less ambitious than trying to be predator free by 2050. It is one of the most important things that we will do together as New Zealanders.' The passion and will that is invested in this ambition has more autonomy than the specifically grounded emotions that are generated throughout the series but they are nonetheless connected, despite the fact that emotions and affect are often conceptualized as distinct entities (Massumi 2002). As Boler and Davis (2018, 81, authors' italics) assert: 'affect references emotional, felt, sensed interactions and states. It is not some mysterious substance *other than* those emotions, feelings, senses, and states.' It is the generation of this excitement, or passion, which enables the *fight* in *Fight for the Wild*, and it is suggested that this observation has significance not only for this individual documentary series but also for environmental action more generally, where there is an urgent requirement to combat the negative emotions linked to the climate and biodiversity emergencies and motivate individuals, communities, and nations into action.

The theme of conservation in *Fight for the Wild* facilitates the singularity and unity of the represented national identity, even though there are some expressions of contestation across the series. Practices of conservation, and action on climate change more broadly, can be problematic when linked with expressions of national identity, particularly in postcolonial contexts (see Potter 2013, for example). Across a range of environmental issues pertinent to the climate emergency in Aotearoa New Zealand there is significant political struggle, not least regarding the economic dominance of the nation's farming industry and its historical exclusion from emission reductions legislation. In contrast, the campaign to save native fauna is less controversial, more accepted across the broad sweep of public opinion, and the kiwi, kererū, and kākā already possess a cultural value that is integral to the country's sense of itself, as opposed to the dominant reality of ubiquitous, crowded paddocks of dairy cows. The process of conservation, and accompanying emotional connection to place, is expressed across the series by a variety of individuals – politicians, children, scientists, activists, volunteers, media commentators – and there is an explicit co-existence of western scientific methods and Māori expressions of *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship, including environmental guardianship). The unified process of conservation work is, though, occasionally contested, or at least problematized, as Hania tells in his response to the use of 1080 poison, and its aerial dispersal: 'The use of 1080 in a *kaitiaki* (person or group carer or guardian) sense is difficult. It is a conflict. At the end of the day, it's a poison. However, most of the conversations I have had

with the Māori leaders in the projects that we operate in are very pragmatic and it boils down to, are we going to watch these species disappear or are we going to save them? So kaitiakitanga has a role in caring for and preserving biodiversity. And if that's the best tool at the moment to do it, that's the only tool we've got at scale, then that's what we must do.'

## Conclusion

Through an analysis of the documentary series, *Fight for the Wild*, this study has sought to show both how emotions are grounded in material engagements with the places of particular environments, and also how those processes of emotion production facilitate a centrifugal spread of social networks that connect scientific conservation work with local communities and a regional and national population. The study has indicated how rationality and emotions are intertwined in conservation work with emotions intrinsic to knowledge production, and more extensively the study has argued that emotions are not singularly or exclusively humanly possessed attributes but rather phenomena that fundamentally arise from our openness to the places of our environments. This process provides the drama of *Fight for the Wild* and it is suggestive for our more general understandings of the motivations and meanings of environmental behaviour. The study has demonstrated that this process of emotion formation arises not only at the level of individual engagements with specific natural environments but that it includes accompanying intersubjective relations. The collective production and expression of emotions from environmental engagement initiates and animates the communities that are portrayed in *Fight for the Wild* and it has been argued that local communities facilitate an optimal scale for the emotional work of environmental activity: creating solidarity, managing negative feelings about being overwhelmed or ineffective, while generating positive emotions from significant outcomes beyond the individual. In turn, the study has also discussed how national identity contributes to the emotional meanings of *Fight for the Wild*, giving a broader form of emotional identification where the grounded work of conservation is allied with, and sustained by, invocation of a national symbolic significance, embodied most obviously in 'kiwi' people saving 'kiwi' animals. In addition, it has been noted that there is an emotional energy, or affect, that circulates around *Fight for the Wild*, and the national Predator Free 2050 campaign the series portrays, and this more diffuse manifestation of excitement is also an integral part of the emotional landscape of *Fight for the Wild*.

This study has prioritized reflection upon the discourses of the represented subjects and sought to demonstrate the broader conceptual significance of the relationship between place and emotion in the successful unfolding of the national conservation project and future work that might further explore this process could focus more on how such grounded emotions are visually and aurally represented. There is a complex relationship between grounded actions that generate emotions and emotional connections and the *representation* of those actions, but this study has sought to prioritize, through an analysis of a documentary series, how emotions are fundamentally environmental phenomena and the way such emotions resonate through social formations. Such a process of emotion production is not the preserve of only privileged represented subjects in particularly evocative wilderness landscapes but it is a generalized process, and future research could explore audience recognition of such a process in different kinds of texts that variously explore different kinds of emotion production.



What arises from the analysis is the way these theoretical conclusions about emotion formation and their cultural distribution are enabled by the documentary form. *Fight for the Wild* provides a diversity of representations and narrative structure that visualize the manner of the expression of emotions and their dispersal across the nation. The documentary form also enables the collective articulation of a national discourse of conservation that is animated by a broad range of subjects, from schoolchildren to government ministers. The production and circulation of discourses is partly facilitated by the fact the subject of the documentary series is not a problematic or highly contested issue and also that the speakers are able to speak eloquently about the importance of the conservation work in addition to simple descriptions of the process.

This article is limited to the study of a single documentary series but it is hoped that it indicates the importance of ongoing investigations into the roles of emotion, and associated issues of identity and belonging, in the management and resolution of environmental crises. The challenges of the climate and biodiversity emergencies are profoundly expressed through *our* challenges dealing with complex and conflicting manifestations of rationality and emotion in response to the emergencies, and also profoundly through different engagements with the varying scales of the emergencies. This study points to the fundamental significance of our grounded emotional connections with places, and those who share those places with us, and it reveals how those personal and intimate connections can be amplified in the broader task of environmental restoration.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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