



[Michael Tobias](#), Contributor Published in Forbes

5/20/2011 @ 08:36PM |1,590 views

God's Country: The New Zealand Factor



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New Zealand may well be the most desirable tourist destination in the world. It is certainly among the most beautiful island nations on the planet, its biodiversity magnificent in every respect. New Zealand's artistic and scientific communities are remarkable; the nation's politics a model of true democracy in action. In fact, there are so many wonderful things to say about the country that my co-author Jane Gray Morrison and I were hesitant, in our newly-released Dancing Star Foundation book, God's Country: The New Zealand Factor, to lavish too many superlatives on a country that might find it difficult to live up to our shared belief in, and love of, this particular nation, her people and her wildlife.

With just over 4 million human occupants, approximately 80 endemic bird species (including those sea birds which visit and breed there), three native bats and countless marine mammals, but no snakes or other predators in the normal sense (other than Man himself), New Zealand – for some 80 million years – has enjoyed relative tranquility.

Then things started to change. Settlers from England, Norway and elsewhere brought cows and sheep and dogs and (inadvertently) mice and rats. Possums were deliberately introduced in the early 1800s for the purposes of hunting and a fur trade (a tragically omnipresent fact today: possums kill native biodiversity). The result of this misstep in many decades past: conservation in New Zealand has meant, in many guises, killing: the

killing of bio-invasives. Not just the “eradication” of possums, but the killing of three introduced members of the Mustelid family, namely, stoats, weasels, and ferrets, whose rapacious hunger for native birds (along with that similar hunger on the part of three species of rats, feral cats, dogs, and mice) has exerted horrific impacts upon native species who for millions of years had no concept of fear and are, today, sitting ducks.

This is where immuno-contraception for predators (that might necessitate genetically modified organisms) has become a major public and scientific debate as in few countries. Where human rights versus animal rights has taken on dimensions that countries like the United States can scarcely identify with, given the fact North American birds and other mammals co-evolved with native predators, whether coyote, bobcat, mountain lion, rattle snake or wolverine. Such creatures never existed in New Zealand. The country’s native birds, like the Kiwi, after whom the resident locals have nick-named themselves, never had to worry about being eaten and thus, in a few cases, gave up the need of flight, saving their energy, and becoming ground dwellers (Kiwi and Kakapo, for example, not to mention the numerous species of now extinct Moa as well as a giant penguin nearly the size of the equally giant penguin fossils found recently just South of Lima, Peru).

New Zealand has been called a “capital of extinctions” as a result of the human introduction of those aforementioned non-native mammalian predators. A pet dog once devastated an entire penguin rookery in a single evening on the South Island a few years ago. In addition, there are thousands of invasive plant species, like Darwin’s Barberry or Chilean Fireweed, in addition to non-native wasps that compete for tree sap with native parrots -the two sub-species called Kaka, or *Nestor meridionalis*.

New Zealand is unique in a myriad of ways, not just because parrots and penguins live side by side, but in the fact that much of her foreign exchange income comes from the sale of animals, shipped live or dead, as well as animal by-products like wool and dairy products. An inordinate amount of New Zealand land has been given over to pasturage for grazing farm animals, a percentage much higher than in the majority of all other nations.

For these, and countless other reasons, New Zealand is truly a template for the study of human nature and ecology. The country probably has more scientists, artists, intellectuals and environmentalists per square kilometer than any other political entity in the world. Her farmers are among the most hardworking, well-read, witty and generous of any. And her history is one that is inextricably tied to the arts, science and exploration. Mark Twain did stand-up comedy in Dunedin after going bankrupt in Connecticut; visits by Charles Darwin, Captain Cook and the great painter William Hodges, as well as (allegedly) Medieval Chinese mariners. Not to mention the original settlers, the glorious Maori and Maorori indigenous cultures.

New Zealand was also the first nation in the world to give women their rights back; to suggest that Antarctica be declared a World Park; and to make itself the first nuclear free nation.

New Zealanders who read of such superlatives will yawn, or exhibit knee-jerk reactions of one sort or another, as should be expected. They share something of a conspiratorial secret (the reason most Kiwi college students who explore the world upon graduation

typically return to New Zealand: they know they are living in one of the best countries on earth). Indeed, for most of the world, this is a democracy that represents what a human paradise must look like.

Which is why my co-author, Jane Gray Morrison and I chose New Zealand as a fitting example of a test-case for what the country has exported by way of a welcoming (though somewhat debated) mantra, namely, “Clean, Green New Zealand.” Could it be true?

To find out more about the dialectics of this tourism slogan, and all of the “Middle Earth” glories that the “Lord of the Rings” locations made globally manifest, we suggest a visit to New Zealand. She can certainly use your tourist dollar revenues right now, especially in Christchurch, following one of the worst natural disasters in the nation’s history, nearly three months ago on February 22nd, Tuesday, at 12:51 pm, the 6.3 devastating earthquake.

Notwithstanding that tragedy, there is no better place to examine what a human paradise might, could, or should mean in the 21st century.

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