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"The upland seal" of the Antipodes and Macquarie Islands: a historian's perspective

Rhys Richards*

Several zoologists have used historical material to postulate that a distinct species of seal, identified only as the "upland seal", once inhabited the Antipodes and Macquarie Islands, but is now extinct. On closer examination that conclusion seems unsustainable. However, when taken with the recent conclusions of Taylor (1992), the historical evidence may help provide an explanation of why the total seal stocks on the Antipodes, and elsewhere in the wider New Zealand region, are taking at least two centuries, or more, to recover their former numbers.

Keywords: *Arctocephalus forsteri*, Upland Seal, sealing history, Antipodes Islands, Macquarie Island, population recovery.

THE "EVIDENCE" OF "UPLAND SEALS" RE-EXAMINED

The original references

Several zoologists have used historical material to postulate that a distinct species of seal, an "upland seal", once inhabited the Antipodes and Macquarie Islands, but is now extinct (e.g. Falla 1948: 151; Csordas and Ingham 1965: 83–99; Shaughnessy and Fletcher 1987: 181). However, there is no supporting evidence of a sub-antarctic "upland seal" species in any of the main contemporary works on sealing, such as Scammon (1874) and Clarke (1882), nor in subsequent reviews of the history of sealing in this region such as McNab (1907), Cumpston (1968, 1980), Hainsworth (1972), Richards (1982) and Busch (1985).

Indeed, all references to "upland seals" made by zoologists within the past half century seem to be traceable back to a statement by Falla : "The fur seals that once made the islands famous, have not been reported in the last hundred years. If they are in fact quite gone, then the Antipodes and Macquarie Islands are in this respect unique among the traditional sealing grounds. It may be significant that these two islands had a reputation amongst early sealers as haunts of a valuable "upland seal." It was never otherwise identified but may well have been a species more valuable than *Arctocephalus forsteri* which has survived elsewhere." (Falla 1948: 151). Falla repeated this suggestion twice, but with no further evidence (Falla 1962: 36; 1965: 67).

Falla's suggestion seems to be traceable to a single reference : Hamilton (1843) translated into English a statement by the French naturalist R.-P. Lesson (1828) as follows : "The Americans regard many seals as fur seals, which are unknown to [contemporary] naturalists, and are quite distinct. Thus, according to them, the fur seal of Patagonia has a bump behind its head; that of California is of very large dimensions; the Upland Seal, or that which retreats far from shore, is small and exclusively inhabits the Macquarie Islands and Penantipodes; and finally, that of the south of New Zealand seems to have other and distinct characters." (Hamilton 1843: 94).

The translation is essentially correct except that Lesson did not write "retreats from the

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shore", but rather referred to "the Upland Seal, or seal of the high ground." (Lesson 1828: 411).

However no further theories should be built on this single source until its validity has been questioned rigorously. Lesson mentioned several mythical seals that do not exist, but the seals of Patagonia (*Arctocephalus australis*) do have a "bump" high on their heads, and the North American fur seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*), that once came as far south as California, are larger than the other seals Lesson described, so his third claim should not be dismissed without serious consideration. It is questionable however whether Lesson was in a position to know what species of seal had been taken at the Antipodes and Macquarie islands.

Lesson's knowledge of sealing

No French vessels are known to have participated in sealing at either the Antipodes or Macquarie Island, and if any individual Frenchmen were involved in the British, Australian and American sealing there, they were not prominent.

René-Primevere Lesson was "Pharmacien 2eme classe" on the French naval corvette *Coquille* under Captain Duperrey on a world tour of scientific discovery from 1822 to 1825. He was also a keen naturalist and a taxonomist who was collecting information for a global classification of all seal species. This pioneer work, perhaps the first of its kind, was published in 1828. No doubt this study was prompted in part by belated commercial interest in Europe in the sealing bonanza which had followed the discovery of the "New South Shetlands Islands" in the Antarctic in 1819. During his cruise with Duperrey, Lesson was assisted by an ensign, Jules-Alphonse-René Poret de Blosseville.

Duperrey sailed to the Falkland Islands, rounded Cape Horn and spent some time on the Chilean coast before sailing, via Tahiti, to the East Indies. From there he went to the west and south, round Australia to Port Jackson and Sydney, where he rested his crew from 18 January to 19 March 1824. Next they visited New Zealand, lying at the Bay of Islands from 3 to 17 April before departing for France, where they arrived in March 1825.

Well before they reached Sydney, the crew of the *Coquille* had already encountered seals at the Falkland Islands, at Chile and Peru and in Western Australia. In Sydney they also met several sealers, including some who had been involved in the recent sealing bonanza, and the consequent rapid extermination of the seals in only three short "summer" seasons, at the newly discovered "New South Shetland Islands". In Port Jackson the *Coquille* lay for three weeks near the Enderby whaler *Rambler* under Captain George Powell who, while searching for new Antarctic seal rookeries, had discovered the South Orkney Islands only two years earlier (Lesson 1838: 185; Bertrand 1971; 127; Jones 1983).

Also in port at Sydney were several Australian sealing captains who had joined the short-lived rush to the South Shetlands, and who, on their return home, had begun to re-examine some of the old haunts of the seals killed on the Australian and New Zealand coasts between 1792 and 1809. It was almost twenty years since Sydney had been an important sealing base, but Lesson's fellow naturalist, de Blosseville, met several sealers who recalled the southern fishery (McNab 1907: 211–228). "Captains Edwardson and Charleton and other English seamen" gave him a considerable quantity of information, some second hand but accurate, about sealing twenty years earlier in southern New Zealand. Indeed, most of our limited knowledge of Fiordland and Foveaux Strait before the 1820s, including the first coastal descriptions since the explorers, and the first descriptions of the Murihiku Maori, comes through de Blosseville (McNab 1907: 211–228). These captains and crews also shared with de Blosseville information from several voyages made during the past year or so to investigate whether some sealing could be revived on those southern coasts.

It was de Blosseville who noted so aptly: "How powerful must be the love of gain when it can induce men to support the fatigues and privations which fall to the lot of the seal fishers!" (McNab 1907: 220).

Later, while at the Bay of Islands, de Blosseville wrote prophetically in his personal diary: "Besides providing excellent ports of call, New Zealand offers brilliant possibilities for the

sealing trade. Fur seals are very numerous on her coasts and in her bays, and if the ardour of the English sealers does not cool, the species will be very noticeably reduced in a very few years because, if there are no unknown lands in these parts, they will find no refuge here, pursued as they are even into the highest latitudes. Some seal hunters hunt all species of seal, taking the oil and the skins; others content themselves with fur seals, whose skins fetch a good price in China. The hunting season begins in November and lasts until July. This period is called the Three Seasons. The furs must be stripped of the long hard hairs, which fall out easily when steamed over boiling water. Sometimes they are preserved whole, otherwise they are cut into strips which takes nothing off their price in England. The leather is good for nothing and cannot be worked. Hair seals, on the other hand, are sought after solely for their hard, thick skins, which have a variety of uses. Seal oil is worth less than whale oil. The skin of the fur seal sells for 3 piastres in America and 3¼ piastres in China, where it is particularly used in making clothes for the mandarins" (Olliver 1990: 169).

But curiously, despite his meticulous report on sealing on the southern coasts of New Zealand, de Blosseville did not mention at all the Antipodes and Macquarie Islands which had formerly been by far the most important sealing grounds. This may be only a simple omission, or perhaps de Blosseville intended to write more later, but he died while exploring the east coast of Greenland in 1834. Equally well though, this surprising omission could be a sign that in fact both de Blosseville and Lesson knew very little about those islands and their so-called "Upland Seals".

Certainly any information Lesson had about sealing on the Antipodes nearly twenty years earlier, would have been second hand. Moreover, Lesson's only mention of "upland seal" is not very explicit, and contrasts with the close attention to detail in de Blosseville's comments.

Furthermore, Lesson attributed the special information he recorded about the seals formerly on the Antipodes not to Sydney sources, but to Americans. Yet nothing else suggests that Lesson or de Blosseville met any American sealers. Only one American sealing vessel was recorded in New Zealand waters between 1807 and Lesson's visit to Sydney in April 1824. This was the *Henry* of New York, which arrived home in April 1824 with a good cargo of 13,000 sealskins, taken during 1823, "from the Auckland and surrounding islands" (*Commercial Advertiser* (New York) 12 April 1824). With uncharacteristic accuracy, Morrell, a contemporary American sealer, reported that these were judged "as good fur seals as were ever brought to the New York market" (Morrell 1832: 363; Richards 1982: 32).

It is possible that some of these 13,000 skins could have come from a minor recovery of seals at the Antipodes. But if Lesson had learned of this American success during his visit to Sydney, the already eager Sydney sealers would have known of it too, yet they did not send expeditions beyond the southern coasts of New Zealand to re-examine the Antipodes and other subantarctic islands for themselves. Such rich discoveries had never before remained secret for long among the Australian sealers, and there are no other hints that they learned anything about the sealing of the *Henry* in 1823 until many years later.

In short, on close examination, Lesson cannot be regarded as a knowledgeable source about American sealing at the Antipodes, neither around the time of his visit to Sydney in 1824, nor during the much earlier bonanza there.

THE SEALING BONANZA AT THE ANTIPODES FROM 1804 TO 1809

In fact, a substantial body of information survives about the short-lived sealing bonanza on the Antipodes (Cumpston 1968: 103–115; Hainsworth 1972; Ross 1987: 23–47). This bleak, desolate and inhospitable group, which has a main island no more than 8.3 km long plus only four small rocky islets, was first seen in March 1800 by Captain Waterhouse in *HMS Reliance*. His discovery, and that some seals had been sighted on the shore, was known to some Sydney merchants, including George Bass, by January 1803; but the first sealing gang, consisting of twelve American sealers, was not landed there until June 1804 when Captain Pendleton in the *Union* re-discovered the Antipodes independently (Fanning 1833: 314–329; McNab 1907: 74). Two other American sealing vessels, sailing via Sydney, the *Independence*

and the *Favorite*, relieved those sealing pioneers in July 1805. The first Sydney sealers to arrive there were gangs landed from the *Venus* in November 1805 and the *Star* in March 1806, while another American captain, in the British South Seas whaler *Aurora*, called there for skins in July or August 1806. Sealing gangs were left on shore to exploit the rookeries until their vessels returned.

Such was the rush to exploit this new sealing ground that by February 1806 at least seven vessels had visited the Antipodes, some several times. After only two years, Governor King complained to London about the American interlopers thus : "Some of whom, under cover of procuring seals and oil about the coasts of this colony, have by the agency of American vessels, and in defiance of Colonial Regulations on that subject, taken a number of people off the islands of Bass's Strait and carried them to a smaller group of islands being considerably without the limits of this territory, where upwards of 80 people are on those islets, the largest is a bare rock and not six miles round, where seals resort in great numbers. In the course of two years, upwards of 160,000 skins have been taken on those islands" (Historical Records of Australia I: 5: 55). A marginal note gives the position of these islands as that of the Antipodes (Richards 1982: 9).

It is well known that the *Favorite* arrived at Sydney on 10 March 1806 with at least 60,000 sealskins from the Antipodes, described as "a special parcel of very superior quality", and that she then delivered to China over 87,000 sealskins (Sydney Gazette 16 March 1806; McNab 1907: 90; Howard 1940: 334). What is less well known is that several other vessels also took away huge cargoes. The *Commerce* arrived at Sydney on 9 April 1807 "from the Penantipodes where she received on board 39,000 cured skins for the London market" (Sydney Gazette 12 April 1807). Sherrin stated that one vessel, which he thought was the *Pegasus*, took home from the Antipodes, in bulk, 100,000 imperfectly cured skins, but "on her arrival in London, the skins having heated during the voyage, they had to be dug out of the hold and were sold as manure – a sad and reckless waste of life" (Sherrin 1886: 233). Several vessels left Sydney for London and collected unknown quantities of skins at the Antipodes while en route home, so the total can only be guessed at, while other vessels whose cargoes are known, may well have collected skins from secondary gangs left elsewhere to devastate other seal colonies on the southern islands and on the coasts of New Zealand.

The late John Cumpston made some very careful, conservative estimates of *minimum* totals killed as follows : some 38,000 skins taken from the neighbouring Bounty Islands in 1807, their first year; at least 160,000 from Macquarie Island between 1810 and 1813; and at least 250,000 from the Antipodes in the five seasons from 1804 to 1809 (Richards 1982: 3). Since these figures are based on skins shipped on board or sold, and did not count the many skins that were spoilt in drying or in shipping, the actual number of seals killed was *certainly* considerably higher.

The decline in the "trade" was very abrupt. The *Topaz* of Boston met two sealing gangs on the Antipodes on 17 December 1807, one of which had taken "only" 4,000 skins in four months (Richards 1982: 13). Over 15 months to July 1808 the cargoes of the *Commerce* fell in three voyages from 39,000 to 3,000. After 1810, cargoes of over 3,000 sealskins collected anywhere in the New Zealand region, or from several localities on one voyage, were the exception rather than the rule.

An equally important element in the abrupt cessation of the trade was the collapse of the markets for sealskins and, consequently, of the sealing merchants in Sydney. Before 1805, dried (and therefore highly perishable) sealskins sold well at Canton and Macao, though not with consistently high prices. But after 1807 the China markets were so flooded with 3 1/2 million sealskins from Masafuera, plus more from South America, that the sealing trade became "scarcely worth following" (Morrell 1832: 130; Busch 1985: 36). Around this time an alternative market began to develop in London, so that for a short period from 1805 to 1808, good prices were available for carefully salted skins in good condition. But in 1809 too many skins were added to an already sluggish market, and at the same time there was a disastrous collapse of all commercial activity in London. Soon after, in January 1810, news

reached Sydney that a crippling duty had been placed on imports of oil and skins. This disincentive to "colonial" sealing was not rescinded until 1820 (Sydney Gazette 21 January 1810 and 12 February 1820).

Those Sydney merchants who had engaged in sealing at the subantarctic islands and at New Zealand on credit were soon bankrupt and their commercial affairs collapsed in a welter of lawsuits that halted abruptly almost all sealing from Sydney. Their commercial demise was so fast, and so complete, that several former sealing merchants were unable to send any relief to their gangs still stationed on the southern islands and at New Zealand. In several cases it was some years before these abandoned gangs were uplifted. Presumably some never were. One or two Sydney merchants survived by switching to the new bonanza that followed after the discovery of Macquarie Island in July 1810. (Campbell Island, discovered six months earlier, was never a major sealing ground though it yielded 140,000 sealskins from March 1811 to January 1813 : Kerr 1976: 153).

At least 101,200 sealskins were taken from Macquarie Island in the first year, but the seal stocks there were soon exhausted. The real wealth proved to be the thousands of huge seal elephants, whose oil rich blubber was "melted" down for steady, if hardly spectacular, profits, mainly from 1813 to 1829 (Cumpston 1968; Richards 1982: 3).

There is no record of any successful sealing at the Antipodes after 1810. The scale of the slaughter in the five seasons from 1804 to 1809 had evidently been so complete that there were scarcely any seals left there and the few vessels that re-entered the trade a decade or so later preferred to search elsewhere. Over the years, a few checks were made intermittently, but the sealskins taken from the Antipodes were pathetically few. William Stewart, who had been at the Antipodes in 1806, returned in mid–1825. He landed a gang with two boats, but by December his total cargo from the Antipodes and elsewhere was only 258 fur seal and 77 hair seal skins. He returned to the Antipodes in February 1826 only to find that two of his gang had drowned and both boats had sunk. In all, his men took fewer than 400 sealskins (Richards 1982: 35).

In 1829, after taking 21 prime sealskins and seven pups on the Bounty Islands in perfect weather, Captain Isaac Percival in the Boston brig *Rob Roy* went on to the Antipodes. He arrived in January 1830 at the height of the season and remained with sealing gangs on shore for two weeks, leaving behind three deserters. No sealskins were mentioned in the ship's journal either during this period or when this unfortunate trio was uplifted in mid-March. Since elsewhere in the journal very small numbers of sealskins were recorded meticulously, this suggests strongly that the sealers from the *Rob Roy* took none at all at the Antipodes in 1830 (Richards 1992: 62).

No other vessels are known to have taken any seals at the Antipodes between 1830 and 1878 when legislation was passed to regulate sealing in New Zealand waters with licences issued for some seasons. No doubt the Antipodes and the Macquarie Islands were examined closely from time to time after 1878 by some legal sealers, and some foreign poachers are known to have visited Macquarie and the other subantarctic islands. Two latter day poachers were Captain Althearn, who in 1879 gave some very experienced advice on how best to fit out "for a fur seal voyage to the Bounty Rocks"; and the voyage of the *Sarah W Hunt* from New Bedford to Campbell Island in 1883 and 1884, which was entirely unsuccessful (Clarke 1882: 430–434, 457–460; Dorsett 1951: 130). Clearly, if fur sealskins have been taken from the Antipodes and Macquarie Islands since 1878, they have been very few.

CONCLUSION

Despite the absence of any evidence whatever for the existence of the "upland" seal other than the original single reference by Lesson in 1828, several zoologists have suggested that the original fur seal encountered on the Macquarie and Antipodes Islands last century was a different species from the New Zealand fur seal, *Arctocephalus forsteri*, which has colonised both island groups this century (Falla 1962; Csordas and Ingham 1965; Laws 1972). This short review of the historical evidence makes unsustainable any continuing description of the

"upland seal" as a distinct species that formerly inhabited the Antipodes and Macquarie Islands.

The historical evidence is consistent with the case made by Taylor (1992), that the small "upland seals" taken there were not a different species or subspecies, but rather New Zealand fur seal yearlings and juveniles congregating away from the rookeries, especially during the breeding seasons. He has presented this as an "alternative hypothesis that the Antipodes and Macquarie may never have supported large breeding populations of fur seals of any species, but rather were once the hauling grounds for hundreds of thousands of juvenile fur seals migrating [there] each summer from breeding colonies at the Bounty, Chatham, Auckland and Campbell Islands" (Taylor 1992: 118).

The original fur seal stocks were reduced over an enormous territory that is still hard to monitor effectively let alone cover closely, and the reduction was remarkably comprehensive. How this change from massive numbers to near extinction was achieved in only five or six seasons from 1804 to 1809, and why the recovery has been so slow, are questions that have not yet been answered. Certainly, removing up to half a million fur seals would have had a cataclysmic impact on a population only a few times that size. The effect would have been still worse, however, if most of those killed were taken from only one age group, the juveniles, thus removing almost entirely a whole segment, that of the next generation of breeding animals, from the reproductive cycle.

The historical records do not establish clearly what proportion of marketed fur seal skins came from the coasts of New Zealand and how many from the southern islands, but on the figures quoted above, it could well be that relatively few seals were taken from New Zealand, compared with about 500,000 taken from the Antipodes, Macquarie and Campbell Islands alone. If, as Taylor suggests, these were nearly all juveniles, and if the juveniles were then, as they are now, about 40% of the population, then the total stocks, including the other age groups then living elsewhere throughout the New Zealand region, would have numbered well over 1,250,000 before the foreign sealers arrived.

If only just enough juveniles escaped to avoid extinction, this could perhaps explain why, when sealing was revived briefly from 1823 to 1829, those later sealers found the fur seals so greatly reduced. Since then, the seals have been molested only infrequently, yet they have recovered so slowly that they are estimated to now total only about 55,000, or less (Crawley 1990: 255). On the basis of the historical evidence that well over half a million sealskins were marketed from the wider New Zealand region in less than a decade (i.e. over ten times their present numbers), the original stock may well have numbered between one and a half million and two million, which would be about fifty times their present "early recovery phase" total.

In working further on the population dynamics of the remarkably slow recovery of the seals during nearly two centuries of relatively limited molestation, zoologists may find additional uses for the historical records.

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