

**Holding the Proverbial Line**  
From [FramingSpeciesism.com](http://FramingSpeciesism.com)  
June 2022

*The more I think about this interaction, the more it reiterates to me just how ingrained the possum-as-‘pest’ narrative is in New Zealand – and that the glue of maintaining this narrative is the everyday social policing done by people within the dominant discourse towards others.*



*The possum magnet. Source: Author*

It was a stunningly gorgeous day and my partner and I were on holiday in Akaroa, a charming small town on the Banks Peninsula in New Zealand. As many countries can relate, New Zealand’s tourist industry has suffered extensively from the lack of international visitors due to the pandemic<sup>1</sup>; however, you wouldn’t know it based on the lively summer atmosphere in town that day. My partner and I, taking a stroll along the waterfront, walked into a souvenir shop and I began absentmindedly spinning a rack of postcards, keychains, and magnets. Suddenly, my attention was immediately caught by one of the most surprising finds that I have ever seen in this country: a plain brushtail possum fridge magnet.

The magnet itself was nothing special – it was a duplicate picture that was featured on the postcard version and wasn’t particularly distinctive; but, as I lifted it up to examine it, I realised it was just that – a magnet. I almost didn’t trust how innocuous it looked. There were no anti-‘pest’ messages or fear-mongering ‘facts’ listed about the possum on the label, nor did I notice any suggestive posing you would commonly see in photographs of possums in New Zealand discourse (such as those below). Very strange, indeed!



JPG x


Feedback

Pages that include matching images

<https://www.sciencemediacentre.co.nz> > 2015/11/16 > a... ⋮

**angry-possum-223 - Science Media Centre**


223 x 201 · 16/11/2015 — The Science Media Centre is **New Zealand's** only trusted, independent source of information for the media on all issues related to science.



<https://www.pinterest.com> > Animals > Mammals ⋮

**Possums: New Zealand animal pests and threats - Pinterest**

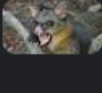
223 x 201 — **Angry possum.** Climate Change Problems, Flightless Bird, **Opossum**, Animal Welfare, Animal. Ishtar Lyla Moon. 29 followers. More information.



<https://www.nznature.net> > post > common-brushtail-poss...

**Common Brushtail Possum - A Pest in New Zealand**


619 x 349 · 28/07/2021 — The following map shows the density of **possum** populations around **New Zealand**. **New Zealand possums** inhabit both islands.



<https://www.facebook.com> > ... > Posts ⋮

**Otago Peninsula Biodiversity Group - Posts | Facebook**


1151 x 767 — In some areas the **possum** numbers are low but like COVID elimination is the best ... We had such a great time teaming up with **New Zealand** International ...



<http://www.stuff.co.nz> > dominion-post > United-we-ca... ⋮

**United we can repel alien raiders | Stuff.co.nz**

600 x 400 · 4/12/2014 — Unwelcome visitor. The 30 million **possums** in **New Zealand** are eating their way through native forests, supplementing their diet with birds' ...



**Gooogle** >

1 2 3 4 5 Next

*The earliest source I could find for that image was in 2010, but it is unclear whether this was authentic. Possum carers I have talked to have stated, that in their extensive experience, this possum is most likely yawning (they are nocturnal after all!). However, you can see with the screenshot on the right just how extensively this image has been used in anti-possum literature online. Source: Unknown*



*A discussion on how images and language are used to villainise possums would not be complete without reference to this oft-used Nga Manu photograph of a possum holding a treasured kererū egg. There is extensive criticism of this photograph and its authenticity (including context as to potential captivity, pre-emptive starvation, etc.), which is enough to discuss in a blog post of its own. Source: Nga Manu*

I took the magnet up to pay and the cashier, looking up while scanning the item through, disapprovingly questioned ‘do you like possums, then?’. I always expect some sort of negativity or criticism to arise whenever possums come up in a situation where people are unaware of my work. However, this time I was on holiday and didn’t want this crudeness to ruin my good mood. It could have meant nothing and I was looking too much into it. I responded with a smile, “yes, I do”, and we moved on.

However, the more I think about this interaction, the more it reiterates to me just how ingrained the possum-as-‘pest’ narrative is in New Zealand – and that the glue of maintaining this narrative is the everyday social policing done by people within the dominant discourse towards others. While a lot of what I cover in my research consists of overt forms of conservation messaging (such as abusive forms of ‘pest’ control and acts of sanctioned cruelty), there is an equally important underbelly of more casual forms which assist in upholding the status quo. In that short interaction with the cashier, the dominant narrative against possums was being reaffirmed.





*Source: Blackwell Journal Tribune*

---

### **Holding the Line**

Considering the back drop of the current climate in New Zealand with COVID-19, this experience made me wonder: could the cashier's frankness be encouraged by the fact that most tourists in Akaroa that day were likely New Zealand domestic tourists? New Zealand, having closed their borders to visitors in 2020, is currently heavily reliant on domestic travellers instead of the droves of international tourists that normally visit the nation (the tourism industry experienced a staggering 47.5%, or \$7.7 billion NZD, decrease between 2020 and 2021<sup>2</sup>). In my own experience as someone born and raised outside of the country, and who has had friends from abroad visit (pre-COVID, of course), foreigners are more likely to balk at the idea of how possums are treated in 'pest' control measures here. Given this, I doubt this experience would have happened with an international tourist, infectious with their excitement of traveling in a new country. Rudeness is hardly good for business.

I wonder, then, was the cashier's disdain at my affection for possums a form of social policing – a small attempt to hold the proverbial line – where possums are 'pests' and I was on the odd one out for thinking otherwise? Anthropological research has explored the impact of peer-to-peer, or group-wide, social control to the internalisation of hegemonic ideas<sup>3,4</sup>, where informal forms of social control can be done through small interactions to regulate attitudes and norms, like the magnet experience I had. This led me to think about other products you could purchase in New Zealand that was made from pieces of possum bodies, such as clothing, food, and accessories, and to wonder how their acceptance as products has materialised.

## **‘Wear a POSSUM, Save a KIWI’**

*Typically when you see items for sale in New Zealand that feature possums, it will be paired with a description of why you, as this patriotic consumer, should purchase this item. In buying this piece, such a piece of clothing made from possum fur, your money works to eradicate possums through funding the possum fur industry. Your purchase also ‘protects’ native forests in New Zealand from these defoliating ‘predators’.*



*Encouraging patriotism through consumers with the “Wear a Possum, Save a Kiwi” signs at ‘The Octagon’, a gift shop in Dunedin, New Zealand. Source: NZ Daisuki*

Possum fur has been advertised as “cruelty-free”<sup>5</sup> and “eco-fur”<sup>6</sup>, with the American company, Eco-Luxury Fur, once using the catch phrase “all of the luxury, none of the guilt”<sup>7</sup> in an attempt to minimise the ethical problems with the fur industry to an international audience. While it is unclear whether this business is still in operation, similar mechanisms to Eco-Luxury Fur’s branding is present within the marketing of possum products in New Zealand today. Consider this excerpt from Comfort Socks, a New Zealand company seeking to sell its possum-Merino blend socks, writing:

*“The brushtail possum was introduced to New Zealand in the 1850s and this particular species of possum is now causing havoc on our natural wild life and native forests.*

*The need to control the number of possums in New Zealand, in order to protect the native wildlife, flora, and fauna, saw the development of a specialised fibre within the knitwear industry of New Zealand. This fibre incorporated New Zealand Merino wool, and Possum fur, a combination that proved to be successful. A superior, high quality yarn was created, that also worked to successfully help the ecology of New Zealand by creating a demand for possum fibre.”<sup>8</sup>*

While the fur is used for items like socks and jumpers, their flesh has been manufactured into pet food, such as the ‘Possum’ brand of chilled dog food rolls and the ‘Raw Essentials’ possum meat products. Just take a look at some of the wording used in attempt to sell these items:

*“Possum meat is sourced from processing facilities licensed by MPI. There are strict controls around land owner access, sourcing methods and poison declarations. Our dog rolls are made under stringent MPI production criteria. The removal of possums from our forests without*

*the use of pesticides encourages the regeneration of New Zealand forests and the protection of our native birds.”<sup>9</sup>*

[Possum](#)

*“Our possum is wild; soft-trapped then shot by licensed hunters... These wild, free-ranging animals are living off our rich NZ flora, which makes them an incredibly nutritious food for cats and dogs... They really are the ultimate food for our pets! Our supplier hunts and processes possum in accordance with the principles of ecological sustainable development, which has a positive flow-on effect to the conservation of New Zealand’s forests.”<sup>10</sup>*

[Raw Essentials](#)

While these are only three examples of companies which are trying to sell products that contain possums – they are entirely full of contradictions. In one sense, the motive for selling and purchasing these items is to assist in completely removing possums from the New Zealand ecosystem, while in another, these businesses – in the capitalist system – are dependent upon a steady supply of dead possum bodies in order to grow and make money. While these ideas are discussed in more detail in my thesis (hopefully finishing by mid-2022!), the experience had me reflect on relationships between social control and consumerism using the possum as a resource.



Source: Erica Berenstein

I have had many conversations like these with my PhD supervisor, Dr Annie Potts, who had published extensively in this area. The contradictory relationships that New Zealanders have with possums and their products makes it questionable whether the country truly does want to erase them. However, one thing is for certain. If we were to manage to completely eradicate possums, humans would have to face the enormity of damage we, as a collective society, have done to the New Zealand environment. Unfortunately, the pessimist in me thinks we will just find another poor animal to transfer the blame.

## References

- <sup>1,2</sup> Tourism Industry Aotearoa. (2021, March). *Quick Facts & Figures*. Tourism Industry Aotearoa. <https://www.tia.org.nz/about-the-industry/quick-facts-and-figures/>
- <sup>3</sup> Lindzey, G. E. (1954). *Handbook of social psychology. I. Theory and method. II. Special fields and applications*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
- <sup>4</sup> Cusson, M. (2015). Social Control. In James G. Wright (Ed.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences* (Second Edition). Elsevier Ltd.
- <sup>5</sup> Stock, R. (2016, July 7). *NZ Possum Fur Industry Wants to Prove It's Cruelty-Free*. Stuff. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/81851424/possum-fibre-and-fur-industry-wants-to-prove-its-crueltyfree>
- <sup>6</sup> Wear New Zealand. (2022). *Possum Fur*. Wear New Zealand. <https://wearnewzealand.com/fashion-catalogue/possum-fur>
- <sup>7</sup> Portland Business Journal. (2008, March 16). *Brushtail Possum: 'All of the Luxury, None of the Guilt'*. Portland Business Journal. <https://www.bizjournals.com/portland/stories/2008/03/17/newscolumn1.html>
- <sup>8</sup> Comfort Socks NZ. (2022). *About Us: Possum-Merino*. Comfort Socks. <https://www.comfortnz.com/view/about-us/possum-merino>
- <sup>9</sup> Superior Pet Food. (2022). *Possy Supreme Dog Roll*. Superior Pet Food. <https://superiorchunky.co.nz/supreme-possy/>
- <sup>10</sup> Raw Essentials (2022). *Raw Possum for Dogs and Cats*. Raw Essentials. <https://www.rawessentials.co.nz/education/possum>

*For those just arriving to this website, Framing Speciesism is a research activism blog written by me, Emily Major, that seeks to explore how we 'frame', or think about, animal species. The current project focuses on the framing of the brushtail possum in Aotearoa New Zealand, which is the subject of my doctoral research at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. I have dedicated my life to serve all species of animals – particularly those who are discarded, exploited, or demonised. Thank you for your time!*