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POLITICS AND EXTINCTION ON A HAWAIIAN ISLAND: RESPONSE TO CONANT AND LEONARD

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In their review (Conant and Leonard 2008) of *Seeking the Sacred Raven: Politics and Extinction on a Hawaiian Island* (Walters 2006), Conant and Leonard allege bias when they state that, “according to Dr. Fern Duvall, who directed the ‘Alalā captive propagation program from 1984 to 1996, the author spoke to him only once for about an hour about ten years before the book was published (Conant and Leonard 2008:188).” The review does not mention the fact that this face-to-face meeting took more than a year to set up and that I finally made a special trip from New Jersey to Hawaii to meet at the time and place of Dr. Duvall’s choosing. We met for the better part of a morning, not for “about an

hour.” This was my second interview with him, not my first. (The first had occurred earlier over the telephone. This one, not the later one, lasted about an hour.) Despite the limited usefulness of these two exchanges, I made a number of unsuccessful attempts over several years to set up additional interviews.

The reviewers also claim that “by devoting an entire chapter to this topic, Walters suggests that disturbance by researchers contributed to the species’ decline more than other causes. This is completely disingenuous.” The reviewers’ misjudgment of my motive is evinced by the simple fact that I also devote a chapter (11) to the topic of ranching and devote more-or-less three full chapters (21, 22, and 23) to the deaths of released birds, which are other possible contributing factors to the ‘Alalā’s decline. Given that I devote several chapters to other possible causes, the reviewers’ judgment that I was being “completely disingenuous” to have included one about possible researcher interference is unwarranted.

In the book I state, “Rare, glamorous, and still mysterious, with little having been published on its biology or behavior, by the late 1970s, the ‘Alalā had become a golden topic for academic research. The bird’s continuing descent toward extinction only increased its allure” (Walters 2006:127). The reviewers attempt to refute this statement by claiming, “If this was a true statement, Hawai‘i should be swarming with ornithologists (and funding).” But this is a logical fallacy. Conant and Leonard’s claim would be true only if the ‘Alalā were the same as the other endangered species to which they refer. It is not. (A comparable syllogism illustrates the flawed reasoning: “The low branches help to make the cherry tree fun to climb. But holly trees have low branches, and they aren’t fun to climb. Therefore, cherry trees can’t be fun to climb either.”) Like the cherry tree, the ‘Alalā has many special attributes in addition to its increasing rarity, glamour, and mystery that helped to increase the bird’s allure.

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The reviewers further conclude that my not including certain views in the book was a result of incomplete interviewing rather than a considered decision on my part. They state, “There is no mention of the fact that more than one official in each branch of government (state and federal) repeatedly begged plaintiffs (including one represented by reviewer SC) to bring suit, apparently hoping litigation would result in a court order forcing them to do the job they otherwise lacked the courage to do. Had he conducted more and better interviews, Walters might have discovered this (Conant and Leonard 2008:189).”

This view was well known to me. I declined to include it for two reasons. First, the insinuation that officials who opposed going onto private property without the owners’ permission were cowardly seemed, at least to me, to be morally repugnant. (Some government officials did quietly support the lawsuit in the hope that a ruling would bring legal clarity to how the Endangered Species Act might apply to endangered species on private property.) The second reason I declined to include the want-of-courage notion in my book was that it could have been believed only by those who assumed that a lawsuit would support their presumption that the Endangered Species Act gave the USFWS the legal right to go on private land against the wishes of the landowners. According to Robert P. Smith, the Pacific Administrator of the USFWS at the time and who was present at the legal proceedings, the judge strongly rebuked this presumption, thereby suggesting that USFWS officials who opposed going onto private land without the owners’ permission had valid questions about the legality of doing so. According to Smith, the judge told the plaintiffs (one of whom was represented by reviewer Conant), “If you think I’m going to rule and hit you guys a home run and that the Endangered Species Act gives you the right to get on private land to carry

out a recovery plan, you’re wrong” (R. P. Smith, pers. comm., see also *Hawaiian Crow v. Lujan* 1991).

In addition to incorrectly believing that the law would be on their side, some of those pushing for the lawsuit also believed that the available science supported their desire for immediate capture of all the remaining wild birds. Conant herself lobbied for this capture in an editorial in the *Honolulu Star Bulletin* titled “Stand-off with ranch owners may doom ‘Alalā” (Conant 1989). In 1992, this pro-capture argument was rejected by an independent panel of prominent scientists, convened by the National Research Council (1992). This report stated, “We do not recommend that all the birds should be brought into captivity” (p. 3).

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to know how a different set of legal and scientific outcomes might have affected the ‘Alalā. If Conant and Leonard’s review is any indication, this contentious debate is far from over.

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