

Blue Antelope - a photo essay
Seeing is Believing / Velocity
February 2006

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Image © Naturalis / Kate Foster

Grateful acknowledgements to Leverhulme Trust; Hunterian Museum; Naturalis in Leiden, the Netherlands, for helpful support and use of images, and specifically to Merle Patchett, Maggie Reilly, Hein van Groouw and Chris Smeenk.

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We are an artist and geographer presenting work in progress from a series of works, called “BioGeoGraphies” enabled by Leverhulme Trust. This is a joint presentation based on shared words and images. Blue Antelope is the title of a forthcoming exhibition in the University of Glasgow, in autumn 2006.

This piece takes the form of a photo essay. It also marks something of a departure from the formal laws of physics. We want to put velocity to work as a conceptual and metaphorical resource; to imagine it a quality of experience shared, to think better, to see and believe with.

Our essay documents a recent research trip and ‘city hop’ between university museum collections in Glasgow and Leiden, the Netherlands. Both the Hunterian Zoology Museum in Glasgow and Naturalis in Leiden prize the remnants of a now extinct animal species, the Blue Antelope.

Our quest for the Blue Antelope began with the Glasgow skull which, slightly confusingly, is out on loan and mounted in a cabinet located next door to our venue this evening, in the Scottish National Museum. Through objects, the cabinet tells bit-part histories of “Extinct” Animals. Nearby stand others, containing relics of “Endangered” species, and other animals brought back, having teetered on the brink.



Image © Hunterian Museum / Royal Scottish Museum / Kate Foster

The skull suggests a vestigial afterlife for a species that once ranged across parts of Southern Africa. Remaining fragments are few and far between: additional to the skull, there are four skins in old European centres of learning, and sub-fossils recently unearthed in archaeological and paleontological sites in the Cape.

Unlike many charismatic members of the larger African animal kingdom, we know very little of the blue antelope.

How it lived among other animal communities remains a mystery. The exact manner of, and the conditions prompting, its demise remain, by and large, the stuff of educated guesswork.

A thin and patchy environmental history has led biologists to speculate that with only very limited geographical distribution in the South African Cape, the blue antelope was all but doomed from the outset.

If this was indeed the case, then it seems there was no great natural abundance to be squandered. First known to the scientific record in 1719, by 1799 the blue antelope was gone.

But in our present lives lived without it, searching questions remain, each haunted by the speed this fateful animal took in a given direction. Did numbers slowly dwindle towards extinction, or did it suffer from an accelerated decline? When did the process of decline reach terminal velocity?

Who were the chief agents in this the swiftest of falls from grace? How did those agents hasten its departure? And, how do these demographic unknowns press in on the sole surviving example of the male blue antelope?

In short, how does a culture reflect the animals it eradicates?

And, how do we come to believe what we see?



Thoughts of mortality – according to a language of populations in freefall, tailspin and crash – are inadvisable whilst you travel by plane.



Image © Hunterian Museum

Safely grounded, we were granted access to Naturalis, a most peculiar sentinel point for the city of Leiden. A towering vision of cosmopolis in a low country. Twenty floors sheathed in metallic snake skin, stuffed full, containing a quarter million animal specimens. Nature's own parliament building and funeral home.

Encountering the unique mounted skin was breathless stuff: a private, respectful viewing. The Blue Antelope now inhabits a climate controlled environment.

And a rarified curatorial atmosphere...



Image © Naturalis / Kate Foster

Other Europeans were there before us, 200 to 250 years ago. And non-European peoples knew the Blue Antelope for who knows how long before that.

These animals were shot - to be possessed, to be understood, to be eaten.

Pallas described this Leiden “type” specimen for science in 1766.
According to one translation of his work, members of this species:
‘were know as the blaauw bok, because when alive, they have a joyous blue
colour’.



Image © Naturalis / Kate Foster

A coloured coat later described as Heavenly - ‘Himmelblau’.

A blue which, legend has it, in death faded and bleached to brown. Leaving
behind a baleful face.

Further “shots” follow.



In any engagement with death...



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Is it through the eyes that we believe? On encountering the animal - in the skin if not the flesh – desire for other kinds of knowing can assert themselves. For things taken away, and for all that remains: shame, grace and awe, felt by association. Fleeting flashes of renewal.



Image © Naturalis / Kate Foster

How should a wide-eyed encounter be undertaken? Artistic sensibilities push the urge to draw, to understand the animal's form and context, to shift medium, and extend the frame of vision beyond what could be “captured” with camera lens.

Touch offers further temptation, in spite of institutional rules for specimen preservation. In order to be more fully in its presence.

A more measured form of understanding would be to describe it within a body of knowledge, to claim it for an academic discipline or sub-discipline.

But, whichever way, and however hard, we try, closeness and intimacy can be thwarted. Efforts to get under the skin might tell us as much about ourselves.

What has been recounted here? By one narrative measure, an obscure case of animal extinction, prompted by an incomplete museum object history. Or, perhaps a tell-tale, a parable, even an existential fable, that forewarns the fate of other species currently speeding their way towards extinction? Here, velocity is a fearsome force to be arrested.



To avoid destiny. And, a future given to be mentioned only in dispatches such as this.

A last word and image for the dear departed.

Godspeed you Blue Antelope.