Chapter 1

THE ANIMAL ENIGMA

On a recent trip to Kakadu, one of Australia's most important and impressive wildlife regions, I was struck by the puzzling and contradictory positions animals find themselves in, relative to their neighbouring and visiting humans. Anyone who has been a tourist to this region will know that animals seem to occupy multiple meanings and roles depending on shifting contexts. So for example, calling in at the Visitor Centre at Jabiru, I was surprised to read in a history of the park that in the 1950s and 1960s it catered to tourist big game hunters. This international tourist elite came to the region before it had park status to shoot crocodiles, kangaroos and especially buffalo. One imagines Ernest Hemingway types, their local agents and perhaps some Aboriginal trackers playing out a colonial scene that had as much in common with Africa or India as it did with Australia. The introduced status of the buffaloes mattered hardly at all in comparison with their quality or distribution or the way in which the country there rendered hunting exciting.[1]

Other literature and information written in the present tense had the buffalo as a pest whose presence threatened the very viability of Kakadu as an ecosystem and travel destination: their destructive movements were likely to destroy the fragile levees that keep the salt water from the precious freshwater lagoons and billabongs. Certainly I did not see a buffalo, and at first I formed the

impression that the well-organised Parks and Wildlife Service had removed them. But they were still there.

The first sighting of them was made in an upmarket tourist hotel in Darwin. A banner stretched across the outdoor cocktail area announced that buffalo was on the menu. Indeed, buffalo was 'on' all over town, and expressed very much in terms of a local delicacy. But more than that, it was clear that buffalo was still a defining icon of the region, a 'must eat' option. This was still Hemingway country and its defining features were specific types of relationships with specific types of animals. Heroic types could be seen taking risks with crocodiles, the unpredictable buffalo could take on four-wheel drives, tourists were 'lost' at billabongs, dingoes were not fully to be trusted.

The postcolonial 'big game hunter country' image sits awkwardly with the reality that this is Aboriginal country and that they own a great deal of the land in the area. Tourists do not have many opportunities to get to know the local people, which is a shame, but there is at least one tour they can do with Aboriginal guides and on Aboriginal land. And this for me was the highlight of the trip.

However, it soon became apparent that any assumption that Aboriginal people and Parks and Wildlife shared the same attitudes to wildlife was wrong. We were told that Aborigines valued buffalo very highly, that it was their favourite meat and that large numbers were kept in order to provide meat for the community. It was also the case that many other introduced species, including the feral cat (much vilified by Parks and Wildlife), were valued and in some areas even regarded as sacred animals. For essentially urban Australians long used to the apparent need to remove introduced 'pest' species, this came as a surprise, a counter-intuitive surprise. For here was a situation where a scientifically based organisation seemed bent on preserving strict animal boundaries and keeping 'others' out while traditional owners in the same area seemed more inclusive and relaxed with diversity – accepting change and a new postcolonial world. Then there was the animal classification projected to tourists as if the colonial days of brute exploitation

and derring-do were still a reality. I could see the confusion circulate among the tour group, most of them white Australians. How were they going to think about the buffalo now? Or about themselves? Or Aboriginal people?

Yet another edible offering compounded this dissonance: fresh native animals. One spends considerable time in Kakadu seeing crocodiles, being told about them, or worrying about them. The overall message is that they too are part of the fragile web of life there and this comes across especially for the crocs, because tourists visit as the dry season sets in and consolidates, and many crocs die from a lack of water. The seriousness and precariousness of nature is still fresh in one's mind as Darwin comes into view for one more night before flying out. In order to make a change from buffalo, fresh crocodile or kangaroo is also on the menu there. Although the food-crocodile is mainly farmed, the menus never make this entirely clear. Yet if it isn't farmed then it is the selfsame animal that featured in the heroic discourse of the Parks and Wildlife rangers and their quest to save native wildlife. The kangaroo is not farmed and may well have been seen by the tourists, in another guise.

Do not imagine that this series of anecdotes from Kakadu is particularly special or to be put down to the topsy-turvy world of tourism. Far from it – they are in fact *characteristic* of the enigmatic position that animals occupy in Australia. And do not imagine that this is how things are in other countries – they are not. This enigma is uniquely Australian, but its bewildering unfolding is not merely a strange story about the fortunes of animals: it goes right to the heart of Australianness itself, what it is to be properly Australian.

ANIMALS AND NATIONS

Animals are significant to most human societies not simply as a source of food or risk but as a rich source of symbols with which to represent complex aspects of our culture, identity and belonging. This book is the result of a study of animals and Australian society,