

## Bettering Stories about Stories about Nature

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### Abstract

Both environmental historians and ecocritics are in the business of simultaneously analysing the stories we tell about the human-nature relationship and creating those stories. Using the case of Kiki, an Aldabra giant tortoise on display in the *Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle* in Paris, I present three potential text types in museum displays which lend themselves to new ecocritical readings: museum labels, biographical displays, and material remains. Ecocritical approaches to the genres of scientific texts and animal biographies and the developing field of material ecocriticism prove useful for making sense of the complex narratives of environmental history. Reaching out to ecocriticism approaches can make the stories I tell about museum displays as an environmental historian better.

*Keywords:* Biography, environmental history, extinction, museums, natural history, tortoise.

### Resumen

Tanto los historiadores medioambientales como los ecocríticos analizan las historias que contamos sobre la relación entre humanos y naturaleza a la vez que crean esas historias. Usando el caso de Kiki, una tortuga gigante de Aldabra que se exhibe en el *Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle* en París, presento tres posibles tipos de textos expuestos en museo que se prestan a nuevas lecturas ecocríticas: etiquetas de museo, expositores biográficos, y restos materiales. Los enfoques ecocríticos a los textos científicos y biografías animales, y el campo en desarrollo de la ecocrítica material han demostrado ser útiles para dar sentido a las narrativas complejas de la historia medioambiental. Contactar con enfoques ecocríticos puede hacer que mejoren las historias sobre los expositores de los museos que cuento como historiadora medioambiental.

*Palabras clave:* Biografía, historia medioambiental, extinción, museos, historia natural, tortuga.

The tall glass octagonal case rises toward the ceiling, ironically dwarfing the giant tortoise that once weighed 250 kilograms contained within. The tortoise, an Aldabra giant tortoise (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*, also known previously as *Dipsochelys dussumieri*), was born in about 1863 in the wild in the Seychelles archipelago. Yet he lived in captivity nearly all his life, first with the industrialist Paul Carrié on the island of Mauritius and then from 1923 in the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes in Paris. After Kiki, as he was named by his human caretakers, died in 2009, his body was taxidermied and put on display in a small room dedicated to the giant tortoise in a section about extinct and threatened species in the Grande Galerie de l'Évolution of the *Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle*

(MNHN) adjacent to the Ménagerie. It was here that I encountered Kiki and his story in 2015.



Fig. 1 Kiki on display in the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris. Photograph by author, 2015.

Kiki is just one of many animals I have encountered in my current project investigating how stories of extinction and the threat of extinction are told in museums. Kiki and the narrative that is constructed about him, giant tortoises, and humans is a good example of where ecocriticism can productively contribute to environmental history scholarship through its focus on narrative construction in the stories academics tell.

Both environmental historians and ecocritics are in the business of simultaneously analysing the stories we tell about the human-nature relationship and creating those stories. While in English the words *history* and *story* have different connotations with story typically implying something fictional, in many other European languages including Norwegian and Swedish which have been my everyday contexts since 2005, one word is

used for both (*historie* or *historia*). While some historians might bristle at being labelled storytellers, many environmental historians have come to recognize the wisdom of William Cronon's argument that historians do in fact have choices in how we construct our stories and that "stories about the past are better, all other thing being equal, if they increase our attention to nature and the place people within it" (1375). Moreover, Cronon urged environmental historians to tell "not just stories about nature, but stories about stories about nature" (1375), which is a call I take up in my extinction narratives work.

In this short essay I want to present some ways I have found ecocriticism scholarship particularly useful when analysing the histories told about animals on display. I hope to show how environmental historians can draw upon the insights of ecocriticism to write better histories, while encouraging ecocritics to continue venturing beyond the standard texts in their analysis. Seeing intersections between the two fields is nothing new—in 2004, Michael Cohen argued that historians can learn from the way ecocritics read—but the latest directions into which ecocriticism is going open up fruitful avenues for collaboration.

Ecocriticism as a field has consistently been expanding the genres included in its analysis (Slovic 5-7). From the nonfiction memoir to the classic novel, from the science fiction short story to the children's book, all of it can be analysed through an ecocritical framework. But even the boundaries of what constitutes a text with a narrative have been stretched in recent ecocritical work, particularly by European scholars, making it particularly useful when considering narratives in a museum context. In the following, I will present three text types in museum displays which lend themselves to ecocritical readings: museum labels, biographical displays, and material remains. Each of these types tells a different history of Kiki and Aldabra giant tortoises; taken together, they reveal a complex environmental history communicated through the museum display.

## Museum Labels

A natural history museum tends to include many short scientific texts about specimens on display. In Kiki's room, which is designed as a family-friendly area with activities aimed at young visitors, scientific words pepper nearly every surface. In a display comparing Aldabra and Galapagos giant tortoises, the labels are an interesting example of scientific narration that can be analysed as a work of literature. As Ursula Heise convincingly argued in *Imagining Extinction*, even a scientific database like the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) red list of species is literature worthy of ecocritical analysis.

A label for an Aldabra giant tortoise shell, which appears in French and English, gives its size ("310 kg max in the wild") and its status on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) list. It then describes the species (the last sentence in [] appears only in the French): "The largest of the giant island tortoises in the wild. Endemic to the Aldabra atoll, the tortoises found on the Seychelles' other granite or coral islands were moved there or returned by humans in past centuries. [The endemic species were exterminated at the beginning of the 19th century.]" The

label's narrative focuses on two things: size and extinction. The size element is relevant because the Aldabra is being compared via the label below to the Galapagos giant tortoise, whose text indicates that it is "400 kg max in captivity." The extinction narrative is relevant because Kiki's display is part of the Extinct and Threatened Species section of the museum. The mention of CITES is a way of pointing to scientific consensus about the tortoise's vulnerable status. The label tells us where the tortoises were originally found: that they were historically moved to other Seychelles islands, and that the endemic species had been extirpated in the early 1800s. Yet the text's extinction narrative is quite opaque about which tortoises were being moved and which tortoises were exterminated. The tone is detached and factual, yet choices have indeed been made about which science to include on the labels.

Expanding the MNHN labels' narrative with additional scientific literature about Aldabra giant tortoises, I discovered that there are four named subspecies of *Aldabrachelys gigantea*; of those, the three subspecies on the outer Seychelles islands quickly became extinct in the wild after European contact whereas the one species on Aldabra survived. Giant tortoises from Aldabra have been introduced to some of the other Seychelles islands. There is, however, contentious debate within the scientific community as to whether these are actually distinct species (rather than subspecies) and whether or not some individuals of these (sub)species survive in captivity (Gerlach et al.). It was only resolved in 2013 that the name of the species should be *Aldabrachelys gigantea* rather than *Dipsochelys dussumieri* (ICZN), a confusion which is apparent with Kiki who is labelled as *Aldabrachelys gigantea* within the museum walls but *Dipsochelys dussumieri* on the museum's webpage (MNHN). Regardless of all of these scientific uncertainties, the narrative of the label is one of extinction and loss.

## Biographical Displays

Another type of genre appears in Kiki's room: the animal biography. While the natural history scientific text about a species standardises and automatises animal behaviour and characteristics, animal biography captures "the individuality of animals" and makes "animals visible as individuals" (Krebber and Roscher 2). Animal biographies as singular histories of specific animal individuals have been written for animals on physical display in museums—both famous individuals and seemingly ordinary ones (see essays in Alberti)—and those that exist only in literature (e.g. Middelhoff; Shah). Animal biographies as a genre is one of the new expansions of literary ecocriticism.

Children are the primary target audience of two of Kiki's biographies, which were both produced under the auspices of the museum. Children's literature is an area ripe for ecocritical analysis because of its role in cultivating ecocitizenship (Massey and Bradford). As ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard argued, scholars should be examining how children's literature constructs the human self-identity in relation to nature/animals, presents appropriate strategies for responding to environmental problems, and recognises agency in nature.

In MNHN, a large wall display board on Kiki's left displays a timeline of his life through drawings and short text. His life events are matched on the timeline with human technological developments; for example, Kiki arriving at the Ménagerie occurs in 1925 on the timeline and there is also a mark for the invention of the television in 1926. Other than Kiki's birth, all of the moments in Kiki's life chosen for the timeline represent changes in his home: relocation to Paris in 1925, a view of him together with crocodiles in an enclosure in the 1940s, Kiki with fellow giant tortoises in a grassy enclosure in the 1970s, a new enclosure that placed the tortoises inside with the sloths in 1986, and finally "Kiki's new life" inside of the museum's tall glass case in 2009. In this biographical construction of Kiki's life, the focus is on the technologies of home and what constituted home for the tortoise over his long life. None of these were in Kiki's control. If I ask this text Gaard's questions, I find a self-identity construction that is predicated on technology rather than nature, a lack of agency for the nonhuman, and no mention of the environmental issue of extinction.

This is quite a different biography than the one told in the children's book *L'histoire vraie de Kiki la tortue géante* [The true story of Kiki the giant tortoise] by Fred Bernard which I found in the MNHN gift shop. In this illustrated biography produced with the museum, Kiki hatches out of the egg and then begins to grow up in the wild, all the while avoiding predators like cats, dogs, and raptors that could eat him (3-4). The one predator he is unable to avoid is sailors who catch turtles to eat them (5-6), but it turns out that the human who catches him does not intend to eat him but instead gives him to Mr. Carrié, "who loves nature and animals" (7). Kiki is well cared for by Mr. Carrié, growing ever larger in the garden. When Mr. Carrié decides to retire and return to Paris, Kiki goes with him. Although Kiki is placed into the zoo, Mr. Carrié visits him everyday (13-14). Kiki's sexual exploits make an appearance: he regularly mated with the females but although some eggs were laid, they never hatched (13). Several decades pass in a couple of pages, highlighted with him noticing soldiers visiting during World War II and long-haired hippies working at the zoo in the 1970s. Kiki continues to grow throughout the book, reaching 250 kilos by the end, when he "poses for the television cameras" behind glass (21). He dies on December 1st 2009 at the ripe old age of 146.

The book biography does not focus on Kiki's enclosures or technology like the museum display version, but rather highlights his relationships—to Mr. Carrié, to the female turtles, to the zoo visitors, and to caretakers at the zoo. The onsite biography is one of control and distance from nature, whereas the book biography is one of multispecies relations and affect. Kiki has agency, at least to an extent, in the book. Analysing these works of children's literature with an ecocritical eye helps expose how they each construct a different version of the historical figure of Kiki. Yet both biographies do not engage with the issue of extinction which was so prominent in the scientific texts. The biographies focus on the fate of Kiki as an individual, but not the fate of Aldabra tortoises as an animal group.

## Material Remains

Finally, in addition to the scientific texts and biographical texts, the material remains of Kiki himself are available for an ecocritical reading. An individual animal in a museum is a material matter in life and death. Historians of science and museums have stressed the constructed nature of taxidermied animals, which blend art, craft, emotion, and scientific knowledge to turn a corpse into a specimen (see Poliquin; McGhie). This recognition of the physicality of specimens fits in well with a recent move by ecocritics to incorporate the corporeal. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann have advocated material ecocriticism as an approach which includes nonhuman matter's agency as described in narrative texts and matter's power to shape the narrative by creating configurations of meaning and substance. Based on these new developments, Bergthaller et al. identified new materialism as one of the new avenues for cooperation between environmental history and ecocriticism (271-2).

Kiki's physical body is an element in his life history. His size and weight features prominently in the book—his hugeness necessitated interventions to move him to his wintering area including first a wheelbarrow and then a powered cart when he got too heavy for that. In the exhibit, a juvenile Aldabra giant tortoise (with no given name) is displayed on the same pedestal as Kiki. This functions as a counterpoint to Kiki, stressing his large size.

The materiality of the taxidermy practice is stressed in the label under Kiki, which gives his name and species in white lettering and then immediately underneath in black lettering: "Mounted specimen by Christophe Voisin, taxidermist, Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle". A taxidermist makes material choices about how the specimen should be displayed. One choice is about position of the individual and another is about what "defects" to repair. For example, on the front of Kiki's shell near the neck there is a hole which had been filled with plaster in his lifetime and this was kept during the preparation process rather than painted over. The display boards and website stress the taxidermy choices as reinforcing Kiki's individuality:

Kiki's shell has a hole plugged with putty. This is the result of common wear on the shell which has been treated many times by veterinarians because it risked becoming an insect nest. In the wild, it is common for a turtle to raise its neck to reach the leaves and fruits on which it feeds. In this position, birds can also remove parasites from the neck. It is also said that Kiki stood up stretching his neck and waited for his caregivers to scratch it. The taxidermist wanted to naturalize Kiki in this position and keep the hole in the shell considering that these elements were representative of the living Kiki (MNHN).<sup>1</sup>

There is no hiding the fact that Kiki's material remains are a created representation of him. His history as told through his body is one of a giant living a long individual life in harmony with caretakers.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from French by author.

## Concluding Remarks

Kiki's story, and in turn the environmental history of Aldabra giant tortoises, as told by the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle is a complex blend of physical remains, photographs, drawings, texts, labels, and cases. Ecocritical approaches to the genres of scientific texts, animal biographies and new materialism have proved useful to me for making sense of the sometimes contradictory narratives in displays of extinct and threatened species like the Aldabra giant tortoise represented by Kiki. Ecocritical approaches allow me to analyse the multi-layered nature of the narratives on display because each text type focuses on a different part of Kiki's history. I am able to see Kiki's history as a story told in different registers simultaneously, none of which tell the whole story, but taken together show a dynamic life, death, and afterlife. As an environmental historian, reaching out to work in ecocriticism makes the stories I tell about museum stories better.

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