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Colonial entanglements in extinction narratives: The afterlives of two Saint Lucia giant rice rats

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Abstract

European colonialism exposed islands to significant threatening processes that drove species to or near extinction. At the same time, they were regular sites of collecting living animals especially because of their high level of endemism. Natural history museums house animals that carry stories of colonial conquest over island ecologies. I argue that existing decolonising approaches to natural history museums do little to decolonise our human-non-human relationship with the species on display. Through a discussion of the extinction of Antillean rice rats in the Caribbean and the only two specimens remaining of the Saint Lucia giant rice rat (*Megalomys luciae* (Forsyth Major, 1901)), I emphasise the importance of connecting extinction narratives to the colonial causes of their disappearance. Three lessons follow to show how natural history museums can address their inherited colonial legacies in displaying extinct animal remains collected from colonised lands.

Keywords: Animal remains, endemic rats, anthropogenic extinction, museums, decolonisation, giant rice rats

Erasing colonial extinctions from public narratives

When the Grand Gallery of Evolution at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris reopened in 1994, its former bird gallery was transformed into the Room of Endangered and Extinct Species. The original interior dating back to the late nineteenth century remains in place, but the specimens now filling the cabinets are either extinct or threatened, with extinction classified according to area of geographical origin: France, tropical rainforests or islands. Over two hundred animals and plants are gathered here, testifying to the mass-extinction event that we are currently witnessing.

Most of the specimens on display link directly to French overseas colonial activities, yet there is very little recognition on the display labels of the connection between these activities and the extinction of the species, nor is there recognition of France as a former imperial power over these habitats. It corresponds with Anna Guasco's (2020, p. 11-12) observation of extinction narratives in the *Survival Gallery* at the National Museum of Scotland: 'although many of the endangered species discussed are from biodiversity "hotspots" in the Global South, topics such as the Global North's or former imperialist nations' ecological debt towards these areas are not addressed'.



It is only within the last few years that scholars and museum practitioners have started to analyse the colonial legacy of natural history museums. Subhadra Das and Miranda Lowe (2018, p. 8) uncovered how natural history museums convey a 'covert racism' by only including the contribution of white people to Western science, thereby alienating certain museum visitors from natural history museums. Such erasure of the colonised manifests itself through historical collections of plants (Kaiser, 2022), minerals (Gelsthorpe, 2021) and animals (Ashby and Machin, 2021; Middleton, 2021), examples that all show how the collecting of natural history specimens from former European colonies both oppressed people and relied on local and Indigenous people's knowledge that remain unrecognised in natural history museums.

To decolonise natural history museums, Das and Lowe argue (2018, p.11) that museum professionals 'need to do better at acknowledging past wrongs for what they are, and telling the whole of the story of science'. Ashby (2021, p. 35) makes a valuable remark in his analysis of the displays of Australian fauna, when noticing that 'decolonisation in museums is most commonly applied to human stories', despite the fact that colonisation has also impacted nature and how we relate to it (Plumwood, 2003). Decolonial approaches which focus mainly on how to make natural history museums more inclusive and diverse for people overlook the potential to change and challenge our relation to the natural world. As a counter to this approach, Guasco (2020, p. 15) proposes an inclusion of 'multispecies justice museum storytelling' into displays of extinctions. This has potential for addressing the museums' responsibility to inform the visitors about colonial oppression of island ecologies as stewards of some of the only surviving remains of now extinct endemic species.

Since they hold some of the only remains of past natures that existed in former colonies prior to European colonisations, it can seem peculiar that natural history museums do not address the damage of ecological systems caused by European extractive systems, especially because natural history museums themselves carry a colonial legacy of collecting and displaying animals from oppressed nations. One reason that Ashby and Machin (2021, p. 45) identify in their article on legacies of colonial violence in natural history museums is that certain objects, such as trophy specimens associated with game hunting, 'undermine museums' conservation messages'. They are therefore often removed from public displays instead of reinterpreted from decolonial perspectives (2021, p. 45). By applying

frameworks from postcolonial ecocriticism or postcolonial environmental humanities, which brings 'postcolonial and ecological issues together as a mean of challenging continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance' (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, p. 2), museums could interrogate their inherited coloniality also when it comes to the display of lost natures. This is best seen with the display of the dodo as a prime example of modern extinction caused by European activity on the island of Mauritius, but often natural history museums also relate its extinction to its evolutionary development as a flightless bird (Guasco, 2020, p. 2). Postcolonial environmental humanities respond to an excessive anthropocentrism within postcolonial studies and Eurocentrism within eco/environmental studies (DeLoughrey, Didur and Carrigan, 2015, p. xiv). Thinking through museum displays as spaces with colonial legacies that have contributed to biodiversity loss might allow new extinction narratives able to nuance the visitors' understanding of the mass extinction we experience today.

In this article, I argue that existing decolonising approaches to the natural history museums do little to decolonise our relationship with the species on display. Through a discussion of the extinction of Antillean rice rats in the Caribbean as a result of European colonisations and some remnants of them preserved and displayed in Western museums, the article argues for the importance of connecting extinction narratives to the colonial causes of their disappearance. It juxtaposes the historic collecting of individuals of Antillean rice rats with the present excavation of rice rat bones among archaeological remains. The historic remains of the now extinct species are all preserved in Western museums, all collected at a time when the species were on the brink of extinction. They constitute a collection of Caribbean origin but shaped by Western scientific norms as a desire to cataloguing the entire natural world (Barrow, 2009, p. 48). On the other hand, the discovery of the bone remains, uncovered from food waste deposits at Amerindian archaeological sites, reveals a past natural and cultural Caribbean reality that no longer exists.

A colonial extinction story

The first recorded encounter by a European of an Antillean rice rat in the Lesser Antilles was the French Catholic botanist, Jean Baptiste Du Tertre 1610-1687, as described in his book, *Histoire générale des îles Saint-Christophe, de la Guadeloupe, de la Martinique et autres de l'Amérique* (1654). On his mission to the Caribbean in 1640 he encountered rice rats in great numbers on the

island of Martinique. They looked vaguely like the black rats he knew from Europe but were of such great size that not even four European rats would weigh the same as one *pilori*, as he called them in his book. He described how the endemic rats served as a food source for the Amerindian population on the island and provided an account of how they prepared the rats.

They would singe off the rats' hair, then expose the rats to air overnight to get rid of their strong musky smell before boiling them (Du Tertre, 1654, p. 342; also see Allen, 1942, p. 91). Bonyhady (2019) reveals a similar relationship between First Nation Australians and the endemic long-haired rats in his book *the Enchantment of the Long-haired Rat*. He writes that 'the *majaru* [long-haired rat] enriched the Diyari's diet and constituted a great source of fat which the Diyari rubbed on their bodies to keep their skin soft ... The long-haired rat probably loomed large in the cosmology of most if not all Aboriginal groups who encountered it' (2019, p. 167). The long-haired rat played a significant role in creation stories of Australia and was enchanted by some First Nation Australians as a totem animal (2019, p. 168). While there is no firm evidence that the Antillean rice rats played a similar role for the Amerindians inhabiting the Lesser Antilles, archaeological remains do suggest that particularly the Taïons 'practised animistic and cemistic beliefs with some totemic and matrilineal remains in their social structures' (López, 2016, p. 454). But as López (p. 454) also points out, it is a difficult task to explore extinct societies when 'only archaeological remains are left and, occasionally, a few ethnohistoric ideologically-biased attestations.'

What is known about the co-existence of the rice rats and the Amerindians comes from Du Tertre's eyewitness account, and excavated bone fragments of the rice rats - with signs of butchery and burning marks - found at Amerindian archaeological sites from the 1970s to today (Wing, 2001, p. 114). This zooarchaeological material shows that 'the rice rats of the Lesser Antilles lived close to human settlements and crops areas' and that 'this tendency to commensalism was probably established since the first human occupation in the archipelago' (Durocher *et al.*, 2021, p. 441). Even though the rice rats were killed as a source for food by the Amerindians when they inhabited the archipelago 7000 years ago, the rice rats did not disappear from the archaeological record before the arrival of Europeans.

Our knowledge about the vast existence of Antillean rice rats in the Lesser Antilles comes

from the fact that they constituted an essential part of the Amerindians' diet. Molecular analysis of the bones shows that the Antillean rice rats inhabited the Lesser Antilles roughly six million years ago, possibly on oceanic dispersals from South America (Brace *et al.*, 2015, p. 1, Durocher *et al.*, 2021). The rice rats lived on almost all the Lesser Antillean islands - approximately twenty different species of rice rats once existed - which makes it one of the most significant adaptive radiations within the Caribbean islands (Brace *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). Species of rice rats are still being identified from the recovered bone material of the extinct species (Turvey *et al.*, 2010; Turvey *et al.*, 2012). But it is important not to limit the bone remains either to be a story about the Amerindians' diet or the evolutionary significance of the Antillean rice rats. As Trevathan (2017,43) explains 'there is a need ... for narrative and analysis to descend into the depths, to submerge in ecological devastation in the hopes of contemplating other future alternatives.' The uncovering of extinct animals among the remnants of equally extinct human populations offers insights into the natural and cultural past of the Caribbean islands - a reality that largely disappeared with European colonisations and is almost invisible in the islands today.

To return to Du Tertre's encounter from Martinique in 1640, he observed not only the endemic Antillean rice rats but also the influx of the black rats (*Rattus rattus* Linnaeus, 1758) that accompanied the European ships to the Caribbean islands (1654, p. 342). The black rat 'was feared and loathed in Europe because it was so destructive' (Bonyhady 2019, p. 13). On the ships and as unwelcomed neighbours in the colonies, rats were considered vermin that 'destroyed harvested grain and devastate food systems' (Cole 2016, p. 143). Rats of any kind had a bad reputation and it seems to have impacted the colonists' view on the endemic rice rats they encountered when colonising the Caribbean islands. The rice rat 'was said to live in burrows in the ground and against it the colonists waged war on account of its destructive habits in their plantations' (Allen 1942, p. 91). For the colonists the rice rats were not a source of food but became a pest when the Caribbean was transformed into cultivated landscapes dominated primarily by sugar canes. Eventually, it was the accidental introduction of black rats that caused the extinction of the Antillean rice rats (Turvey *et al.*, 2010, p. 767). The endemic rice rats had developed in isolation with few, if any, predators and were defenceless against the black rat that took over their habitats. As McNeill (1994, p. 317)

explains, rats were in general, throughout island communities, 'the single most consequential alien intruder,' by his phrasing, 'shock troops of ecological imperialism.'

Alfred W. Crosby (1986) coined the term *ecological imperialism* in his book of the same name, arguing that the success of European imperialism was a combination of ecological factors - especially since the European imperialists broke millions of years separation between continents and introduced sudden changes into otherwise closed ecosystems (Crosby, 2004, p. 7). It triggered biological changes that were often unintended but nevertheless made the colonisation of islands easier because of the instability it wrought on the environment (Crosby, 2004, p. 192). Crosby recognised that the introduction of various invasive species played a significant role for the success of the European colonisation of island spaces, but at the same time he also exempts the colonists from the responsibility of the ecological damage they caused. Yet islands became unstable when European settlers exploited island spaces of their resources and deployed the land to produce crops for the colonising countries (McNeill 1994, p. 302). They bear the responsibility of those detrimental changes, and museums are good places to inform the public about the connections between ecological losses and Western colonial activities abroad.

Colonial collecting of living animals

Only a handful of skin-based specimens of the Antillean rice rats from Martinique, St Vincent and St Lucia exist today (Specimens are held at the following institutions: Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle 2006-187, 1979-385, 2006-188, 1994-1329, 1883-312; Naturalis, Leiden 21287.b; London Natural History Museum 1850.11.30.6, 1853.12.16.2, 1855.12.24.201, 1897.12.26.1). These specimens were collected in the nineteenth century. The species no longer existed at the levels of abundance previously observed by Du Tertre in the early seventeenth century but were now considered rare by naturalists visiting the islands (Lorvelec *et al.*, 2007: p. 301). Animals were collected to establish a taxonomy system that should "contribute to the enterprise of cataloguing the globe's flora and fauna" (Barrow 2009: p. 48). Islands were regular sites of animal collecting because of their high level of endemism. As specimens were removed from their original context and placed inside Western collections, they immediately became part of a European rational project of knowing the entire world (Mackenzie, 2009).

The skin-based specimens which are the focus of

this paper, are the only two specimens of the Saint Lucia giant rice rat (*Megalomys luciae*) known to exist today. One specimen (MNHN-ZM-MO-1994-1329) is exhibited in the Room of Endangered and Extinct Species of the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle* (MNHN) in Paris. It came into the collection in 1851 and is described in the museum report, *Bulletin du Muséum National D'Histoire Naturelle*, from 1952: 'Megalomys Luciae (Forsith Major [1901]). One specimen mounted: 1 ♀ ad., brought back by M. De Bonnacourt; this animal lived in the Menagerie Jardin des Plantes from 25 August to 12 November 1851' (MNHN, 1952, p. 70) (translated from French). From this it appears that the specimen was brought or shipped to Paris alive by M. De Bonnacourt, who also contributed other specimens from the Caribbean islands to the *Muséum National D'Histoire Naturelle*. This Saint Lucia giant rice rat spent her last few months in the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes until she died. The dead body was afterwards handed over to the MNHN and mounted as posed taxidermy still existing today.

The second specimen of the Saint Lucia giant rice rat (NHM-1853.12.16.2) came into the collection of the National History Museum (NHM) in London in a similar way. In *The Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* (1849, p. 105), where all the living animals that came into their collection from 1833-1965 are recorded, one Saint Lucia giant rice rat also appears. It was presented to the Royal Menagerie in London November 1849 by lieutenant R.E. Tyler. The Saint Lucia giant rice rat died in 1852 after three years of captivity in London Zoo (Flannery and Schouten, 2001). It was handed over to the British Museum, later transferring to what is now called the NHM following the establishment of that institution, where it remains today. It was not prepared as a mount but is rather a study skin.

The establishment of the zoological department of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and the Zoological Society of London with London Zoo marks the rise of the modern zoo (Mitchell 2018, p. 418). They were both founded to foreground natural history. The scientific endeavour to classify the world's species led to the removal of exotic animals from their lands to enhance public knowledge and research. However, the display of exotic animals was not a new phenomenon. They had been around for centuries in various forms as fairs and menageries but the display of the 'wild' was often solely for entertainment before the development of the modern zoo. Menageries often had limited knowledge of the animals, their natural diets, breeding habits, natural grouping and life-styles (Hancock, 2001, p. 55), so the collected

animals did not tend to live long. Western European natural history institutions were fundamentally 'grafted onto a Eurocentric and essentially English concept' of the menagerie (Hancocks 2001, p. 17), and this is apparent in that museum collections often acquired animals exhibited in menageries and zoological gardens. Natural history museums not only represent pristine nature unaffected by humans but in fact also illustrate humans' desire to manage and control nature by exhibiting animals that have been in captivity (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 2002, p. 9).

While zoos are often heavily involved in animal conservation projects today, historically they have also been sites of animal extinction: the last known passenger pigeon (died 1914), Carolina parakeet (died 1917) and thylacine (died 1936), were all zoo captives. Similarly, the last Saint Lucia giant rice rat to be collected is the one that died in the London Zoo in 1852. No further specimens were collected, but the species was last reported seen in 1881 (Turvey *et al.*, 2009, p. 768).

Displaying colonial animal remains in museums

MNHN in Paris exhibits a collection of endangered and extinct species in the Room of Endangered and Extinct Species. The room contains over two hundred animal and plant specimens from the three Environments - islands, tropical rainforests and France. According to Cécile Callou, scientific responsible for the vertebrate collection at the MNHN, the gallery exhibits few specimens from mainland France (Callou, *pers comms*, May 2019). This is of course related to the historical founding of the museum where specimens were first collected from all around the world, especially French possessions during the colonial era, but it also indicates the uneven geographical distribution of endangered or extinct species in the world, where an overrepresentation belongs to tropical climates and islands (Vamosi and Vamosi, 2008; Tershy *et al.*, 2015).

The Room of Endangered and Extinct Species is dark with only light shed on the specimens inside the display cases that run down the walls on both sides of the room as well as the middle section. Jørgensen has observed that 'a room with animals in glass cases is an archive of animal bodies, but it is also an archive of animals portraits' (Jørgensen, 2022, p. 362). Jørgensen compares the animal portraits in this room with portraits painted using Dutch seventeenth-century *chiaroscuro* technique, where the only light shed on the subject is from a candlelight. It draws our attention to details and

stresses the fleeting nature of life that could easily be 'snuffed out.' (Jørgensen, 2022, p. 363). Even the specimens on display are at risk; if the specimen 'dies' through aging or damage, the record of the animal disappears with it. Every fifteen minutes a gigantic Renaissance clock goes off, reminding you that time is short for many of the species in this room, for some time is already out.

Within the room, the now extinct Saint Lucia giant rice rat sits upright on its hinds with its head bending forward and its forelegs folded together (Figure 1). The tail is between its legs as it sits on a small podium locked inside a wooden display case.

This Saint Lucia giant rice rat can be classified as a mounted taxidermy specimen, where the skin of the dead animal has been preserved to make it 'come alive'. The skull has been kept inside it, but the rest of its insides have been replaced with artificial material. Taxidermy literally means 'the arrangement of skin' (Poliquin, 2012, p. 10) so what the visitor sees replicates the original animal's external appearance, where only the eyes have been replaced with glass eyes. Even though the representation of it looks authentic, the taxidermy practice is not a neutral representation of an animal, but always reflects a human relation to the animal in how the skin is arranged (Alberti, 2011; Poliquin, 2012). It is a human creation of an animal and thereby also a human gaze on that animal. We can start to ask ourselves questions about the mounting choices: Why has the body been placed in an upright position on its hinds instead of all four legs? Why is the head bending down and not straight ahead? Viewers do not know the answers to these questions, but the decisions play a fundamental role in how they make meaning and respond emotionally to the animal.

The Saint Lucia giant rice rat is exhibited in a glass case with three other taxidermy mammals from the Caribbean islands: a Martinique giant rice rat (*Megalomys desmarestii* Fischer, 1829), which is also extinct, a Cuban solenodon (*Solenodon cubanus* Peters, 1861) that still exists in Cuba but is categorised as endangered, and a red-rumped agouti (*Dasyprocta leporina* Linnaeus, 1758) from Guadeloupe, which is categorised as least concern since they are abundant in north-eastern South America. These are all examples of the rich fauna of flightless mammals that existed within the Caribbean islands before they experienced 'the world's highest level of historical mammal Extinction' (Turvey *et al.*, 2017, p. 918), but this is not recognised alongside the display case. The display text next to the body of the Saint Lucia



Figure 1. Taxidermy Saint Lucia giant rice rat (*Megalomys luciae*) at the MNHN (MO-1994-1329). (Photo credit: Gitte Westergaard)

giant rice rat reads “the Saint Lucia giant rice rat disappeared under circumstances that remained unclear. The species is known only by two specimens, one of which is presented here.” [translated from French].

While it is true that the exact reason for the disappearance of the Saint Lucia giant rice rat remains unknown, there is enough archaeological evidence to connect the disappearance of the rice rats to European colonisations of the Caribbean. ‘Radiometric dates available for archaeological horizons from different islands show that many taxa definitely survived until close to the time of first European arrival in the region around 500 years ago’ (Turvey, 2010: p. 767). How colonial activities led to the extinction of many species could easily be incorporated into the display label. It gives the museum an opportunity to both discuss European colonisations, the spread of invasive species, global trade and the vulnerability of island spaces. It would also be appropriate to reveal that

Saint Lucia was a French colony, which would explain why the Saint Lucia giant rice rat is still on display in France far away from its original habitat, as well as how the species was collected in the wild and spent its last years in a menagerie. The missing information about the correlation between European colonisations and the consequential extinction rate in the Caribbean shadows which anthropogenic impact caused the disappearance of the rice rats. There are limitations to what information can be included in the display label, but in the context of this gallery the museum does not seize the opportunity to explore fundamental topics that would explain why the specimen is in their collection and no longer exists in nature.

The second existing Saint Lucia giant rice rat is in the collection at the London Natural History Museum (NHM) stored in the magazine of the museum (Figure 2). If you did not know it was a Saint Lucia giant rice rat, you would not have guessed it from its appearance.

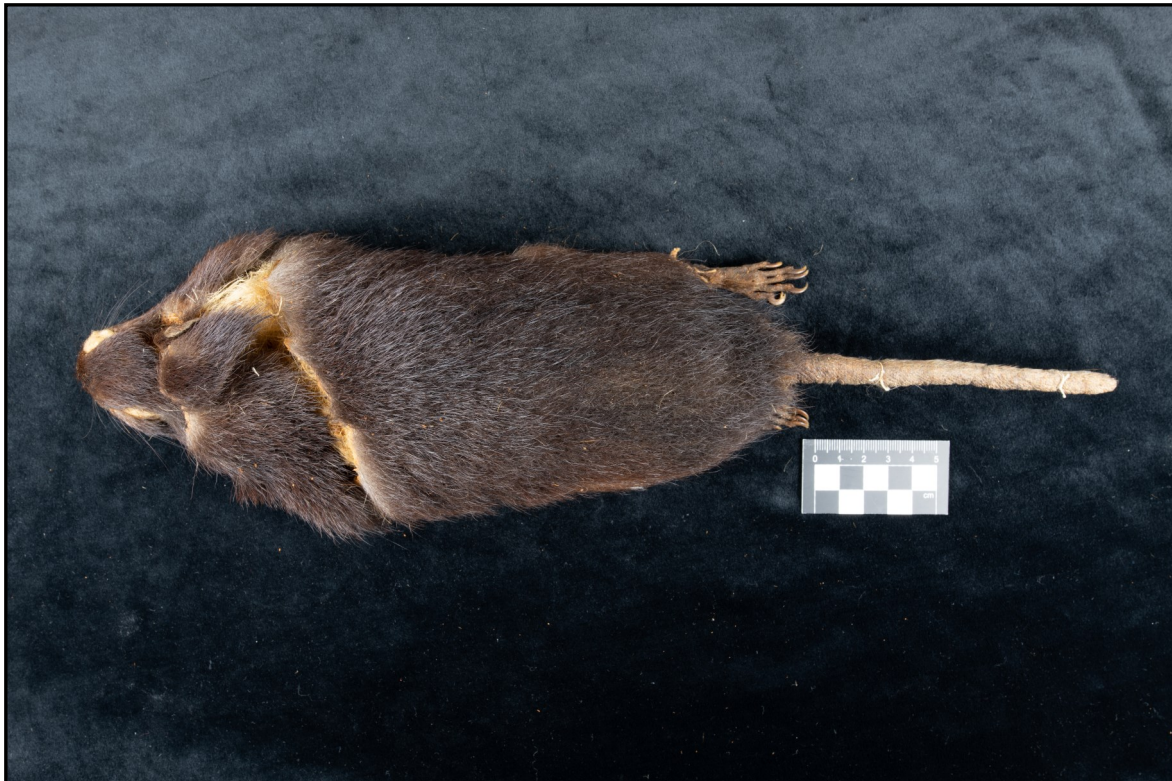


Figure 2. Front side of study skin Saint Lucia giant rice rat (*Megalomys luciae*) at the NHM (1853.12.16.2). (Photo credit: The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London)

Flannery (2001) describes his encounter of this Saint Lucia giant rice rat specimen in the book, *A Gap in Nature*, where he, together with Peter Schouten, set out to create portraits of extinct animals in text and illustrations from remaining museum specimens. He writes that 'it resides in a glass-topped box in a museum drawer surrounded by hundreds of its smaller (still surviving) relatives. Whoever stuffed it did a poor job. The specimen, which is a size of a small cat, is now falling apart and is so fragile it bears a label with a strict injunction not to touch it' (Flannery and Schouten, 2001, p. 42). In contrast to the MNHN specimen, this one has been prepared as a study-skin. Since the insides of the body have been removed, the animal now exists in two parts: the skull and the skin. The study skin was what Forsyth Major (1901) used to describe the species and to give it the scientific name *Oryzomys luciae* (now considered a junior synonym) in 1901 and has since been in the hands of many scientists. Unlike the specimen displayed at the MNHN in Paris where the animal is re-animated to look alive again, this specimen is preserved only for scientific reasons.

The Saint Lucia giant rice rat has suffered significant damage as it is missing parts of the tail and forelegs. But the specimen has been CT-scanned in recent times and now exists as a 3-D model. It ensures

the specimen's future existence even if its organic material should be lost. But the 3-D model also provides an 'alternative form' of the object that is not meant to replace it, but rather to give it a more dynamic life (Krupa and Grimm, 2021, p. 53). If the 3-D model is made freely available as an online source, the specimen can be shared more widely and easily as well as accessed and used in a way that is less restricted by the NMH. In that way, digital repatriation can, according to Krysiana L. Krupa and Kelsey T. Grimm, serve as a decolonising practice (2021). As it is right now, the specimen is not available for the public to see, not even as an image in the collections online.

Although the two specimens of the Saint Lucia giant rice rat are very differently preserved - one primarily for scientific research and the other specimen as an 'accurate' representation of what this specimen looked like - they are the last two skin-based remains of this extinct species. They reveal two very different means of preserving dead animals for future generations that have equally been important to how we understand the giant rice rats as well as shaping our visual impression of an ecological world that no longer exists. The specimens provide different modes for how the museum could engage themselves in the decolonisation of extinction.

Extinction narratives and colonialism

Specimens of animals have been and continue to be collected from colonised lands. Inside Western natural history museums, they are often only consulted to answer scientific questions but are silent about European colonial violence and complementary ecological devastations (Gladstone and Pearl, 2022). European natural history museums have a colonial legacy that they have just begun to engage with, with an aim of making the museums more inclusive and to break a predominating whiteness inside museum institutions (Das and Lowe, 2018), but decolonisation also concerns extinct specimens on display that have disappeared as a direct consequence of European invasion and settlements.

European colonisations have both caused the loss of nature and shaped a specific relationship to nature which is rarely visible and thereby not challenged in how natural history museums display extinction. Extinction narratives need to go beyond the individual species that are behind glass to the colonial practices that brought them there. This would shed light on past multispecies communities, an uneven loss of biodiversity and cultural practices inflicted in extinction narratives. Here, I draw out three lessons from the story of the extinction of rice rats in the Caribbean to show how European colonialism and museum display practices maintain a colonial structure inside the natural history museum. These lessons built upon Donna Haraway's concept of 'response-ability'. Haraway has defined response-ability as 'that cultivation through which we render each other capable, that cultivation of the capacity to respond' (Haraway, 2015, p. 256-257). The museums take part in this cultivation in how they create or do not create room for visitors to relate in different ways to the species on display. The museum has the responsibility to provide a space for response-ability. Inside museums, response-ability both refers to the responsibility museums have for our surrounding environment through the objects they hold in their collections but also how the museum can create room that allows for responsiveness among their visitors to environmental loss in shaping new ways of relating to the outside world (Endt-Jones, 2020, p. 186).

1. The museum has a responsibility to show different human relationships with nature than the ones formed through colonialism.

As revealed by the archaeological record, Antillean rice rats have a long history of relationships with humans. They lived near humans feeding on their crops, and the rice rats enriched the human

population's diet. Their remnants bear witness to human-non-human commensalism and greater Caribbean biocultural diversity. But this historical entanglement is rarely talked about as the bone fragments are either used to understand the evolutionary history of the rice rats and their extinction or the diet of human Caribbean populations. Natural history museums miss an opportunity to reveal a different human relationship to the endemic rats that stands in contrast to how the Europeans perceived them as vermin alongside the black rat introduced into the colonies. This would challenge a dominating European value system of animals where rats are part of the 'unloved' animals that received less attention (Rose and van Dooren, 2011).

2. The museum has a responsibility to connect extinction narratives to the colonial causes of their disappearance.

The black rat was introduced to the Caribbean islands with Europeans and has been identified as the main reason for the extinction of the endemic rice rats (Turvey *et al.*, 2010, p. 767). But European colonialism is exempted from the responsibility of their extinction since the introduction of the black rats happened more by accident than as a conscious choice. This creates a narrative where the rice rats are responsible for their own extinction since they could not survive the changes imposed on their environments. If the museum instead acknowledged the impact of colonialism on the extinction of the rice rat, the uneven geographical disappearance of species would be recognised as well as the harmful effect European extractive systems had on colonised lands (Guasco, 2021).

3. The museum has a responsibility to engage their own colonial involvement in collecting and displaying foreign specimens in their collections.

When European naturalists or other settlers in the colony who took an interest in the flora and fauna started collecting specimens for Western natural history museums, the rice rats were already on the brink of extinction. A few specimens of the Antillean giant rice rats were collected from different Caribbean islands and brought 'home' to spend their last living years in zoological gardens and subsequently in Western museums. In the museum they were inscribed into a European scientific classification system in a desire to know the entire world. Few are on display; the rest are preserved in museums in countries that had the colonial power over Caribbean islands. There are no remaining specimens of the species in any of the Caribbean islands. Natural history museums are invaluable in understanding climate changes,

biodiversity loss and evolutionary history of the more-than-human world (Bakker et al., 2020). But even though natural history museums have succeeded in making their collections relevant and useful in the present day, the historical collecting of specimens still mirrors a colonial view on the natural world that the museums must be cautious not to perpetuate and reproduce. Extinction narratives give the museum an opportunity to engage in their own colonial legacies by illuminating the connection between the specimens preserved in their collections and the biodiversity loss experienced in geographical regions of the world impacted by colonial activities.

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