

Habitat restoration and management in avian reintroductions

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Abstract Habitat loss to agriculture, and habitat change due to alien invasive species are now the principal threats facing birds globally. One successful conservation intervention involves population restoration through reintroduction. Evaluation of reintroduction outcomes has highlighted the importance of releases into appropriate habitat, and traditionally reintroductions have had a focus on relatively intact habitat. I explore habitat management at reintroduction areas, in order to highlight examples of viable reintroductions taking place within highly modified habitats. I evaluated reintroduction projects for 28 bird species to categorise the degree of habitat modification at release sites, and the intensity of ongoing habitat management necessary to support the new population. Twenty-one of the 28 species have been released into habitat that is relatively unmodified. For 15 of these 21 species, there has been pre-release restoration of habitat to approximate near pristine conditions, and for seven species intensive post-release habitat management remains essential. Only seven of the 28 species have been released into relatively modified habitat, and three species in highly modified habitats requiring intensive ongoing habitat management: the black stilt, Oriental white stork, and Japanese crested ibis. Habitat modification by agricultural and urban expansion will become an increasingly important threat to birds globally. This means that the area of natural, relatively intact habitat available in which to undertake reintroductions is shrinking. It is worth considering restoration of viable wild populations within habitats that have been substantially altered. The challenge will be to manage the factors that limit the establishment, growth and persistence of a reintroduced population. Some native species will be more adaptable than we assume, and for some the cause of original declines may be addressed without restoring habitat to near pristine conditions. For

many avian reintroduction programmes, management of the birds and their habitat must be sustained long after the successful establishment of a new population. Reintroduction practitioners cannot rely on being able to release birds into pristine patches of habitat, but rather must embrace the notion of a “*natural diversity enriched by human intervention*” (Takeuchi 2003).

Key words Population restoration, Translocation, Reintroduction, Bird conservation

Introduction

We are widely considered to be living in what has been termed the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002), an era in which humans have become a global geophysical force (Steffen et al. 2007) effecting modification of natural habitats worldwide. Over the last ~50 years humans have altered the world's ecosystems to a greater extent and at a greater rate than at any other time in our history (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005) and as a consequence the Earth has entered its sixth great extinction event (Ceballos 2010). One-fifth of species are currently classified as Threatened, and on average 52 species of mammals, birds and amphibians move closer to extinction each year, with in excess of 220 bird species declining by at least one threat category between 1988 and 2008 (Hoffman et al. 2010). Birds are highly visible but also highly vulnerable indicators of habitat change. The 2009 Red List assessment found that 1,227 species of birds are classified as globally threatened with extinction (www.iucn.org), with habitat loss to agriculture and habitat change due to alien invasive species being the principal threats to birds (Birdlife International 2008).

One intensive, and increasingly successful conservation intervention involves population restoration through conservation translocation (Seddon et al. 2007; Seddon 2010) to reinforce or reintroduce wild populations. Reinforcement involves the movement of individuals to build up an existing population, while reintroduction is the intentional

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movement of an organism into part of its native range from which it has disappeared (IUCN 1998; Seddon 2010). The number of reintroduction projects is increasing. The World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Reintroduction Specialist Group had records for current reintroduction projects for 138 bird species by 2003 (Seddon et al. 2005), up from only 69 species in 1998 (Stanley Price and Soorae 2003), and likely to exceed 200 species by 2012.

Evaluation of reintroduction outcomes across a large number of projects has highlighted the importance of releases into appropriate habitat (Wolf et al. 1998). The IUCN's *Guidelines for Re-introductions* (IUCN 1998) have been the most widely applied international framework for reintroduction planning and implementation and make five main points concerning release site selection and management: the site should be within the historic range of the species; reintroduction should only take place where the habitat and landscape requirements of the species are satisfied, and likely to be sustained; the area should have sufficient carrying capacity to sustain growth of the reintroduced population; there needs to be identification and elimination of previous causes of decline; and where the release site has undergone substantial degradation, a habitat restoration programme should be initiated (IUCN 1998). Thus the IUCN guidelines do not stipulate that release sites must consist of relatively intact habitat, but this is likely to be the default target since it is reasonable to assume that the less the habitat has changed since a given species was last present, the more likely it is to be able to sustain a restored population of that species.

Reintroductions have therefore had a focus on translocations into relatively intact habitat, and this has been a point of difference between the disciplines of reintroduction biology and of restoration ecology, the latter being

most concerned with the restoration of degraded habitats (Seddon et al. 2007). In this paper I explore some general patterns relating to the habitat in a reintroduction area, specifically the degree of pre-release habitat modification and the intensity of post-release habitat management. In doing this I aimed to highlight some examples of viable reintroductions taking place within highly modified habitats and consider whether such examples offer a glimpse of the future where reintroduction practitioners explore increased opportunities to reintroduce bird species into modified habitats rather than assuming an overriding need for near-pristine habitat conditions.

Methods

A qualitative survey of bird species reintroduction accounts was compiled for a sample of species, derived from summaries published by the IUCN RSG (2008, 2010) and augmented from the available literature. Projects were summarised according to six factors: cause of decline, status of the original habitat, release site preparation, degree of modification of the habitat at the release site, and level of habitat management required in order to sustain the reintroduced population. I considered "habitat" to include all aspects of the environment, including vegetative features, food and predators. *Reintroduction target area* (Mihoub et al. 2009) is defined as the general region surrounding a *release site* into which the released birds are expected to disperse and settle, with the *release site* defined as the specific locale at which a release takes place. Reintroduction target area status was categorised along an approximate 5-point scale from 1 = pristine to 5 = extremely modified (Table 1). The level or intensity of ongoing habitat management required to support the

Table 1. Sliding 5-point scale of the degree of habitat modification at a release site, and the intensity of post-release monitoring necessary at a reintroduction site in order to enable persistence of the restored wildlife population.

| Category | Degree of habitat modification of the reintroduction target area | Intensity of post-release habitat management at the reintroduction target area |
|----------|--|--|
| 1 | ● Pristine, e.g. unmodified primordial rainforest | ● No ongoing habitat management post-release |
| 2 | ● Relatively intact, e.g. regenerated/restored woodland | ● Low intensity, intermittent management, e.g. limiting disturbance due to agricultural activity |
| 3 | ● Relatively modified, e.g. mixed natural and agricultural landscapes | ● Moderate intensity ongoing management, e.g. anti-poaching patrols; anti-predator vigilance |
| 4 | ● Highly modified, e.g. intensive agriculture, or restored vegetation but presence of exotic predators | ● High intensity ongoing management, e.g. modification of agricultural practices; predator trapping; livestock fencing |
| 5 | ● Extremely modified, e.g. high density inner city urban development | ● Very high intensity management, e.g. maintenance of predator-proof fencing with continuous trapping |

Table 2. Summary of release-site habitat status and management in the reintroduction of 28 bird species illustrating a range of degrees of habitat modification and management intensity, from near pristine conditions and minimal ongoing management, through to highly modified habitat and intensive ongoing management.

| Name | Species | Country | Original cause of decline | Current status of original habitat | Release site preparation | Degree of habitat modification at the release site | Intensity of habitat management | Reference |
|--------------------------|--|--------------|--|--|---|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| Ostrich | <i>Struthio camelus</i> | Saudi Arabia | Hunting | Degraded by livestock | Fencing and livestock exclusion | Restored grassland | Livestock fencing | Zafur ul-Islam et al. (2008) |
| Nene goose | <i>Branta sandvicensis</i> | USA | Hunting, habitat loss, introduced predators | Modified by agriculture | Predator control | Mixed natural and planted grasslands | Predator control | Marshall et al. (2008) |
| Great Spotted Kiwi | <i>Apteryx haastii</i> | NZ | Introduced predators | Invaded by exotic predators | Predator exclusion fencing & trapping | Beech forest & alpine | Predator exclusion | Gasson (2008) |
| Southern Ground Hornbill | <i>Bucorvus leadbeateri</i> | South Africa | Habitat loss due to human population growth & cattle | Degraded and fragmented by farming | Cessation of cattle ranching due to changing environment | Restored grassland, woodland and savannah | Cattle exclusion and provision of nest cavities | Theron and Turner (2008) |
| Red-billed Curassow | <i>Crax blumenbachii</i> | Brazil | Hunting and loss of Atlantic forest habitat | Lost to forest clearing | Restricted access and anti-poaching patrols | Remnant forest | Poaching patrols | Steiner Sao Bernardo et al. (2008) |
| Hawaiian Creeper | <i>Oreomystis mana</i> | USA | Habitat degradation; introduced ungulates | Degraded and lost by logging and exotic ungulates | Fencing to exclude feral ungulates; natural regeneration | Restored high altitude forest | Fencing to exclude feral ungulates | Kohley and Lockyer (2008) |
| NZ North Island robin | <i>Petroica longipes</i> | NZ | Exotic predators and habitat fragmentation | Fragmented by livestock farming, with rats | None | Restored forest fragment with predators | None | Morgan et al. (2008) |
| Seychelles White-eye | <i>Zosterops modestus</i> | Seychelles | Nest predation by exotic predators | Invaded by exotic predators | Eradication of rats and cats | Predator free islands but modified by orchards and gardens | Prevention of invasion by predators | Rocamora and Henriette-Payet (2008) |
| Houbara Bustard | <i>Chlamydotis macqueenii</i> | UAE | Hunting | Minor degradation by grazing | Regulation of access and hunting, some control of natural predators | Natural dune land | Hunting prevention | Lawrence et al. (2008) |
| White-headed Duck | <i>Oxiura leucocephala</i> | Hungary | Habitat loss, hunting and egg collecting | Drained wetlands and modified lakes | None | Modified/restored lake with human disturbance | None | Bijomi (2008) |
| Cheer Pheasant | <i>Catreus wallichii</i> | Pakistan | Hunting | Low altitude hills modified by grazing and grass cutting | National Park protection, reduction of agriculture | Recovering low-mid altitude grasslands turning to unsuitable scrubland | Restriction of agricultural activity | Garson (2008) |
| Bearded Vulture | <i>Gypaetus barbatus</i> | Austria | Persecution | Alpine slopes with low intensity domestic ungulates | None | Relatively intact alpine slopes | None | Zink and Frey (2008) |
| Aplomado Falcon | <i>Falco femoralis septentrionalis</i> | USA | Unknown | Xeric grassland with low intensity cattle grazing | National Wildlife Refuge | Relatively intact xeric grasslands | Provision of some artificial nest structures | Heinrich (2008) |

Table 2. Continue.

| Name | Species | Country | Original cause of decline | Current status of original habitat | Release site preparation | Degree of habitat modification at the release site | Intensity of habitat management | Reference |
|-------------------------|--|--------------|---|--|---|---|---|-------------------------------|
| Golden Eagle | <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i> | Ireland | Persecution | Low intensity livestock grazing | National Park | Relatively intact Irish mountains | Restriction of farming | O'Toole (2008) |
| Red Kite | <i>Milvus milvus</i> | England | Persecution | Woodlands and open habitats modified and fragmented by arable/grass fields | None apart from raising awareness of local farmers | Woodlands and open habitats surrounded by fields | None | Murn et al. (2008) |
| Corn Crake | <i>Crex crex</i> | UK | Mechanization of agriculture | Arable grasslands | Agreements with land managers for late cutting | Managed arable grasslands | Change grassing cutting regimes | Newbery (2010) |
| Grey Partridge | <i>Perdix perdix</i> | UK | Habitat loss to agriculture intensification | Arable farmland a fragmented scrub/woodland | None | Managed arable grasslands | Maintenance of hedges; reduce farming disturbance | Rantanen et al. (2010) |
| Houbara Bustard | <i>Chlamydotis macqueenii</i> | Saudi Arabia | Hunting | Severe degradation by grazing | Fencing and livestock exclusion | Restored savannah | Fencing to prevent hunting and livestock grazing | Zafur ul-Islam et al. (2010) |
| Malherbe's parakeet | <i>Cyanoramphus malherbi</i> | NZ | Exotic predators and habitat fragmentation | Invaded by exotic predators | Predator eradication | Predator free offshore island | Prevention of invasion by predators | Ortiz-Catedral et al. (2010b) |
| Red-fronted Parakeet | <i>Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae</i> | NZ | Exotic predators and habitat fragmentation | Invaded by exotic predators | Predator eradication | Predator free offshore island | Prevention of invasion by predators | Ortiz-Catedral et al. (2010a) |
| Yellow-crowned Parakeet | <i>Cyanoramphus auriceps</i> | NZ | Exotic predators and habitat fragmentation | Invaded by exotic predators | Predator eradication | Predator free offshore island | Prevention of invasion by predators | Adams and Cash (2010) |
| Helmeted honeyeater | <i>Lichenostomus melanops cassidix</i> | Australia | Habitat loss to agriculture intensification | Fragmented by agriculture | State Park | Restored riparian vegetation | Restriction of farming | Menkhorst et al. (2010) |
| Western Bristlebird | <i>Dasyornis longirostris</i> | Australia | Wildfires | Fragmented by agriculture | National Park | Mixed age scrubland | Controlled fire management | Burbridge et al. (2008) |
| Oriental White Stork | <i>Ciconia boyciana</i> | Japan | Intensification/mechanization of paddy field agriculture | Original marshland lost to fragmented paddy fields and woodland fringe | Fish ladders, and reduction pesticides, change water flow regimes | Functional paddy fields | Restoration of traditional agricultural practises | Naito and Ikeda (2007) |
| Japanese Crested Ibis | <i>Nipponia nippon</i> | Japan | Intensification/mechanization of paddy field agriculture | Original marshland lost to fragmented paddy fields and woodland fringe | Fish ladders, and reduction pesticides, change water flow regimes | Functional paddy fields | Restoration of traditional agricultural practises | Sado City Government (2010) |
| Black Stilt/Kaki | <i>Himantopus novaezelandiae</i> | NZ | Habitat loss to farming/water abstraction; introduced predators | River deltas and farmland, with low intensity agriculture and exotic predators | Intensive predator control | Natural river deltas and farmland wetlands with exotic predators, human disturbance | Intensive predator control | Van Heezik et al. (2009) |

Table 2. Continue.

| Name | Species | Country | Original cause of decline | Current status of original habitat | Release site preparation | Degree of habitat modification at the release site | Intensity of habitat management | Reference |
|-------------------|------------------------------|-----------|---|--|--------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------|
| Kakapo | <i>Strigops habroptilus</i> | NZ | Exotic predators and habitat fragmentation | Invaded by exotic predators | Predator eradication | Predator free offshore island with intact forest | Predator exclusion | Lloyd and Powlesland (1994) |
| Southern Emu-wren | <i>Stipiturus malachurus</i> | Australia | Habitat loss and degradation due to agriculture expansion | Fragmented by agriculture | Conservation Park | Restored xeric scrubland | Restriction of agricultural activity | Pickett (2010) |
| Peregrine Falcon | <i>Falco peregrinus</i> | USA | Habitat loss and pesticides | Fragmented by agriculture and urbanisation | None | Urban and peri-urban areas, building mimic natural cliff side habitats | Provision of some artificial nest structures | USFWS (2011) |

reintroduced population was categorised on a similar sliding 5-point scale from 1 = no management, to 5 highest intensity management (Table 1).

Results

I evaluated a total of 28 bird species (Table 2) for which sufficiently detailed information was available on current reintroduction attempts to categorise the degree of habitat modification at release sites, and the intensity of ongoing habitat management considered necessary to support the establishment, growth and persistence of the new population (*sensu* Armstrong and Seddon 2008). Twenty one of the 28 species have been released into habitat that is relatively unmodified compared to the original habitat of the species, either due to an absence of degradation or change (rarely) or due to restoration and regeneration of vegetative elements and removal or mitigation of the impacts of invasive species (Fig. 1). For 15 of these 21 species, considerable effort has gone into the pre-release restoration of habitat to approximate near pristine conditions, and for seven species intensive post-release habitat management remains essential.

Only seven of the 28 species have been released into relatively modified habitat: for the two New Zealand species, the North Island robin and the black stilt (see Table 2 for the scientific names of species mentioned in the text), the release site habitat remains modified by the presence of exotic predators; the peregrine falcon is unique in

being released into an urban environment, and the remaining five species have been released into landscapes transformed by agriculture. Three species in highly modified habitats require intensive ongoing habitat management: the black stilt, Oriental white stork, and Japanese crested ibis.

Discussion

Although a majority of the limited sample of projects surveyed here describe avian reintroduction attempts taking place within relatively intact habitats that closely approximate the original pristine conditions in key respects, there are a number of examples of viable reintroduction attempts taking place in highly modified habitats. To illustrate some specific features across the spectrum of different types of habitat modification and management associated with avian reintroduction projects, I outline five case studies below (see underlined common names in Fig. 1).

1. Case studies

1–1) Relatively unmodified with high intensity habitat management: Kakapo

The kakapo is perhaps the quintessential New Zealand endemic bird: it is critically endangered and has a suite of unusual features that are both a legacy of the long isolation of the New Zealand landmass, and which make it particularly vulnerable to introduced predators. Kakapo

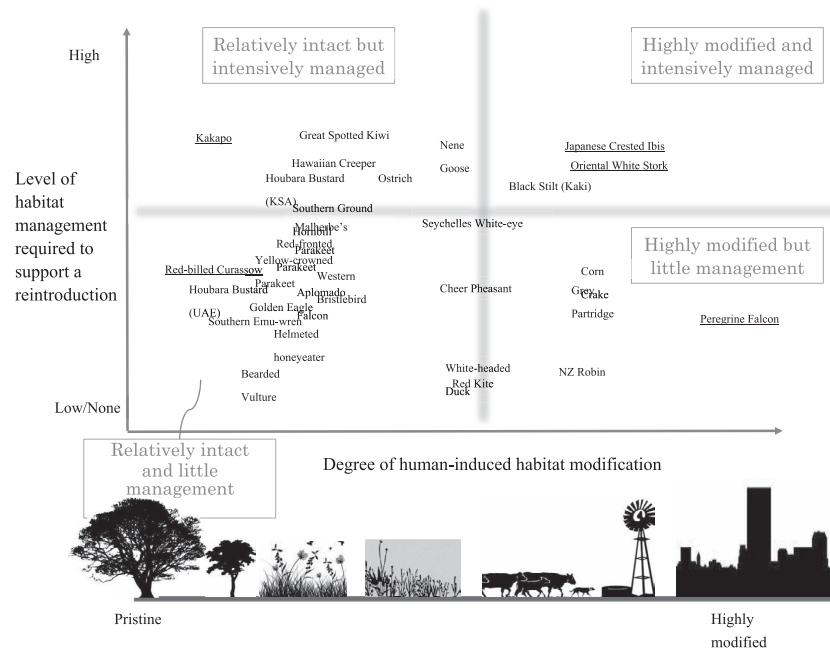


Fig. 1. Reintroduction projects for 28 bird species, plotted on two axes: x-axis is degree of habitat modification in the reintroduction area, from pristine or largely intact natural ecosystems at the left through to increasing modification by agriculture and urbanization, on the right; y-axis is the level or intensity of post-release habitat management required to sustain the reintroduced population.

are large, nocturnal, flightless, lek-breeding parrots, that were once widespread throughout New Zealand but which were reduced to a single remote location in Fiordland by the 1950s (Elliot et al. 2001). During the 1980s and 1990s all surviving kakapo were translocated to predator-free islands (Lloyd and Powlesland 1994). Currently, kakapo are on only two southern islands, Codfish/Whenua Hou, the only site with a successfully breeding population, and Anchor Island following a translocation in 2005 (www.kakaporecovery.org.nz/, accessed 22 June 2011). Both islands have dense native forest cover and highly restricted public access. These two populations are sustained through an intensive management programme that includes stringent measures to prevent reinvasion of islands by predators.

1-2) Relatively unmodified with low intensity habitat management: Red-billed Curassow

The red-billed curassow is endemic to the Brazilian Atlantic rainforest, but was driven to extinction in parts of its range by the early 20th century due to hunting pressure and the loss of habitat (Steiner Sao Bernardo et al. 2008). There have been successful reintroductions since 1991, the most recent programme returning the birds to relatively intact Atlantic forest in Reserva Ecológica de

Guapiaçu (REGUA), Rio de Janeiro State, from 2006. REGUA comprises >5,000 ha of forest within the larger Três Picos State Park, where the only post-release habitat-related management involves anti-poaching patrols by eight park rangers (Steiner Sao Bernardo et al. 2008).

1-3) Highly modified with low intensity habitat management: Peregrine Falcon

Following a rapid decline in population throughout the continental United States, in 1969 the Peregrine Falcon was placed on the U.S. Endangered Species list. The primary cause of the population crash was widespread use of the pesticide DDT, and following the ban on DDT use in 1970, projects were started to reintroduce Peregrines. Between 1974 and 1999 over 5,000 Peregrines were released, with some of the most successful releases taking place in cities (Heinrich 2009), where tall buildings effectively mimicked the bird's cliff nesting habitat. Peregrine Falcons have been reintroduced successfully to a number of range states and in a variety of environments, I have chosen to highlight their successful restoration in highly modified urban environments requiring no specific post-release habitat management. New York city now has one of the highest concentrations of peregrine falcons in the world (Luniak 2004).

1–4) Highly modified with high intensity habitat management: Oriental White Stork (OWS) and Japanese Crested Ibis (Toki)

Both the OWS and Toki were extinct in the wild in Japan by 1971 and 1981, respectively, the decline of both species being due to the combined effects of increased use of agricultural pesticides and changes in the management of the rice paddy field systems in which the species used to forage for fish, frogs, and a wide variety of invertebrates (Naito and Ikeda 2007; Sado City Government 2010). Reintroduction projects for OWS and Toki started with pilot releases in 2005 in the Toyooka Basin of Hyogo Prefecture, and in 2008 on Sado Island in the Niigata Prefecture, respectively (Naito and Ikeda 2007; Sado City Government 2010). For both species the key to future success lies in the restoration of traditional paddy field agriculture, entailing the forging of strong links with the farming community in order to reduce the use of pesticides, to restore the wet winter condition of paddy fields, to maintain peripheral water channels to support diverse invertebrate communities, and to install fish ladders to facilitate natural fish dispersal and migration pathways. The most fascinating aspect of these reintroduction projects is the almost total reliance of the birds on a highly modified agricultural landscape. The first paddy fields in Japan date to the Yayoi period, 1500–2000 years ago (Akazawa 1981), and before that time it can be assumed that OWS and Toki foraged in much less modified wetland sites. Under traditional rice paddy management systems, with no artificial sprays and with winter flooding, the birds presumably regarded paddy fields as just another wetland, albeit with more human disturbance. It is perhaps unique to have to go back more than 2000 years to locate the original habitat type of a species, but clearly the long intervening history of use of paddy fields by both species indicates that up until recently, self-sustaining populations could be sustained in this highly modified environment. However, populations of neither OWS nor Toki can persist in the face of increased mechanization necessitating changes in water flow regimes, or with the increased use of pesticide sprays. The restoration of OWS and Toki on mainland Japan will depend on strong support for the project from farmers and local communities and a willingness to restore traditional paddy field management systems in the face of economic incentives to

modernise.

2. Future need for ongoing management to sustain species

By 2004 loss and degradation of habitat to agricultural expansion was the most significant threat affecting birds listed as Near Threatened in the IUCN Red List (Birdlife International 2008). Habitat modification by agricultural and urban expansion is set to become an increasingly important threat to birds globally in the very near future. This means that not only will greater numbers of bird species require conservation interventions, but that the area of natural, relatively intact habitat available in which to undertake such interventions is shrinking. It is possible, however, for at least some threatened species, to consider restoration of viable wild populations within habitats that have been substantially altered by agriculture or urbanisation. The challenge will be to determine the factors that may limit the establishment, growth and persistence of a reintroduced population and to address these specifically. The physical appearance of habitat within a reintroduction target area may be a poor guide to habitat suitability, particularly if we consider habitat to encompass more than just landscape and vegetative elements. For example, the presence of exotic predators in areas of native forest in New Zealand may not be overtly evident, and may not alter the appearance of the forest, but would significantly reduce the suitability of the site as a potential reintroduction area. This is not to say that we give up on the protection and restoration of functional natural ecosystems; relatively intact habitats will always be needed to sustain sensitive species, such as habitat specialists. However, it seems likely that some native species will be more adaptable than we may assume, and that for many species the cause of any original decline may be addressed without having to restore habitat to near pristine conditions.

The other realisation is that for many, perhaps most, avian reintroduction programmes, management of the birds and their habitat must be sustained long after the successful establishment of a new population. This idea of ongoing management is perhaps epitomised by the restoration of Oriental White Stork and Japanese Crested Ibis in the *satoyama* landscapes of rural Japan, landscapes that are characterised by the management of the natural environment, described also as “*natural diversity enriched by*

human intervention" (Takeuchi 2003). This is also an excellent description of the future of many species restorations, where success depends on long-term, perhaps even perpetual, management. The work does not stop when the released birds fly free, nor when the first wild hatchlings fledge, and not even when a robust wild population has been established. If we want to have wild populations of storks, or ibis, or kakapo, then we cannot rely on having some last pristine patches of habitat. Although the reintroduction ideal may be "*persistence without intervention*" (Seddon 1999); the reality seems likely to require a long-term commitment to the stewardship of restored wildlife populations and their habitats.

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