

‘You could and should eat them into eradication’. A review of ‘Eat The Invaders’ Series 1.

January 2025

In January 2025 the Australian Broadcasting Commission (the ABC from hereon) ran the series *Eat The Invaders* ‘a provocative attempt to turn our unwanted ecological trash into desirable culinary gold.’¹

There were six episodes each of which dealt with one invasive species: Rabbit, Carp, Cane Toad, Camel, Cat (both feral and domestic) and Deer. The episode on deer also looked at the Long Spined Sea Urchin, not an invader but nonetheless a pest, causing damage to kelp forests and the fragile ecosystem of which they are a part.

Hosted by Tony Armstrong each episode featured scientists, land carers, producers, consumers, feast guests, Kirsha Kaechele artist and curator at MONA², and Vince Trim, chef at MONA. The latter two have since 2019 partnered in an art project - *Eat The Problem* - which is credited as the inspiration for the series. Kaechele says ‘Eating invasive species is something I’ve been interested in for some time, and in some cases you could and should eat it into eradication.’³ For Trim, ‘It’s really exciting to be using these invasive ingredients that we have’.⁴ The two collaborate on the Feast that ends each episode. More this later.

Each episode has some or all these elements:

- History of the invader from entry to present day
- Efforts to control or eradicate the invader
- Conversations with stakeholders in the food chain from producer to consumer
- Preparation of an everyday meal from the invader
- Consumer testing of the product made from the invasive species or substitute in the case of Cane Toad and Cat
- Discussion with two Invasion Biologists – Prof. Andrew Lowe and Prof. Phill Cassey
- Feast using the invader from MONA

As a food historian/writer the series was instantly attractive to me. I had dealt with rabbits in my book *True to The Land. A History of Food In Australia*⁵ and was interested in the stories of the other five invaders. The series is of the infotainment genre. This article is a longish review of the series, its length indicative of the wealth of information, and entertainment in each episode of the series. I do it thematically and not episode by episode. In each theme I look at a few invaders.

The history of the invader, aiding and abetting

The series identifies by whom and why the invader was brought to Australia and the impact of it when it becomes feral or wild on native species and First Nation’s people’s foodways and cultural practices.

Rabbits were first released into the wild from Thomas Austin’s Barwon Park in Winchelsea, Victoria in 1859. Austin had them sent from England as game. ‘It took rabbits less than 70 years

¹ ‘Eat The Invaders’ www.abc.net.au/EatTheInvaders

² The Museum of Old and New Art

³ Kirsha Kaechele, *Eat The Invaders*

⁴ Vince Trim, ‘Eat The Invaders’,

⁵ Van Reyk, Paul, *True to The Land. A History of Food In Australia*, Reaktion 2021

to colonise Australia. That's the fastest invasion by a mammal anywhere. Rabbits are easily one of the most destructive pest animals. They threaten more than 300 native species. Rabbits had a major role in the eradication of the lesser bilby.⁶

The Cane Toad was brought to Australia from Central and South America as a biocontrol to eradicate native beetles which were devastating the sugar crop in Queensland, (when) but grew to plague proportions. Cane toads are highly toxic. I knew that but didn't know of their impact on native species. When they move into a new area they can end up killing native predators who may not have realised that the toads are poisonous. Cane toads have been increasing in size and continue to invade new areas. The estimate of the cane toad population is staggering - 200 million of them in Australia.⁷

Camels were brought to Australia in the 1840s to serve as pack animals in remote areas but were let to roam free as cars and trains made their work redundant. Alarmingly, Australia now has the greatest number of wild camels in the world. They are destroying native vegetation and damaging culturally significant sites for First Nation's people.⁸

Cats have been in Australia since the earliest days of the colony of New South Wales and undoubtedly went feral shortly after. Today there are an estimated 1.4 million to 5.6 million feral cats in Australia. 'Seven native animals per night that's the impact feral cats are having'.⁹

Control and Eradication

The series outlines mechanisms that have been introduced or are in the pipeline for control or eradication.

Rabbit's history here is a model case study. In 1950 the *Myxoma* virus was introduced into the population with initially good results. However, in a short space of time they developed resistance to it. A strain of rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus was introduced. Over time the effectiveness of it decreased. 'We are up to multiple strains of *calici* virus,' says Cassey, 'but each time we see populations rebounding. We're not eating them and so we need a new technology – one of the proposed technologies is genomic editing and gene drive. One of the suggested genes is a fertility or sterility gene so if you breed out a population that's nearly all men the population will crash'.

A viral control of Carp is being looked at but won't be released till the potential impact on other riverine species is investigated.

Control of wild deer in Tasmania is a contested space. Currently deer in Tasmania are classified as game and in a way are protected. There is now a 2-year trial of a law to declare them as pests which will allow the mass culling of deer. Not surprisingly wild deer hunters are opposed to this. They see it as bringing about the end of a years long practice, their culture. They worry about the entry of commercial interests.¹⁰ 'It goes back to people want to be in touch with food.'¹¹

⁶ Dr Tanja Strive, Senior Principal Research Scientist CSIRO Health and Biosecurity, Rabbit Episode 1 *Eat The Invader*.

⁷ 'Cane Toad', Episode 3 *Eat The Invaders*

⁸ 'Camel', Episode 4 *Eat The Invaders*

⁹ Dr. Aly Ross, Wildlife Ecologist, 'Cat' Episode 5 *Eat The Invaders*

¹⁰ 'Deer' Episode 6 *Eat The Invaders*

¹¹ Wayne Turale, Episode 6 *Eat The Invaders*

Not every solution needs to be science or legislatively based. Bringing a welcome touch of humour are the Boomah Women Against Cane Toads. Armed with a long handled pick-up tool and a plastic bucket they go looking for cane toads at night, in this instance on a golf course. When found they put the cane toads in one member's fridge 'to sleep' then take them up to hospital that has a freezer that finishes the job. 'It's good for the environment if we don't get out and do it who is going to?' They claim to have killed 10,000 in one week.

Eating invasive species now

Australians have in the past eaten and currently also eat invasive species - rabbits, carp, camels and deer.

'Australia once used to be a nation of massive rabbit eaters. Back in the forties we were eating around 27 million rabbits a year'.¹² But rabbit has fallen out of favour in part the programme says because of worries about whether they are diseased or not¹³ and perhaps in part because of the rules and regulations hunters But rave to go through to slaughter them.¹⁴

Kim Johnson, Winchelsea Country Women's Association who prepares a rabbit casserole, makes it from her mother's handwritten recipe book. She speaks poignantly of why she thinks people have lost the skill of cooking rabbit - because of lost recipe books. 'Everyone's mum had one ... this book was my mothers and it brings back memories .There was no such things as Ingredients and Method it was all put into one ... This book would probably go back to 1968 - I think we've lost the cuisine because we've lost the recipes. A single recipe like what's in here has proven that simplicity is the key to have a tasty tasty dish.'¹⁵

But rabbit is back on the menu at restaurants and cafes. Nifra Poultry in the Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne advertises: ' Nifra Poultry is a family owned and operated business dedicated to sourcing and supplying the highest quality free range poultry and game meats including chicken, rabbit, turkey, duck and kangaroo.'¹⁶ The Limestone Café at Schofields, New South Wales, specialises in Maltese Food and has rabbit stew on spaghetti. There are other restaurants and cafes in Sydney e.g. The Rusty Rabbit, Bistro Papillon.

In 2010 the National Feral Camel Action Plan was set up by the government which mainly consists of sporadic aerial culls. And while some camels are harvested for food the market is very small.' Camel control is left to the owner of the property on which the camel has been culled. 'When the animals in good condition I try to take as much meat as I can and then when the freezer full the rest are left to rot. It is an insane amount of waste - when the world is starved for protein and these are just turning to earth.'¹⁷ Why is not more camel eaten? Armstong says we have all sorts of taboos when it comes to eating something that has not been farmed like the chicken pork or beef that we are used to.¹⁸ The episode has Armstrong meet up with Kunle Adesua, founder *Tribal Tastes Food* and Harun Hersi a Somali butcher who sells camel who cannot understand that Australians don't value camel as Somalis do. Adesua makes a camel stew (orbieta? The name disappointingly is not credited.)

¹² Guy Hull, Episode 1 *Eat the Invaders*

¹³ Winchelsea CWA member

¹⁴ Ross Matthews, Local Hunter, 'Rabbit' Episode 1 *Eat the Invaders*

¹⁵ Kim Johnson, Winchelsea branch of the CWA, 'Rabbit' Episode 1 *Eat the Invaders*

¹⁶ Nifra Poultry qvm.com.au/store/nifra-poultry/

¹⁷ Jack Carmody, Prenti Downs Station, 'Rabbit' Episode 1 *Eat the Invaders*

¹⁸ 'Camel', Episode 4 *Eat The Invaders*

Deer in Victoria and Tasmania are considered game and are protected and can be wild caught, whereas in the other States and Territories they are declared a pest. There are around 6,000 deer hunters in the State.¹⁹ Until recently it was illegal to serve wild caught deer at restaurants. Kaechele and Trim lobbied for that to change, and it was.

Cats are strictly off the menu for most Australians because they are seen as pets. Perhaps the most confronting segment in the whole series is that showing Indigenous Rangers hunting for and eating feral cats in the Northern Territory Kiwirrkurra Community. 'In the desert no protein is wasted. Whether its goannas or cats. Cats are seen as pests and eating them is far from taboo. In fact, it's a delicacy.'²⁰ 'She's going to put that pussy cat in the fire. Maybe 45 minutes to cook. Different taste.'²¹ Significantly in terms of protection of endangered species, 'The reason the bilbys are still here is because of the cat hunting that people do.'²² When asked if they would eat feral cat Dr. Aly Ross, Wildlife Ecologist²³ at Yookamurra Sanctuary, and Gillian Kowalik, Ranger, both say they would, Ross says she has done so before. Dr. Matthew Ruby, Anthrozoological Researcher discusses cognitive dissonance – when one is troubled holding two opposite views at the same time. ...For a lot of people thinking about the animal origins of their meat is a really uncomfortable experience.. Because they might think well, I really love animals and yet an animal has to be killed for me to eat this rib-eye.'

The MONA Feasts

At the end of each episode Kaechele and Trim and guests eat a dinner inspired by an invader. Cane Toads and Cats are the exception. The interesting thing here for me is the introduction of invasive plants and birds to the menu. For the Rabbit Feast 'Rabbit tureen with liver pate and we are thinking of the English country garden and the way that colonists brought over all the plants that have now become invasive weeds.'²⁴ With hedgerow perfume to spray over the meal as dressing and as you can taste it'.²⁵ Cane Toad dinner is 'wild pheasant, invasive mynah birds and some bugs as they were what the cane toad was brought in to control - crickets.'²⁶ For the Cat Feast Trim has been thinking about the number of birds they kill and that got me thinking of the number of feral birds we have here in Tassie so we are going to cook some starlings, pheasants and blackbirds. I'm going to make a very traditional dish. I think I am going to do Italian pasta.'²⁷

Other than Warwick Thornton (see below) the guest who most impressed me Geoffrey Robertson AO KC.

There is no ethical problem at all in a local species eating an invasive species. My idea is to clone the Tasmanian Tiger, like a wolf it preys on deer. It's a win win. ... By and large I am not predisposed (to the argument that a population management would be better than eradication ... I'd like to hear it argued out but I suspect that's the side I would come down on I would come down on.

¹⁹ Tracey and Wayne Turale, 'Deer' Episode 6 *Eat the Invaders*

²⁰ 'Cat' Episode 5 *Eat the Invaders*

²¹ Jodie Ward, Indigenous Rangers 'Cat' Episode 5 *Eat the Invaders*

²² Doctor Rachel Paltridge Ecologist Indigenous Desert Alliance, 'Cat' Episode 5 *Eat the Invaders*

²³ Dr. Aly Ross, Wildlife Ecologist 'Cat' Episode 5 *Eat the Invaders*

²⁴ Hopefully there is a Series 2 where invasive plants can be discussed.

²⁵ Trim, Episode 1 Rabbit *Eat the Invaders*

²⁶ Trim, Episode 2 Cane Toad *Eat the Invaders*

²⁷ Trim, Episode 5 Cat *Eat the Invaders*

Eating invasive species in the future

Tracy Hill, Business and Process Manger Coorong Wild Seafood:

Most I think (people might eat carp) if we turn it into products people are familiar with like sausages, fishcakes'.²⁸

The series runs a blind taste test in each episode, getting 'ordinary Australians' to try a new product, the catch being they don't know the origin of the product. In all cases some of the consumers say they would try the real thing. The cane toad, using a substitute because of concerns about poisoning the customers, are presented as a snack food 'Croaky Crunchies'. Consumers responded positively to them thinking they were infect eating cane toad. When the truth is revealed consumers say 'Once it's in a package, Australian made, you just would get the reassurance'; personally, I'd have a got at it, I hope that broader Australia could embrace something like that but I think it's a tough sell'.

But setting up an industry around an invasive species – like camel – faces significant challenges. Lowe: 'Camel has the opportunity to becomes a large-scale food industry and that could potentially control the numbers. The issue really is about getting the camel or the camel meat from the outback into restaurants and into supermarkets. There has been an attempt to set up a food industry around camels but it hasn't been successful.

Cassey: It's the investment, Camels live in such remote environments and they're wide spread – when we were harvesting camels we didn't invest enough in the infrastructure to support local communities.

Of Cats Cassey says;

We're not going to start everyone eating cats. Cats have too much cultural history, I believe, in Australia, to be eating them and we're never going to hunt them at that level. We can quite quickly solve the domestic cat problem by responsible cat ownership.

But ultimately I think what the series shows is

'We can't eat our way out of this'.²⁹

Invasive plants and birds

I was disappointed that little was said about edible invasive plants, the prickly pear being the worst offender, closely followed I think by the blackberry. Invasive plants other than the pear or blackberry play something of a support role via the Feasts at the end of each episode. Perhaps plants are not good 'talent'.

I was also disappointed that invasive birds didn't make the cut except as prey of the Cat served up at the Cat Feast.

Hopefully there will be a Series 2 in which this issue could be redressed.

²⁸ Tracy Hill, Business and Process Manger Coorong Wild Seafood 'Carp' Episode 2 *Eat the Invaders*

²⁹ 'Rabbit' Episode 1 *Eat the Invaders*

Non-Anglo Perspectives

This I think was a serious fail for the programme most starkly in the Carp episode. The mantra here was that 'Australians don't eat carp'. The first problem with that statement is that carp certainly eaten by Australians over several decades. The more substantial problem is which Australians don't eat carp? Chinese Australians dine on carp at New Year³⁰ and at other times.³¹ Carp dishes are in the cuisine of Vietnamese Australians.³² Carp is also a Czechoslovakian Christmas dish.³³

The episode on Camel also disappointed me. At the Id

Other than the episode on Camel which featured Kunle Adesua making a camel dish and an unnamed woman making gefilte fish in the Carp episode no Non-Anglo Australians get to talk about where the invader fits in their cuisine or to make an every day dish.

The most damaging invader

The opening of each episode shows a painting of the first flag raising in the colony. Over that image Armstrong says:

'Since the British first colonised Australia we've been fighting a losing war against alien invaders. They're causing an environmental catastrophe. But what if we could help by turning these unwanted pests into a new food source.'

You could substitute First Nation's People for 'we've' and it's a similar situation for them.

Uncle Moogy Major Sumner, Ngarrindjeri & Kurna Elder speaking about the Coorong/Kurangk, Ngarrindjeri Country says:

The Coorong used to be like a supermarket you didn't have to go anywhere for food, food was all around you ... Colonists were following the laws and rules of the country they came from. They're not looking after this country. Stagnant water kills not just the river but the plants and the fish and the creatures that live in but carp love it.³⁴

Curiously no First Nations people comment on the destruction of important cultural sites by camels.

I'll leave the final comment to film maker Warwick Thornton at the Camel Feast:

³⁰ 'The auspicious symbolism of these traditional Chinese New Year foods is based on their pronunciations or appearance. Not only do the dishes themselves matter, but also the preparation, and ways of serving and eating mean a lot'.¹² Lucky Chinese New Year Foods to Greet the Year of Snake 2025

³¹ 'Recipes for popular carp dishes in China'

³² 'Carp is a type of fish that has long been no stranger to the rice tray of the vast majority of Vietnamese people.' *What does carp make deliciously? Top 10 recipes that the whole family loves.* chanhtuoi.com.

³³ 'Invasive pest carp a popular part of traditional Czech-Australian Christmas', www.abc.net.au

³⁴ 'Uncle Moogy Major Sumner, Ngarrindjeri & Kurna Elder, 'Carp', Episode 2 *Eat the Invaders*

Camels didn't chose to come here but there was a coloniser who did choose to come and that's the human and I'm a bit upset that we are eating camel. Why aren't we eating the Tory pork pie. Should we eat the real coloniser?³⁵

³⁵ 'Camel' Episode 3 *Eat the Invaders*