‘Possum Purge’: To Cleanse and Purify
From Framing Speciesism
September 2021

Every year, Paparoa School, an elementary school in Northland, New Zealand, runs a ‘Possum Purge’ fundraiser. The event, referred to as a ‘Gala Day’ is heralded as an opportunity for the community to come together and win some prizes. These prizes are given for various categories, including the most unplucked possums per team and the “Les Tilby Trophy”, which is awarded to a child who shoots or traps a possum with a specific weight, assuming they are “assisted by a responsible adult”. Due to COVID-19, their ‘purges’ for 2020 and 2021 were – thankfully – cancelled.

Advertisement for the Paparoa Possum Purge - Source: Paparoa School’s Facebook Page

Paparoa School’s ‘Possum Purge’ is unfortunately not the only event where communities, including young children, are encouraged to participate, and celebrate, in the killing of ‘pest’ animals. Drury School, located south of Auckland, was heavily criticised for its possum hunt in 2017 where young children were witnessed drowning live joeys who were plucked from their dead mothers in buckets of water\(^1\).

Uruti School, a primary school in Taranaki, was host to a ‘best-dressed dead possum competition’ in 2012\(^2\,3\). Critter Day in Whangamomana, Taranaki, saw young children bringing in their ‘best kills’ and
posing for photographs\textsuperscript{4}. These are only a select few. While possums are the primary targets for many of these events, pigs, rabbits, wallabies, and goats are also paraded for their deaths at annual hunts.

\textbf{‘Best Dressed Possum Competition’ - Source: Jonathan Cameron}
These events are often transparent about their mission (e.g. purge to conserve) and are forth-coming about their deliberate inclusion and education of young children. For example, the Hororata Pig & Possum Hunt claimed their event was “designed to encourage children to enter” and included “family photo
competition[s] as well as a possum throwing competition for juniors”\textsuperscript{5}. The advertisement for the Paparoa ‘Possum Purge’ above was clearly marketed to young families and school-age children with the bouncy castle and fire engine.

Additionally, participating in these events can get you rewarded. There are often a dazzling list of prizes, ranging from cash awards, donated vouchers from local businesses, and big-item prizes, including firearm silencers and chainsaws (i.e. there’s something for everyone!). Of all prizes that could be offered, why these?

Chainsaw Prize for Paparoa School’s 2021 ‘Possum Purge’ - Source: Paparoa School Facebook Page
Entries for this years Waiau Pig Hunt Fundraiser can be submitted online. Early Bird Entry draw closes Friday 1st October 2021 - Entries received before this date go into the draw for a Hardy Magnum Suppressor valued at $565. Sponsored by Rivers to Ranges.

https://forms.gle/8cvQ7LEKoXWc6X3A9
While these events have been heavily criticised by activist scholars such as Dr Lynley Tulloch and Dr Marc Bekoff\(^6\), little has been done regarding the ethical considerations towards not only the animal victims of these hunts, but the children being raised alongside this as well. These children, ranging from pre-school-age to elementary school-age, are amidst incredibly important years for their empathy development and healthy socialisation. It has been well established by researchers that there is a strong link between animal abuse in childhood with potential human abuse in adulthood\(^7,8\). This is not to say that every child who participates in hunting and killing of ‘pest’ animals will turn into domestic abusers, but statistically, it is much more likely.
As I taper off for this blog post, I am reminded about the importance of words and how much power they hold. It is not difficult to see the vein of violence which underpins these events. The association with eradicating ‘pest’ animals with a ‘purge’ is a very interesting decision. ‘Purge’, while ranging in etymological meanings, typically meant to cleanse or purify.

This process of ‘cleansing’ New Zealand of its unwanted ‘pests’, through events called ‘purges’, draws parallels with other historical ‘purges’, such as the ‘Great Purge’ by Stalin and the U.S.S.R. The ‘Great Purge’, or ‘Great Terror’, saw the murder of an estimated 750,000 people between the years 1936-19389,10.

Importantly, this is not to equate or make light of the devastating human rights violations that have occurred in the past, or are occurring now, but it does make me question why humans can hate something so much that ‘purging’, or ‘cleansing’, the environment of them is worthy of rewards and a celebration.

References:


