

Chapter 16

# Tasmanian Tiger

Precious Little Remains

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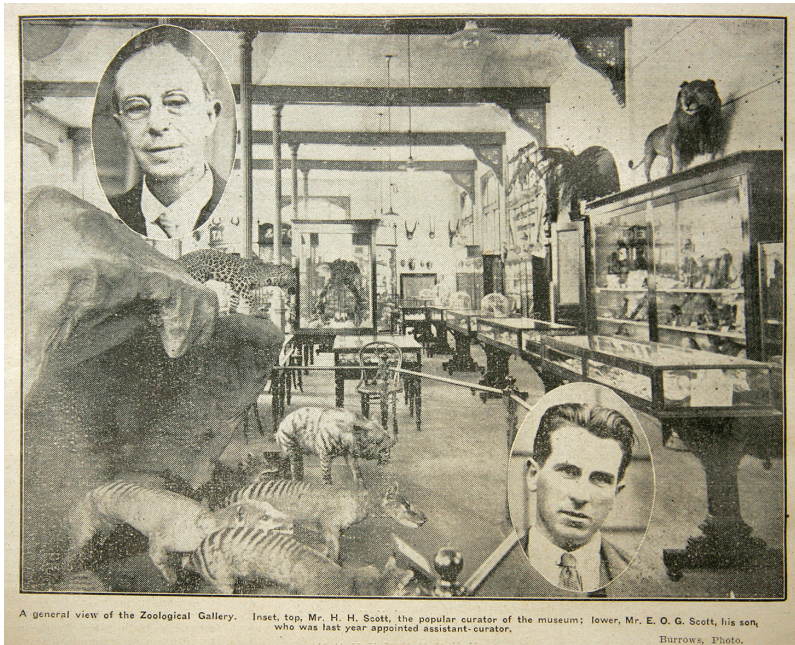
## Introduction

The thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), is integral to Tasmania's historical and cultural identity and is recognized globally as an icon for extinction.<sup>1</sup> Having lived alongside Tasmanian Aboriginal people for over 40,000 years this unique species was driven to extinction just 133 years after European invasion.<sup>2</sup> Today, some people believe that the thylacine still exists, hidden in the remote wilderness of Tasmania's rugged west coast. Why do they continue to believe that the elusive thylacine will one day be caught in front of the cameras? Why do 'true believers' still 'go bush' searching for evidence of its survival? The lack of irrefutable evidence of the species continuing existence, and our scientific understanding of the population dynamics of large carnivores, should be justification enough for the community to accept extinction. These unfounded beliefs appear to stem from a lack of understanding of thylacine phylogeny, biology and ecology. What could we, the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (QVMAG), do to correct these misconceptions? This communal misunderstanding positioned the museum as the nexus of thylacine education.

The QVMAG was established in 1891 in Launceston, northern Tasmania, in the heart of what was thylacine country. The museum's vision is: 'Our Country, Our People, Our Stories: QVMAG is a place where our community explores, connects and is inspired', which is extremely applicable to the thylacine. The museum's thylacine collection and archives are

significant locally, nationally and internationally. It holds five thylacine mounts, eight complete skulls (cranium and mandibles), one cranium, two sets of mandibles and four sets of assorted post-cranial elements, as well as associated documentation. There are also fourteen lots of thylacine cave deposit material in the geology collection. QVMAG has exhibited thylacines since at least 1908, when one (possibly two) mounts appeared in a display case.<sup>3</sup> The next photographic record of thylacines on display is from 1931, with four thylacines appearing in a diorama named ‘Carnivore Rock’ alongside other ‘brute creatures’ – a vulgar hyena and a sly fox, all overlooked by a leopard (Illustration 16.1).<sup>4</sup> The thylacines were arranged in a staggered, radiating fashion, which gives the appearance of a ‘pack’ started into action, one baring its teeth. This presentation would have done little to placate the community’s fear and hatred of the species at a time when it was on the brink of extinction. The three thylacines that are clearly visible in Fig. 16.1 remain in the museum collection today.

The thylacine holds a special place in the hearts and minds of the Tasmanian community. To this day people still report sightings and bring thylacine ‘evidence’ to the museum. However, over this past decade there has been a steep decline in ‘true believers’ asking to be heard. Fewer ‘old timers’ are relating their sightings and historical interactions, while younger Tas-



**Illustration 16.1** The QVMAG zoology gallery in 1931 showing the ‘Carnivore Rock’. *Weekly Courier*, 17 June 1931, p. 4.

manians are producing weather-worn skeletal remains questioning their identity, or rediscovered historical documents that may contribute to our combined knowledge of the species. This change in demographic, and their respective 'evidence', reflects Tasmania's ageing population and their differing positions on the species. We are seeing the replacement of a cohort that has first-hand accounts of the thylacine, or are willing to continue the search, with a younger generation that accepts that the thylacine could not have survived overharvesting, competition and anthropization.

This recent shift in attitudes is a small part of the continuum of changing attitudes to the species since European invasion. The earliest drawing of the thylacine produced by a European settler, the surveyor George Prideaux Robert Harris in 1808, reflected that generation's love of natural history and species discovery;<sup>5</sup> however, the artist delivered a misshapen and dangerous-looking animal, somewhat like a hyena. The 'fierce predator' imagery, and choice of language, influenced attitudes and actions up to, and after, extinction.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in the 1920s, there were growing but futile calls for thylacine conservation; however, these were drowned out by the more vocal 'eradication' lobby. From the death of 'Benjamin', the last captive thylacine, in 1936, through to the 1980s, searches for remnant populations took place. This delusional, head-in-the-sand attitude gave the community false hope that extinction had not occurred at their hands, and that the species persisted in Tasmania's remote south-west.<sup>7</sup> There were even plans hatched to relocate the thylacines to an island *when*, not *if*, they were found,<sup>8</sup> the justification being that they would be better off in some form of captivity than in the wild. Authorities declared the thylacine extinct in 1986, fifty years after 'Benjamin' had died at the Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart. There were still people, mainly older Tasmanians, who insisted that the thylacine was still out there, but by this time the 'fierce predator' image was being replaced by an elusive creature awaiting rediscovery.

At the same time as mortality was overcoming these elderly 'true believers', younger generations were coming through with a better appreciation of the depth and breadth of human impacts on whole ecosystems and landscapes. They understood that parts of Tasmania – once truly remote and considered thylacine refuges, like the forests in the west and south-west – had now been opened up to industrial logging, mining, hydro-power generation and tourism. They also understood that these forests were as inhospitable for the thylacine as they were for humans. These younger Tasmanians were not looking for the thylacine, but for thylacine artefacts and historical information. Fewer and fewer sightings, photographs and footprint casts of the extant but cryptic, more and more relics of the long lost.

That is my experience and interpretation of the recent changes in attitudes in our community, and I credit part of that change to the museum's exhibition about the thylacine, 'Tasmanian Tiger: Precious Little Remains', and the accompanying book by the same name. These were initiated at a time when alleged sightings and the presentation of physical evidence were a common occurrence at the museum, and amateur searches continued in Tasmania's wilderness. We were spending hours with 'true believers' and 'old timers' in a futile attempt to refute their 'evidence', and correct their understanding of biology, ecology and extinction. We felt it was time to put together an exhibition that shared the full story of the thylacine, to effectively draw a line under this extinct species, and to highlight that mistakes could be repeated today, threatening a suite of Tasmanian wildlife with extinction, which was surely where the community's energy should be focused. However, the research needed for this exhibition and book was considerable and, as we progressed, we found that our focus changed.

This chapter will explore the balancing act of educating the public about the tiger's life history and the many drivers for extinction, and the need to dispel myths and factoids, while also tracing the necessity to simultaneously record and celebrate the historical and cultural aspects of the thylacine. Firstly, I will reflect on our background work, making passing comments on the exhibition, before exploring how the thylacine was portrayed in our exhibition.

From inception to completion, this project was a challenging journey in itself; facts were scarce, historical information was rich and misinformation was widespread. Also, one author (me) had no knowledge of this species, while the second author had had a decade of historical research. Yet this mismatch worked. As a thylacine novice and sceptic, I was able to question dogma and put forward alternative views and theories, while my colleague, who was well versed in the social history, focused on addressing the need for evidence, and collating and structuring historical and cultural content. This unlikely pairing first produced the definitive book on the thylacine, stretching back 25 million years, capturing its mystique and role in the environment, and then balancing this against the ignorance and its persecution at the hands of Europeans. In turn, the cross-disciplinary exhibition was developed to reflect the book's content, using a mixture of traditional object-based methods supported by Indigenous content, new technologies, and aural and tactile elements. *Tasmanian Tiger: Precious Little Remains* is a permanent record of the community's love-hate relationship with the thylacine, exploring environmental, economic and cultural aspects of the species demise in the face of unprecedented change and prejudice. It also highlighted the ongoing threat of extinction to other Tasmanian wildlife.

## Understanding the Thylacine

In this section I lay out the journey that we took to develop themes and content for the book and exhibition. My original vision was for purely scientific content that would bring to an end any delusions that the thylacine still lived. However, this was just a small component of what made it onto the floor.

### Peer Review

It was important to us to produce a permanent record, a peer-reviewed book, of our research, something from which the exhibition could be drawn. All research comes under scrutiny, but thylacine-related content will always attract more than its fair share of critics – the book was our way of dealing with this. It had to present the scientific evidence for extinction and its many drivers, as well as to reflect the historical and cultural importance of the species. The book explored four themes: (1) thylacine biology and ecology, and some of the drivers for extinction; (2) the many government-sponsored and private thylacine searches that occurred after it became a protected species; (3) the QVMAG thylacine collection, and the museum's role in the local and global thylacine trade; and (4) the thylacine as represented in early accounts, oral histories, newspaper articles, and tales.

Some elements of this work and background research were directly translated into exhibition content as they reflected the QVMAG's vision ('Our Country, Our People, Our Stories'). A very specific example was a sketch of an elaborate trapping system of fences, pitfalls and box traps installed by local landowner, Robert Stevenson. This highlighted his familiarity with thylacine and his awareness of its behaviour. The evidence of Stevenson's prowess was displayed with the sketch, a multi-skin thylacine buggy rug. Another element was first-hand recollections of the thylacine, made available as audio recordings – the visitor needed to hear, not read, these to fully appreciate that this species had been alive, experienced and lost within living memory, and was not some temporally distant legend. Another part of the book that was translated directly into the exhibition was 'Dilger's tiger', the museum's best thylacine mount with the best provenance, and the supporting museum correspondence about its acquisition, which related a financial 'scandal' of sorts. Finally, but one of the most important elements from the book, was the Indigenous content. There is a paucity of historical information about the First Tasmanians relationship with the thylacine, yet the exhibition was an opportunity for contemporary Indigenous views and stories to be told through art and language.

We will return to the exhibition content in more detail later.

## Science

The priority for me was the science, as this would solve our ongoing problem of dispelling common fallacies and sightings that could never be substantiated. We synthesized what was known – and just as importantly what was not known – about the thylacine, and the many factors that contributed to its extinction.

We explored convergent evolution, pre-European Tasmania and the traditional land management practices of the First Tasmanians, the government bounty scheme enacted to eradicate the thylacine, the wider demand for live and dead specimens as they became rare, and the introduction of European farming methods and sheep. The result? Extinction. The reason? The interplay between multiple factors, all stemming from European invasion.

However, during this process of digesting, distilling and interpreting facts, figures and models, it became clear that we were doing an injustice to the cultural importance of the thylacine. We needed to do more than simply educate the community about the *science* of the species and extinction. In fact, early on in our scientific research it was evident that we first needed to understand the British Empire's contemporary views of the natural world for us to properly interpret the quick, dramatic and disastrous transformations brought about by Europeans in Tasmania, and how this led to the thylacines demise. In short, 'brute creatures', particularly predators, were considered an economic risk and a threat to the safety of explorers and settlers, and thus should be killed.

## Language

This was the view of the government of the day and the rural constituency to which they were closely linked. Indifference, fear and ignorance ruled, and is reflected in the language used in reference to the thylacine: primitive, inferior, skulking and stupid; savage, cowardly and treacherous; flexible and powerful predator; vicious, furious and surly; child stealer; undesirable, pest, sheep killer; vermin to be eradicated. Who would want such a beast living near them. Yet there was a love-hate relationship, particularly as the thylacine became rare in the early 1900s. It was referred to as a most singular and novel creature; affectionate, timid, shy and misunderstood. There was community interest in management measures that would preserve the species; official recognition as a protected species, reserves, captive breeding programmes and a prohibition of thylacine exports. Unfortunately, economics outweighed conservation. It was most unfortunate that the thylacine was a valuable commodity alive or dead, with trappers, furriers, bounty and trophy hunters, museums and zoos, all driving demand for the

thylacine. Plus, sheep farmers were never interested in making real economic sacrifices in order to preserve the species.

This multitude of views are presented in the exhibition as oversized facsimiles of historical newspaper articles, editorials and advertisements, interspersed with historical images of the thylacine as a trophy or captive beast. Observers of the time drew on their existing knowledge of nature, and specifically in this case of striped carnivores; the thylacine was immediately likened to the then exotic and dangerous tiger as ‘carnivorous and voracious’.<sup>9</sup> By the 1880s thylacines were being bought and sold. Advertisements reflecting their value as a commodity were common; ‘perfect, large Native Tigers, Devils . . . and Platypus. All these I want dead’ advertises a furrier;<sup>10</sup> ‘For Sale – Native tiger, very quiet, feeds well’, presumably sold as a pet. By 1880, the thylacine was an established threat to sheep farming in the eyes of landholders, and a real risk to personal safety. A boy aged 11 was ‘dragged a considerable distance by the savage beast. . . . residents in the vicinity are greatly concerned at the presence of such an undesirable visitor’.<sup>11</sup> And let us not forget the government bounty scheme for the ‘destruction of native tigers’.<sup>12</sup>

The public debate weighing up conservation against eradication continued to appear in the newspapers until well after the last known thylacine died. Arguments for the necessity of preservation and the importance of sanctuaries were countered by farmers like the previously mentioned Robert Stevenson, who wrote that he would openly flout laws protecting the species and ‘pop a rifle bullet into a tiger . . . right in the neck’.<sup>13</sup> The exhibition reflected the community’s attitude at that time, including in the language used, and it was an economic one – more valuable dead or in captivity.

## Searching

It was clear that the government and community knew the thylacine was in demise from about 1910, yet they were incapable of action. It was in the 1930s, when the species was probably functionally extinct, that there was real interest in searching for remnant populations, primarily to protect, but sadly also to exploit financially in different ways.

There were many formal searches. Six decades (1930s–1980s) of government-sponsored searches came to nothing. From the 1950s to the 1980s, recognized researchers and research organizations dominated the search effort, using more advanced techniques as technology developed. Private searches continue to this day, although the premise has changed through time. No irrefutable evidence of the species survival has ever been found. Since the 1980s there have been many searches that have been fi-

nancially ‘inspired’: some based on large monetary rewards, others attracting corporate sponsorship; some cashing in on media income, and others taking advantage of paying tourists wanting to join the mystique of the search. The only evidence from these latter searches is the ongoing monetary value of the thylacine.

The decades of search effort and the ‘evidence’ of thylacine survival feature heavily in the exhibition and are discussed below.

### Cultural Searches

The final, most important and culturally significant type of search is the informal search by the ‘bushy’ – the ‘true believer’ who still ‘goes bush’ in search of the elusive Tasmanian tiger. It is these people and their tales of strange animal calls and the flash of a striped hide in the undergrowth that keeps the dream alive and feeds the community’s ongoing interest and belief. No amount of science will change their views – they heard what they heard and they saw what they saw. These people and their stories hold a certain place in Tasmanian society, and if ever conversation turns to the thylacine, then their tales will be heard and nobody will refute them. It is this ongoing individual belief, along with the community’s acceptance of their belief, that needed to be celebrated in the exhibition ‘Tasmanian Tiger: Precious Little Remains’.

And so, at this juncture, we had a clear understanding of what the exhibition would contain alongside the science; it was content that reflected the attitudes of the past, and preserved the memory of the thylacine *and* of the community who knew it first-hand, and who continue to believe in its existence.

### Exhibition Content

With the above-mentioned understanding clear in our minds, we set to distil this into two overarching objectives: firstly, to provide the audience with information about the thylacine and its extinction, and to empower them to contribute to the protection Tasmania’s current list of threatened species from extinction; secondly, to link thylacine objects, images and stories with people and places, and with the attitudes, decisions and actions of the past.

This multidisciplinary exhibition combined artistic, scientific and historical elements. To achieve this, we loosely employed the VARK learning style.<sup>14</sup> In short, we combined visual, aural, reading and kinesthetic (doing/tactile) elements to better engage the individual, rather than broaden en-



gement. Not every element could be reproduced in each of these learning styles. Instead, the intention was to provide flexible communication of our main messages to ‘deepen’ the experience. Equally, particular elements were best presented in particular ways. For instance, you cannot *hear* a thylacine skull with a hatchet cut across the sagittal crest, or *hear* a map intended as a visual guide. However, the stories and tales of thylacine interactions are best *heard* from the mouth of a ‘true believer’. The combination of VARK-inspired engagement was intended to give the audience a deeper and more meaningful experience and understanding of the thylacine.

Below is a description of the exhibition content and its themes and subthemes, and the messaging embedded within.

### **Historical Film**

The first thing, and one of the last, that the visitor sees in the exhibition is historical film footage of captive thylacines in the London and Hobart zoos. On entry, the visitor views dog-like creatures held in poor conditions, some being taunted to ‘perform’ for the audience. However, as they leave the exhibition, with their new understanding of the species and persecution, they see a very different creature.

### **Indigenous Perspective**

The first voice heard was that of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, which had lived alongside the thylacine for about 43,000 years. The First Tasmanians have an oral history, and so there are no written records of their ancestral relationships with the thylacine. To capture the Indigenous perspective, Aboriginal artist, Vicki West, produced a thylacine sculpture, titled *Luna 2*, from marine bull kelp, a traditional construction material, as well as netting, twine and recycled fabric (see Illustration 16.2). It was a response to the similarities seen between the story of the thylacine and that of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The sculpture, to quote West,

responds to the mythical status of the thylacine, ongoing stories of sightings challenging notions of extinction, and a world in which extinctions have become part of everyday. The history of the ‘extinction’ of the thylacine closely parallels the extinction myth of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, with both having a bounty on their heads under colonial rule, and with both being seen as pests in their own environment. The impact of this ‘cleansing’ of the landscape to conform to colonial pastoral ideals continues to be felt today.



Illustration 16.2 Vicki West, *Luna 2*, 2014. Published with permission.

Alongside West's sculpture is a painting by Indigenous artist Lisa Kennedy. Titled *tebrakunna*, it reflects the concept of long-practised traditional land management practices, mutual hunting grounds, and a continuing culture. Tasmanian Aborigines shaped the landscape and ecology of Tasmania through the deliberate use of fire. They maintained a stable ecosystem that met their needs, and inadvertently those of the thylacine, for thousands of years. Alongside this artwork is a quote by Aboriginal historian, Lyndall Ryan,<sup>15</sup> that describes this traditional practice: 'On the heaths and plains behind their coasts, which they kept open by firing, the men hunted kangaroos, wallabies and emus, and the women hunted possums and other small mammals'. The same benefit was extended to the thylacine.

Europeans recorded Aboriginal language and custom, and two examples are included alongside the Indigenous content. Firstly, there is a selection of traditional thylacine names from across Tasmania. This reflects the wide distribution of both the thylacine and the First Tasmanians, reinforcing Aboriginal ownership of the land and their knowledge of the thylacine.

Finally, one of the earliest European records of Indigenous custom relating to the thylacine is told. George Augustus Robinson, 'conciliator' between settlers and Aborigines, recorded the following account when there was bad weather after his men killed a thylacine: 'The cause of this bad weather is attributed to the circumstance of the carcass of the hyena being left exposed on the ground, and the natives wondered I had not told the white men to have made a hut to cover the bones, which they do themselves, make a little house'.<sup>16</sup>

This mix of contemporary Indigenous art, historical language and the retelling of custom reminds the audience that the thylacine lived alongside the First Tasmanians for millennia. Would Tasmania still have the thylacine today had traditional ownership and land management methods

not been pushed aside by the fear and ignorance of Europeans, and their farming practices?

### Science

Considerable effort went into interpreting the species and its extinction without overcomplicating the messaging. This was achieved by displaying mounts, skeletal elements, scientific illustrations and photographs, models and a reproduction pelt, all with supporting object labels and text panels. The main case display for this theme featured four elements (Illustration 16.3). Firstly, the mount of an Australian dingo (*Canis lupus dingo*) appears opposite that of a female thylacine. These represent the concept of convergent evolution, the process whereby two unrelated species evolve similar traits as a result of having a similar ecological niche. This particular thylacine mount was displayed because it is very unique – its pouch is open and four everted teats are visible. A strategically placed mirror allows the viewer to see into the pouch. This serves two purposes: it differentiates marsupials (the thylacine, kangaroos, possums, Tasmanian devil, etc.) from placental mammals (the dog, dingo, hyena, etc.); it also identifies this thylacine as a mature female, and suggests that when she was killed, she likely had the care of four joeys that had probably been left in a den while she hunted.



**Illustration 16.3** This case display includes mounts of the Australian dingo (left) and a female thylacine (right), highlighting the concept of convergent evolution and the difference between placental and marsupial mammals (marsupial pouch inset). Also featured is a series of skulls of thylacine relatives, a diagnostic photograph, and fossil material. Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.

Secondly, the case includes a comparative photograph of a dog and thylacine skull, highlighting the diagnostic features. This element was included in response to the number of dog skulls being presented by the public for identification, in the hope that it was thylacine. There has been a dramatic reduction in skull identification enquiries since the exhibition opened.

Thirdly, the display included a series of skulls of related Tasmanian carnivore and insectivore marsupials. The intention was to highlight the similarities and differences in size and shape of these species, in turn highlighting the different ecological niches within the Tasmanian environment, and that the thylacine was the largest marsupial carnivore in living memory.

Lastly, there is a display of thylacine fossil remains; these may be around five thousand years old, reinforcing the species presence in Tasmania for millennia prior to the arrival of Europeans and dogs.

Accompanying this display were two text panels that distilled complex topics into just 150 words each. One described the thylacine, its ancestry, its historical distribution, virgin population at European invasion, an outline of European attitudes, and its short time to extinction. The second panel provided an overview of the drivers for extinction.

Adjacent to this were two touchable objects: a commercially produced thylacine model set on the floor for children to handle, and a replica thylacine pelt pinned to the wall like a tanned hide. These tactile elements balanced the dry, clear-cut scientific information, and it is obvious that they are well used, evidenced by the gentle and careful patting by the visitor. One last interactive 'scientific' element was a touchscreen computer featuring a 3D image of a thylacine skull. Developed using photogrammetry, this allowed the visitor to handle and enlarge the skull virtually. The organic surface texture, delicate suture lines, the large sagittal crest that once anchored massive jaw muscles, and impressive tricuspid teeth are fascinating. These features contrast with the handwritten registration number 1962:1:53 on the cranium. For me, this human mark reinforces uniqueness and individualism, but equally transforms it into an inanimate possession for cataloguing and shelving.

### **Dilger's Tiger**

A second thylacine is displayed in an adjacent case. This specimen is set against a natural setting that typifies thylacine habitat – open grasslands bounded by open eucalypt woodland. The case is darkened, silhouetting the thylacine against the backdrop. This is primarily a conservation measure to minimize light exposure to an already light-damaged specimen. However, it also adds an element of mystery. A sensor, triggered by the approaching visitor, slowly illuminates Dilger's tiger, an impressive adult male. The

visitor, with their new understanding of the species, is presented with the alpha male. They no longer see a dog-like animal. Instead, the marsupial features are obvious – the stiff tail, the low and rounded haunches, and the head – all clearly, but (genetically) distantly, kangaroo-like.

Dilger's tiger is the transition from the scientific to the historical, and epitomizes our second objective, to link objects, images and stories with people and places. This specimen is the most valuable of the museum's thylacine collection as it has excellent provenance, yet it was purchased well under market value. In short, Alfred Dilger snared this thylacine in 1912 when thylacines were rare and of considerable value. A miscommunication led Dilger to mistakenly sell the dead thylacine to the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery for just 20 shillings plus freight, instead of to Launceston's City Park Zoo for £3 (about three-week's wages). Dilger soon realized his costly error, and wrote to the museum, pleading for better compensation, arguing that he had 'carried him 10 miles, and I tell you he was a fair weight'.<sup>17</sup> He was unsuccessful in his request, as it was rare for a thylacine to be offered to the cash-strapped Tasmanian museums, who could not compete financially with higher-paying wildlife traders.

Dilger's tiger prepares the audience for the next display, 'Hunters and Collectors', a narrative on destruction. This uses historical photography, advertisements and editorials to relate how the thylacine was perceived, persecuted and killed. This sad and confronting display includes: the original 1888 notification of the government bounty scheme promoting the 'Destruction of Native Tigers',<sup>18</sup> competing with advertisements placed by a circus and a zoo for live and dead thylacines; disturbing imagery of zoo-held thylacines caged in substandard conditions by today's standards; proud farmers with gun in hand posing with their trophy thylacine; and a modified photograph of a thylacine, portraying it as evil and dangerous with needle-like teeth, horn-like ears and narrow-set eyes. Lastly, is a quote from respected zoo director and ornithologist William Le Souëf stating, 'Thylacines are now getting scarce as every man's hand is against them . . . these animals will probably become extinct before many years'.<sup>19</sup>

Extirpation was achieved by the people of Tasmania. The last-known wild thylacine was killed in 1930 by Wilf Batty (featured) at Mawbanna, north-west Tasmania; and the last captive animal died in Hobart Zoo in 1936 (featured). This triggered a series of searches for remnant populations, which is the focus of the next display.

### Sightings and Searches

'Sightings and searches' uses objects, images and text to explore the many attempts to rediscover the thylacine, and material considered to be 'evi-

dence' of its survival. The visitor is provided with a chronology of the many unsuccessful government-sponsored and formalized private searches, and the changing attitudes, methods employed and motives for continuing the hunt. Early searches may have been well intentioned but were futile. With sanctuaries in mind, two-person teams searched for evidence across 1,000–3,000 km<sup>2</sup> of rugged terrain in Tasmania's west and north-west.<sup>20</sup> This was simply a shot in the dark, and was reflected in the results – 'signs of thylacines' and 'footprints suspected to be those of a thylacine'.

More sophisticated searches in the 1960s through to the 1980s are detailed, and supported by objects. Firstly, a change in thinking around how and where to search for the thylacine was adopted by the Thylacine Expeditionary Research Team, and they mapped public records of sightings. An oversized copy of the original map is featured in the exhibition, and its content is revealing – most sightings were in north-east Tasmania and on the central plateau, two areas previously ignored by searchers. Is this evidence of a missed opportunity to have preserved the species in the 1930s? And does the data reflect thylacine distribution, or just human distribution?

This change in thinking around thylacine search effort was accompanied by a change in the technology available for collecting evidence. Snares were still being used right through to the 1980s,<sup>21</sup> and one is displayed with instructions on how to set it; yet one of the first rudimentary motion-activated cameras, used by Guiler in the 1960s, is also displayed.

Modern formalized private searches have morphed into a semi-commercial/commercial business, either producing content for the entertainment industry, or servicing a niche sector of the tourist trade. These searches use modern technology like the motion-activated cameras, but have taken on a more 'experiential' element, 'going bush' like the 'old timers' searching for 'evidence'. However, they are not 'true believers'; instead they are searching for the dollar, not the thylacine. This is reflected in the exhibition in a single, poignant image of a newspaper front-page article featuring foreign cryptozoologists, branded with the logo of a multinational corporation, with the headline 'TIGER HUNT. International team hopes to settle thylacine mystery once and for all'.<sup>22</sup> The world awaits their findings.

The final type of search presented is that of the 'true believer', the old bushman who is convinced that the thylacine persists. They know where (but will never tell anyone) and they have the evidence to prove it. Unfortunately, their 'evidence' never stands up to scrutiny. On display is a selection of 'evidence' donated to the museum – sheep and dog skulls, desiccated dog and Tasmanian devil scats, plaster casts of unidentifiable footprints, a blurry (and probably altered) photograph of wallaby, and the jawbone of a baby fur seal.

The stories of some of these ‘true believers’ are available in the exhibition as audio files. This aural element provides a personal connection between the visitor and a Tasmanian with a personal link to the thylacine. Some speakers recall sightings and interactions from their youth, at a time when thylacines still lived. Others confidently speak of more recent sightings and strange sounds, and employ a process of elimination to rule out other Tasmanian wildlife as an option. On reflection these are good old yarns, or tiger tales, that feed the imagination, but do not support survival. Finally, and most unhelpful to our modern-day mission to educate the public about the loss of the thylacine, is Robert H. Green, highly respected curator of zoology at QVMAG from the 1970s to the 1990s, who speaks authoritatively about the survival of the thylacine in remote Tasmania, and population growth. Green provided the ‘true believers’ with oxygen; we are now trying to quench that fire. In all, the audience benefits from hearing from these Tasmanians voicing their passionate beliefs, as it feeds remembrance of the species.

The ‘sightings and searches’ section poses the question to the audience, ‘Are they still out there?’ Having explored this far into the exhibition, the viewer is clear that the thylacine has not survived.

### **Gone but Not Forgotten**

The final display highlights how rarity and looming extinction increased global demand from the zoo, museum and university industries, the very entities that today would be integral to the preservation of a threatened species. A selection of images of museum-held skins, skeletons and poor taxidermy from around the world are interspersed with advertisements for the sale of live specimens, the imminent arrival of cashed-up foreign animal traders, expressions of admiration to shooters for having reduced thylacine numbers to record lows, and editorials from Tasmanians decrying proposed measures to protect the species. The thylacine was persecuted and exploited to the end; considered a pest to be exterminated, a commodity to be traded, but never valued as part of Tasmania’s unique wildlife. Instead, this exhibition shows that the thylacine’s value was as a mount in a public display or an articulated skeleton in the collections of the world’s museums, for endless study and reflection.

### **Conclusion**

This brings to an end the exhibition, with the exception of two cases of skeletal remains that can be studied up close. Some bones are easily identi-

fiable (ribs, skull, vertebra), others are harder to place, requiring the viewer to refer to the adjacent scientific illustration of an articulated skeleton. There are partially articulated limb and foot bones delicately wired together by an unknown person in the past for an unknown purpose, a string of vertebra on a length of fencing wire, a skull with an axe mark, another featuring handwritten notes scrawled across the snout identifying the collector, location and date.

Each of these specimens has its registration label attached relating its core data – who, what, when, where. On close inspection, nearly all labels lack data; we do not know where or when many of the specimens were collected, or their sex or age, or the collector. Without this information the question begs, what scientific purpose do these specimens serve, as they tell us nothing directly about thylacine biology, ecology, diet, habitat, distribution, population size, or fecundity. Other than being a potential source of DNA and morphometric data, the thylacine remains have next to no scientific value. So why does the museum retain them? It is for their historical and cultural value. They are objects of remembrance. The story of the thylacine is more about attitudes, places and people, and their decisions and actions.

The exhibition is a window into Tasmania's past, highlighting to this generation and future generations the mistakes of the past, so that we do not repeat them. As the visitor leaves the space, they are faced with a display of some of Tasmania's native wildlife, including a selection of endemic species that are vulnerable to, or threatened with, extinction unless we make environmentally sustainable decisions. There is no excuse for species extinction on our watch, and our exhibition 'Tasmanian Tiger: Precious Little Remains' shows our community that they have the power to ensure that the fate of the thylacine is never repeated.

**David Maynard** is the senior curator for natural sciences at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania. He took this role in 2012, and quickly came to realize the cultural and social importance of the thylacine to Tasmanians. Since then, he has seen a change in the community's attitude to the Tasmanian tiger, shifting from an unswaying belief that it survived in the remotest parts of Tasmania, to an understanding that the human hand has left no place for the thylacine to hide. He co-authored (with Tammy Gordon) the book *Tasmanian Tiger: Precious Little Remains*, from which the exhibition of the same name was developed.



## Notes

1. Kyne and Adams, 'Extinct Flagships'.
2. Department of the Environment, '*Thylacinus cynocephalus*'.
3. 'Launceston's Museum'. *Weekly Courier*, 14 January 1908, 81.
4. This image was reproduced in the article 'Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery', *Weekly Courier*, 17 June 1931, 4.
5. See Gates, 'Introduction'.
6. Freeman, 'Figuring Extinction'.
7. Maynard and Gordon, *Tasmanian Tiger*.
8. Guiler, *Thylacine*.
9. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 21 April 1805, 3.
10. 'Wanted' (advertisement). *The Mercury*, 14 September 1886, 1.
11. 'Country News'. *Launceston Examiner*, 6 April 1899, 7.
12. 'Re Destruction of Native Tigers'. *Launceston Examiner*, 5 March 1888, 1.
13. 'The Native Tiger', *Examiner*, 3 March 1937, 1.
14. Fleming, *VARK*.
15. Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines*.
16. George Augustus Robinson, *Friendly Mission*, 921.
17. A.W. Dilger, Letter to H.H. Scott, 4 June 1912. Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.
18. 'Re Destruction of Native Tigers', 1.
19. Le Souëf, *Wild Life in Australia*.
20. 'Move to Preserve Tasmanian Tiger. Sanctuaries Are Suggested'. *The Advocate*, 12 April 1937, 7.
21. Maynard and Gordon, *Tasmanian Tiger*.
22. 'Tiger Hunt'. *The Mercury*, 30 October 2013, 1.

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