On the Edge

by Vicki Hamilton
BA Fine art, BFA Hons (Class 1)

An exegesis submitted in support of an Exhibition of works of art for the degree of Master of Philosophy.
The University of Newcastle, July 2013
# Table of Contents

- List of figures 1
- Research question 4
- Abstract 5
- Introduction 6

**Chapter One:** Biodiversity and why we need it 9

**Chapter Two:** Case studies 20
- Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat 22
- Greater Bilby 26
- Sumatran Orang-utan 30
- Polar Bear 35
- Black Rhinoceros 39
- Mountain Gorilla 43
- Hawaiian Monk Seal 48

**Chapter Three:** Contemporary Art/Science and the Conservation of species 52

**Chapter Four:** Art as a catalyst for change 80

**Chapter Five:** Previous art work 88
- Master’s exhibition *On the Edge* 96

- Conclusion 107

- Source of figures 110

- Bibliography 115
List of figures

1. Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat
2. Wombat Distribution Map
3. Greater Bilby
4. European fox with a Greater Bilby in its mouth
5. Sumatran Orang-utan
6. Sumatran Orang-utan distribution map
7. Polar Bear
8. Black Rhinoceros
9. Mountain Gorilla
10. Gorilla distribution map
11. Photograph by Franck Makoundi – bushmeat at the market.
12. Hawaiian Monk Seal
13. The Hawaiian Archipelago map.
15. Ken and Julie Yonetani, Still Life: The Food Bowl 2011
19. Julie Bartholemew, Swift Parrott 2010
20. Julie Bartholemew, Coxen Fig Parrott 2010
22. Rod McRae, Operation Foxtrot 2010
23. Anna Culliton, Pocket full of Bilby 2013
24. Caz Haigh, Hatii 2011
27. Rod McRae, *Crying out loud in the age of stupid* 2010
29. Lisa Roet, *White Ape*
31. Anna Culliton, *Girl with Seals* 2013
35. Vicki Hamilton, *Muzzled* 2010
43. Vicki Hamilton, *Consequences of our actions* 2010
44. Vicki Hamilton, *Loaded kiln* 2013
45. Vicki Hamilton, *Vengeance* 2013
47. Vicki Hamilton, *Flux* 2013
51. Vicki Hamilton, *Defenceless* 2009
52. Vicki Hamilton, *Hanging by a thread* 2013

53. Vicki Hamilton, *Banished* 2013 (work in progress)
Research Question

How can contemporary art work express an understanding of the plight of endangered species?
Abstract

Many artists have contributed through their artwork to the understanding of the need for a vigorous biodiversity, which is a vital element to the health of the planet and is essential for the survival of all species including humans. Factors such as understanding of loss of habitat through deforestation, climate change, agriculture and introduction of exotic species impinge on biodiversity. This awareness is central to this project, and has generated the concerns embedded in this ceramic practice. By considering how art can contribute to the plight of endangered species this research initially examined the data which underpins the theories of the demise of biodiversity resulting in vulnerable, endangered and critically endangered species. Intensive case studies focussed on selected animals, which were to become the models for this ceramic work, which has built on the practice of other concerned artists. Finally, several aspects of environmental philosophy, such as animal rights, formed the basis for this work.
Introduction

My exegesis examines the importance of biodiversity and the current status of selected vulnerable, endangered and critically endangered species, in order to inform my art practice. My work expresses the consequences for each animal when biodiversity is lost, due to human activity. Human activity has pushed some species into extinction which interrupts the life cycles of biodiversity. I have selected particular threatened animals because they are essentially voiceless and are caught in circumstances which have been created by human activity. Their dramatic decline in numbers and quality of life is indicative of humanity’s self-centredness. Humans are at the top of the food chain and the effects of biodiversity loss may not be obvious. Short-sighted greed and ignorance need to be countered before it is too late.

I describe the many different impacts on each of these threatened animals due to human activity. Deforestation, the introduction of exotic species, poaching and exploitation are all *direct* impacts on the survival of vulnerable, endangered and critically endangered animals. Climate change and pollution are *indirect* impacts that lead to destructive and sometimes irreversible changes to the animals’ habitats and populations. I discuss these issues as well as those artists, organisations and individuals that are working to curb the effects of human activity on these threatened species.

Initially I researched source material through worldwide organisations to ascertain the status of each selected animal. The International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) which monitor animals in danger compile and maintain a list called the Red List which provides the current status of threatened animals. From this Red List I chose seven animals suffering from these *direct* and *indirect* impacts of human activity. I have also sourced information from The World Fund for Nature website (formerly World Wildlife fund), the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the United National Environmental Programme (UNEP) which monitors climate change and habitat degradation.
Later I refined my investigations to more specific conservation groups and their projects and how effective they are. For example, The Australian Orang-utan Project which rescue and rehabilitate injured and orphaned Sumatran Orang-utans.

Consequently my art work focuses on the loss of these animals and their habitats, through the impact of human activity. I have researched theories, philosophical opinions, scientific evidence and specifically artists and their art work to support my understanding of this threat to biodiversity and the efforts to address these issues.

The results of my research are central in providing the status of each animal, so I can express my concerns through my art work. The ceramic materials that I use are versatile and allow me to construct the figures in postures to demonstrate the circumstances of each animal due to human activity.

Chapter One explains the importance of a robust biodiversity and what happens when it is lost. Chapter Two describes each of the selected animals, their role in the ecosystem, the decline of their habitats and quality of life. Chapter Three discusses artists, conservation organisations and individuals working to protect these vulnerable species from extinction. I also describe contemporary artists’ contribution to public awareness and understanding of the endangered species through their artwork. Chapter Four considers the philosophical views regarding the inter relationships of wildlife and humans. Chapter Five describes my previous and current art practice, motivation and the aims of my exhibition, *On the Edge*.