Imaging Extinction: Disclosure and Revision in Photographs of the Thylacine (Tasmanian tiger)

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Abstract
The thylacine was a shy and elusive nonhuman animal who survived in small numbers on the island of Tasmania, Australia, when European settlers arrived in 1803. After a deliberate campaign of eradication, the species disappeared 130 years later. Visual and verbal constructions in the nineteenth century labeled the thylacine a ferocious predator, but photographs of individuals in British and American zoos that were used to illustrate early twentieth-century zoological works presented a very different impression of the animal. The publication of these photographs, however, had little effect on the relentless progress of extermination. This essay focuses on the relationship between photographs of thylacines and the process of extinction, between images and words, and between pictures of dead animals and live ones. The procedures, claims, and limitations of photography are crucial to the messages generated by these images and to the role they played in the representation of the species. This essay explains why the medium of photography and pleas for preservation could not save the thylacine.

Keywords
thylacine, representation, photography, human-animal interactions, extinction

Introduction
References to photography in nineteenth-century zoological publications often stress its difference from previous picture-making traditions; for instance, naturalist Agassiz (1871) commented that "the accuracy of a photographic illustration is of course far beyond that of an engraving or lithograph" (p. 47). Photographs were generally thought of as "faithful to the objects or scenes they represented" (Snyder, 1994, pp. 175-183), and photographs taken in zoos were described as "the most reliable and permanent souvenirs of wild Nature it is possible to obtain" (Dando, 1911, p. vii).
These perceptions, some of which are still dominant, are particularly significant in relation to photographs of nonhuman animals. For example, engravings and lithographs of the extinct thylacine that preceded photographs in scientific and popular zoological works in the nineteenth century were often derived from taxidermy specimens (themselves constructions), dramatic and fanciful reports, or were copies of previous images. Most of these engravings emanated from Europe and first figured this colonial species as dog-like but progressively contorted the form of the animal—adding ominous signifiers that activated fears traditionally associated with European species such as the hyena and wolf. Any likeness to a living thylacine was remote (Freeman, 2005b).

Early photographs of the species, on the other hand, seem to exemplify Sontag’s (1977) remark that “the painter constructs, the photographer discloses” (p. 93). Pictures of the thylacine in Washington, New York, and London zoos that appeared in twentieth-century zoological works reveal a very different form, situation, and behavior. They disclose information that challenges and contests the meanings previously suggested. These photographs open a space in which more sympathetic attitudes toward the species could have been generated, and a few of the texts that accompany them reinforce these ideas.

When photographs of the thylacine first appeared in 1904, there is some evidence that viewers may also have been influenced by a number of factors that are crucial to consideration of the images. These arose from interactions between the location of the animals, the assertions of the scientific frame in which the photographs are found, and the texts that accompany them.

First, while the institution of the zoo still projected appealing ideas about imperial power in the early twentieth century, concerns about the treatment of animals and the disappearance of species were emerging; some zoos, particularly in America, provided their captives with improved facilities. However, zoo photographers mention wire mesh, concrete, and badly lit cages as their greatest problems, and they made every effort to avoid their appearance in a picture (Anonymous, 1904; Dando, 1911; Berridge & Westall, 1911). That the zoo site was regarded as undesirable is also indicated by the removal of the background when these photographs were used in general works about animals.

Second, when these photographs are considered in relation to previous illustrations of the thylacine in zoological works, they are potent carriers of the claim of “truth” inherent in photography, especially when the thylacine they reveal is so different from that represented in previous illustrations.

Third, when the first two points are in operation, the messages generated by the images have the potential to draw responses of concern that are in
conflict with their texts, which still include references to threatening behavior, sheep-killing, and associations with European animals long considered evil or undesirable.

Zoologists today often perceive these photographs and their texts as disinterested or inaccurate reports or consider the photographs—independently of the misleading assertions of their texts—as historical “evidence” of the thylacine’s form, situation, or behavior (Moeller, 1997; Guiler & Godard, 1998; Paddle, 2000). In this way, these pictures accumulate authority as denotative images. However, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are and “despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth” (Sontag, 1977, pp. 6, 7).

This essay shows how photographs of the thylacine that appeared between 1904 and 1926 not only reveal the situation of the species in zoos but also edit out undesirable elements so that “composite pictures of preferred worlds” are constructed (Jeffrey, 1981, pp. 15-18). That is, they were revised to either alleviate emerging concerns about the conditions in the zoos in which the thylacine was resident, to present a “natural” environment, or to suggest the traditional stereotype of a ferocious animal who threatened human endeavors. These changes tended to subvert any latent concern about the plight of the species. I focus on six photographs. The first three appear to display what was called “straight photography,” and three later images show obvious signs that some form of manipulation has taken place—either in relation to the subject of the picture or the photographic negative. In the light of the thylacine’s subsequent extinction, these photographs now operate as a momento mori of the species. They provide sad and fascinating subjects for analysis, they are redolent with connotations, and their revisions become charged with meaning.

The Impact of Photography

The first photograph discussed (Figure 1) appeared in the Report of the Smithsonian Institution in 1904 (Baker, 1904). The Institution administered the National Zoological Park in Washington where a female thylacine with three pouch-young arrived in 1902. The Park was one of a new wave of zoos that featured open-range environments and large, heated enclosures and claimed to pay attention to the specific requirements of animals. The introduction to the Illustrated Guide to the National Zoological Park 1902 states that the zoo was established for the preservation of native animals who were threatened
with extermination and that its existence was opposed by subsequent senators and congressmen who were unable to see any benefits derived from preserving them (Evans, 1902).

The thylacines in the photograph—the first live examples of the species seen in America—were located in the Lion House, a site that contrasted with their placement with less desirable animals in zoos in Europe. The figures in the picture borrow the noble stereotype of the lion and build on it with glossy coats and an easy, fearless demeanor. The picture codes the thylacines as healthy survivors, but the text in the Guide stresses the rarity of the species and pronounces that its members will soon be “as extinct as the dodo” (Evans, p. 20). The authority of zoological institutions and the professed purpose of Washington Zoo encourage a response of admiration and concern for these animals; however, Paddle (2004) refers to a Washington Post 1903 article in which Baker, author of the entry from the 1904 Report, is quoted as saying that, because they had no competition and an abundance of food, Australian animals were the “stupidest animals in the world,” which accounted for “their
rapid extermination... by the British.” In the same article, Baker calls the thylacine a “natural-born idiot” (pp. 205, 206).

These different conceptualizations draw attention to the complexity and instability of historical ideas of the animal (Brower, 2005). Pictures of thylacines at London Zoo, where conditions were cramped and badly lit, have the potential to generate entirely different messages. The *Illustrated Official Guide to London Zoo* (Mitchell, 1904) includes a photograph replete with signifiers of exclusion and confinement. The photograph—not shown here—is of a thylacine in a dingy space that has every surface marked with barred lines. They shadow the brick wall behind the figure and produce broad bands on the dusty ground; to the right of the animal, coarse chicken wire covers the closely-barred wall.

In the five lines of text beneath the image, Mitchell (1904) states that the thylacine resembles a Wolf or Wild Dog and is “very fierce,” that, “as it does great damage to flocks it is being killed off by settlers,” and that the animal has dark stripes across the greater part of the back (p. 94). The text actively extends the idea of barring to the animal’s body. Now, the thylacine’s stripes seem to suggest this creature is marked for imprisonment, but the interaction of photograph and text can be complex. As Foucault (1983) points out, “verbal signs and visual representations are never given at once. An order always hierarchizes them, running from the figure to discourse or from discourse to the figure” (pp. 2, 3). Bearing in mind its novelty and assumptions of fidelity, the early twentieth-century photograph usually dominates a text, but the text can also “load” the picture in the sense that Barthes (1977) suggests in relation to burdening an image with “culture, a moral, an imagination” (p. 26). In this case, image and text reinforce each other and existing ideas about the species in the early twentieth century.

Wollen (1989) draws attention to how photographs function in time—“their currency, their circulation and re-cycling” and how they can go through “a whole history of re-publication and re-contextualization”—that result in new perceptions of an image (n.p.). This effect is apparent in an indistinct, reversed version of this photograph, published in the third volume of *Popular Science*, a multi-volume work by Mee (1912), where the animal is referred to as the “hideous thylacine, or pouched wolf” (pp. 2007-2009). There is little in the picture to support this description. The form of the thylacine is dog-like, and he looks uncared for and vulnerable, rather than stupid or unsightly. Sonntag (1977) is concerned that the shock of photographed atrocities wears off after 30 years of saturation, but many pictures of the thylacine, such as this one, seem to gather poignancy with the species’ extinction and the increasing rate of disappearance of other animals. They act as “historemes,” where the
instance of a thylacine in London Zoo’s squalid cage stands for the failure of European culture to preserve species.

The growth of concern about the treatment of animals in Britain is reflected in the News Bulletin of the (NY) Zoological Society of 1901, where there is a report of a “long and severe attack” on conditions at London Zoo by the Humanitarian League of London (Anonymous, p. 43). Occasionally, these sentiments were also expressed in British natural history works.

The next photograph first appeared in More Natural History Essays (Renshaw, 1905) and shows the same male individual in London Zoo with a bent back and positioning of his tail denoting submission, while the spare coldness of the trough and the distorted wire mesh evoke the same depressing effect as the former photograph (Figure 2).

However, Renshaw (1905) begins the long essay about the thylacine in this work with the words, “across the zoological history of the nineteenth century one may well write the word ‘extermination,’ for as Omar destroyed the priceless treasures of the Alexandrian library so have others robbed the world forever of many beautiful and interesting animals” (pp. 214-232). It is an uncommon reference to the value of the thylacine in works of the period, and Renshaw hopes that animals bred in Australian zoos will be the foundation of a “menagerie race” that will “stave off the day when the thylacine will vanish forever.”

The text also states, “Truly, the fate of the thylacine hangs in the balance.” Read after the species’ extinction, this and other elements in the text do powerful work on the photographic image. By inscribing the captivity of the animal as a pause before the species’ final disappearance, the fall of the shutter emerges as a moment in which the figure is “captured” for a second time. The text also explicitly refers to the photograph, interpreting the position of the animal as an abrupt pause in his motion, with head raised “as if to reconnoitre” (p. 229). Image and words work together to produce a powerful message, but one that would have needed wide dissemination, constant restating, and a receptive audience to have a positive impact on the remnant population of thylacines in zoos and in the Tasmanian wilderness in 1905.

Revising the Photograph

The next set of photographs indicates that the new medium and the zoo location, when combined with old or new discourses, were indeed perceived as a problem that required a revision of the image. Photographs of the thylacine were adjusted to accentuate a particular feature of an animal, to show the species in a “natural” habitat, or to regenerate suggestions of threat that characterized nineteenth-century constructions. The animal subject was posed; the
background of some photographs was replaced; the image was retouched—or its outlines were enhanced—and paint was applied to the photograph. Finally, a dead specimen replaced the living animal. These strategies were not unusual.

The first techniques for retouching photographs were exhibited at the Paris World Fair in 1855 (MacQuire, 1998) and Hartmann's (1904) railed against inking photographic images for the purpose of individual expression. In 1910 Hurley combined photographs of stags in various positions at the Sydney Zoo into a "family setting" by printing several negatives together (Bickel, 1980). Between 1907 and 1930, Edward Curtis used traditional attire, as well as suggestive captions, to construct images of a "vanishing race" of American Indians (Jackson, 1992). In all these pictures, the denotative claims of photography still operate, either implicitly—as images circulate in widely separated temporal, spatial, and perceptual zones—or explicitly in captions and texts. Power relationships between subject, photographer, publisher, and viewer are encoded in the photographs and in the political acts of constructing and changing them. In More Wild Animals and the Camera, photographer Dando (1913) describes and demonstrates how photographs were made “entertaining and attractive” to aid the “widest possible diffusion” of publications like The Life of Animals (Ingersoll, 1906, frontispiece) (Figure 3).
Dando (1913) selectively positions the thylacine to foreground a simple visual signifier—the stripe—and comments that he had to wait a long time before this animal took up the position shown (Edwards, 1996). In his research on the history of the stripe, Pastoureau (2001) suggests that they present a “rhythmic, dynamic, narrative surface that indicates action” and that “the spectator’s eye cannot not be drawn to a striped surface.” He adds, “in any image, the striped element is always the one seen first” (pp. 21, 22).

Figure 3. The Tasmanian Wolf. Walter P. Dando, More Wild Animals and the Camera, 1913. © Zoological Society of London
In the text that accompanies this photograph, perhaps the failure to elaborate on the thylacine’s stripes indicates that their meaning was particularly familiar; the stripe taps into a host of intertextual references. For instance, Pastoureau points out that in medieval Europe stripes and their counterparts “convey(ed) varying degrees . . . of transgression.” Animals with striped or spotted coats were seen as something to fear. “Even the zebra . . . passes for dangerous at the end of the Middle Ages.” Pastoureau maintains that this mistrust of striped animals has left “an enduring mark on the Western imagination.” Even today, the tiger whose stripes are admired remains the symbol of “a fascinating kind of cruelty” (pp. 25, 26). As Mitchell (1994) points out, the most indelible texts within images are there when, “they seem to be most completely absent, invisible or inaudible” (p. 98).

Wright (2003) remarks, however, that photographs trace multiple trajectories. For instance, Dando’s (1913) photograph also references the thylacine’s nocturnal behavior: The animal in the picture is trying to gain entry to his sleeping quarters behind that door.5 Paddle (2000), in conversation with Alison Reid, keeper at the Hobart Zoo in the early 1900s, notes that the door of the inner enclosure was often shut during the day to prevent the thylacine from escaping the spectators’ gaze. The death of the “last” thylacine is attributed to the failure to open the door during an unusually hot day and cold night (pp. 191-195). For an informed post-extinction viewer of this photograph, the closed door is a compelling emblem of death. There were more direct ways to manipulate a picture than posing its subject—the zoo background could be re-placed (Figures 4a and 4b).

Like the animal in a zoo enclosure, the upper photograph (Figure 4a) that appears in Wonders of Animal Life (Berridge, 1915) is surrounded by a continuous, isolating frame that acts as “a finding and focusing device placed between the observer and the image” (Shapiro, 1985, p. 212). This photograph of the thylacine is included in a chapter on animals verging on extinction that makes a point of mentioning habits that are destructive to humans, rather than expressing concern for the animals. Several elements in the picture tend to justify the species’ extinction: The frame that surrounds it cages and secures the figure and a criss-cross pattern in light and shadow thrown by the wire of the cage covers the entire scene. Its caption reads, “The Tasmanian Wolf which preys on sheep.” The frame also creates an impression of depth that distances the animal from the viewer. Shapiro notes that frames have become so commonplace that their function and how they operate on a picture are often ignored.

The lower picture (Figure 4b) first appeared in The History of Land Mammals in the Western Hemisphere (Scott, 1913). The thylacine’s body seems to have been touched-up to remove the shadow of the bars on the fur, and the
Figure 4a. The Tasmanian Wolf Which Preys Upon Sheep. W.S. Bertridge, Wonders of Animal Life, 1915. © Zoological Society of London

Figure 4b. Thylacine, or “Tasmanian Wolf” (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*).—By permission of W.S. Bertridge, London. William Berryman Scott, A History of Land Mammals of the Western Hemisphere, 1913. © Zoological Society of London
thick frame has been reduced to an exceptionally fine line. The result is dramatic. The caption, “Thylacine,” advocated because it is “less confusing” than “wolf,” finally transforms the image from one that depicts a caged nuisance to a scene of tranquility and ease. The picture now masks the situation of the species by suggesting its members enjoy an idyllic existence. Another way to change a problematic photograph was to crop the figure or remove the background completely. These technical processes, combined with retouching were particularly quick, effective ways to accentuate or add a particular feature—such as large teeth—to photographs of the thylacine and were used with other strategies to entirely change the meaning of an image.

The thylacine in the last picture I discuss literally embodies the unequal power relationships between animals and humans and exploits assumptions of veracity that discourage close attention to the details in photographs. Stories of the species’ propensity for sheep-killing had circulated since reports of sightings early in the nineteenth century and were the motivating force behind the Tasmanian government’s bounty that operated from 1880-1909, after which only a very small population survived. However, research by Guiler (1985, 1998) and more recent studies (Paddle, 2000) suggest that there were few verified attacks on livestock of any kind, while a study of the species’ morphology (Jones & Stoddart, 1998) has confirmed that thylacines were not adapted to predation on sheep but to the pursuit and consumption of smaller native animals. Zoological and natural history works in the nineteenth and twentieth century participated in the construction of the species as a menace to introduced animals and often condoned the extermination of this animal.

In The Last Tasmanian Tiger—an exhaustive study of government and wool industry records, scientific works, and anecdotal evidence—Paddle (2000) identifies the next photograph (Figure 5) as one of the chief causes of a “blossoming of the construction” of poultry predation (pp. 84-89), for which he can find little evidence. It was published 13 years after the bounty was removed, a date that was crucial in terms of the survival of the species. The photograph first appeared in the front of volume 1 number 3 of The Australian Museum Magazine (1921) with no text but the words “from life” beneath it, and again in The Wild Animals of Australasia (Le Souef & Burrell, 1926). It has been reproduced many times since in various publications—with the assumption that it depicts a living animal, either fed a chicken in a private zoo or raiding a henhouse. However, in an album in the State Archives of Tasmania, Laird (1945-1977) an associate of the photographer, Harry Burrell, maintains that the figure was not a living animal at all—“it is a stuffed specimen placed against a bush background.”

Burrell’s fabrication is technically skillful, but evidence that the figure is a specimen is apparent from the faint line where the tail is sewn onto the body.
and retouching marks on the underside of the tail. The wasted flesh in the belly and groin area is also indicative of a stuffed skin, rather than a living animal. The figure is unrealistically rigid, the stripes and the fur in general have a lifeless quality, and the legs appear uniform and stick-like. Any animal with a flapping chicken in his mouth is unlikely to be so motionless. The specimen’s immobility is indicated by the clarity of the figure in contrast to the out-of-focus foreground, the blurry bracken in the background, and the apparent movement of the chicken’s wing. The chicken also seems out of scale in relation to the size of the thylacine’s head, which suggests it may have been a superimposed element rather than photographed in situ with the specimen.

Intriguingly, Burrell deposited a series of half glass-plate negatives and several prints in the Australian Museum Archives, taken on the same day and in the same location. The plates show no evidence of technical manipulation, but one print reveals a fuller view of the “bush background” that shows it consists of dead branches leaning against the wire of an enclosure. I can find no specific evidence that the editorial staff of the Museum Magazine were aware the animal in the photograph was a specimen, but the attribution “from life” raises serious questions about the culpability of those involved in the production of the publication. This is supported by statements in the first issue of the Magazine in April 1921, where the publication is said to be part of an “increased

Figure 5. Tasmanian Tiger or Wolf. Copyright photo from life.—H. Burrell. The Australian Museum Magazine, 1921.
effort to reach a wider public,” particularly children, and that its magazine is “intended for those who have no special knowledge of the technical details of natural history.” It also notes, “surely an animal is more interesting when it is presented, not as a mere dead thing, but as a living, breathing creature” (Anderson, 1921 pp. 3, 4).

Ironically, the leading article in this first issue of the Magazine is by Gregory (1921), a visiting American zoologist and the curator of comparative anatomy at the American Museum of Natural History. It is titled, “Australian Mammals and why they should be protected” and explains why Australian animals are “the most uncommon and, perhaps, the most interesting in the world,” stating that extinction “is neither necessary nor inevitable.” It is illustrated by a sequence of photographs of animals against natural backgrounds and concludes with the bracketed note that “the photographs in this article, when not taken from life, are from specimens in the Australian Museum” (pp. 65-74). As using specimens to illustrate an article was a common practice in the magazine why, then, was it not admitted in reference to the photograph of the thylacine?

The text in The Wild Animals of Australasia (Le Soeuf & Burrell, 1926), the other work in which this photograph appears, develops the potential of pictures to generate hatred, fear, and indifference toward the thylacine’s survival. Although there is no caption on this illustration claiming the photograph is from life, the absence of any information that it is a specimen encourages this assumption. The text concentrates on the thylacine’s hunting and feeding behavior, both in and out of captivity; it is littered with words like “carcass” and “victim” and with descriptions of behavior such as “one sharp fox-like bite” that tears a dog’s skull off. While reference to other behavior is included, the proclivity of images to invoke inter-texts is consistently exploited through the use of violent and sensational connotations. In the stunning last paragraph, while commenting on the superstitious dread in which the thylacine is held in Tasmania, the museum specimen the photograph probably depicts is referenced in the sentence, “indeed, some [trappers] will even smash the wolf to pulp afterward, thus depriving science of the skeleton and skin” (pp. 318, 319).

When this book was reviewed in volume 3 of The Australian Museum Magazine, it was welcomed as an important step in the completion of a survey of the mammals of Australia. It was noted that “the new work contains 104 life-study photographs,” and “it is the illustrations . . . which make the strong popular appeal”. This Australian publication, then, was considered a standard zoological work and carried with it assumptions of authority bestowed by official institutions. It was also attractive to a popular audience and had a wide
readership in Tasmania and other Australian states. This is the same combination of authority, popular appeal and wide circulation that was associated with the most demonic representations of the thylacine in engravings and lithographs in earlier works.

Conclusion

This essay performed what Brower (2005) refers to as a “denaturalisation” of wildlife photography (pp. 3, 4). The images discussed demonstrate how photographs operate with cultural institutions, processes, and practices to construct multiple-subject positions for animals and to produce a variety of social relationships between human and animal. Framing of the image by photographers, writers, publishers, and scientific institutions contributed to ideas about the thylacine that influenced outcomes and affected the survival of the species.

For the general reader in the early twentieth century, assumptions about the veracity of photography implied that these photographs disclosed the essential character of the thylacine and informed the public about the situation of the species. Compared to engravings and lithographs, photographs had immediacy and authority that might have overridden written accounts of a species still labeled, “a vicious predator” at a time when few individuals were left in Tasmania and sentiments favoring preservation began to appear in American and Australian publications. Photographs did not show a sheep-killer or a wolf-like beast but a pathetic, inoffensive, caged animal. In the physical and discursive frame of the zoological work, there was an opportunity to make these photographs meaningful in terms of the species’ survival; that is, to “incite a phantasy, take on a meaning, and exercise an effect” (Tagg, 1988, p. 4). However, the indifference of scientific institutions in Australia, the manipulation of images, the craving for sensationalism, and persistently negative texts in early twentieth-century zoological works explain why these photographs could not save the thylacine from extinction. Until the last moment of existence, the species was pictured and contextualized in most zoological and natural history works as an animal in need of erasure.

Notes

1. All extant photographs of living thylacines are taken in zoos; there are no records of a photograph taken in the wild. There are several trophy shots of dead animals in existence.
2. Re-arranging the natural world to ensure a photograph complied with early twentieth century pictorial conventions was a common practice. Bonyhady (2000) discusses the removal of trees and placement of figures and objects in the foreground by British photographer Samuel

3. Brower (2005) comments on the additional meaning a photograph gathers when an “ecological catastrophe intervenes” and offers the example of the photograph of the last quagga in London Zoo. Many of the photographs discussed in this essay generate a similar “haunting sense of loss” (p. 6).

4. MacQuire (1998) points out that “contemporary responses to the reality of an image tend to be determined not so much by the image but by the assumptions concerning the origin of the image”. That is, it is “the cultural network inflecting its referent” that is decisive in this regard (p. 146).

5. The necessity for patience and the difficulty of photographing animals that sleep during the day or hibernate for long periods is the subject of discussion in a chapter called “Round the Zoo with a Camera” in a book by another of London Zoo’s official photographers, Berridge (1911).

6. For a detailed exposé of the glass-plate negative of this and four other photographs of the thylacine in the series, see Freeman (2005a).

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