

The Easter Bilby as a counter-marketing strategy for biodiversity conservation

by Diogo Veríssimo

ABSTRACT: Social marketers regularly have to contend with antagonistic marketing efforts promoted by other social actors, such as the tobacco and alcohol industries. These efforts can severely limit the impact of social marketing. As a consequence, social marketers often engage in counter-marketing, the development of marketing strategies aimed at undermining the messages promoted by a competitor. In this paper, it is studied the creation of the Easter Bilby brand, developed in Australia as a counter-marketing strategy to the popular Easter bunny. Rabbits are invasive to Australia and have caused massive damage to the country's biodiversity while the bilby is an endemic and threatened species that better reflects the uniqueness of Australia's fauna.

Key words: Australia; Branding; Easter Bunny; Invasive Species; Social Marketing

O Bilby da Páscoa como estratégia de contra-marketing para a conservação da biodiversidade

RESUMO: Os marketers sociais deparam-se, por vezes, com mensagens antagónicas promovidas por outros agentes sociais, sendo exemplo disto as indústrias do tabaco e do álcool. Estes esforços podem diminuir consideravelmente o impacto dos esforços de marketing social, obrigando os marketers sociais a desenvolver estratégias de contra-marketing para mitigar o impacto das mensagens desenvolvidas pela concorrência. Neste artigo, examina-se a criação da marca social Bilby da Páscoa, como um competidor para o popular «Coelhinho da Páscoa» na Austrália. O coelho é uma espécie invasora, neste país, tendo causado enormes danos à sua biodiversidade. Por isso, durante a década de 1980, surgiu a ideia de usar o *bilby*, um marsupial australiano endémico, como um novo símbolo da Páscoa. Neste artigo, é investigado o valor do Bilby da Páscoa enquanto marca, tanto para o cliente como em termos financeiros.

Palavras-chave: Austrália; Branding; Coelhinho da Páscoa; Espécies Invasoras; Marketing Social

El Bilby de Pascua como estrategia de contramarketing para la conservación de la biodiversidad

RESUMEN: Los vendedores de marketing sociales se encuentran, a veces, con mensajes antagónicos promovidos por otros agentes sociales, siendo ejemplo de estos las industrias del tabaco y del alcohol. Estos esfuerzos pueden disminuir considerablemente el impacto de los esfuerzos de marketing social, obligando a los vendedores de marketing sociales a desarrollar estrategias de contramarketing para mitigar el impacto de los mensajes desarrollados por la competencia. En este artículo se examina la creación de la marca social Bilby de Pascua, como un competidor para el popular “Conejito de Pascua” en Australia. El conejo es una especie invasora en este país, habiendo causado enormes daños en su biodiversidad. Por eso, durante la década de los 80, surgió la idea de usar a Bilby, un marsupial australiano endémico, como un nuevo símbolo de Pascua. En este artículo, es investigado el valor de Bilby de Pascua como marca, tanto para el cliente como en términos financieros.

Palabras clave: Australia; Branding; Conejito de Pascua; Especies Invasoras; Marketing Social

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Social marketers are unique in their recognition that in a free-choice society there are always alternatives to a given behavior (Lee et al., 2011). However, beyond having to content with alternatives to the behaviors they promote, social marketers also have to deal with preexisting and conflicting messages promoted by other social actors, which limit the impact of social marketing (Burton et al., 2013). Examples of this are the social marketing efforts to curtail smoking and excessive drinking, which clash with the messages promoted by the tobacco and alcohol industries (Burton et al., 2013; McKenna et al., 2000).

To increase their chances of success, social marketers engage in counter-marketing, the development of marketing strategies aimed at undermining the messages promoted by a competing social actor or actors (Evans and McCormack, 2008). This can be challenging, as social marketers commonly have fewer resources than their industry competitors (McKenna et al., 2000). Nonetheless, there are several documented cases of counter-marketing success in the public health sector (Durkin et al., 2012). This has led organizations such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the USA, to specifically include counter-marketing in their best practice guidance for tobacco control programs (CDC, 2014).

In the environmental context, there are few documented cases of social counter-marketing interventions. This is surprising as all key environmental threats are driven, directly or indirectly, by human behavior (Veríssimo, 2013). One of the threats where the role of humans is clearest, is that of invasive species, those which spread through human activity to a new ecosystem or landscape, and are likely to have negative impacts on the pre-existing native species and ecosystems. Indeed, invasive species are the second most frequent cause of extinction for species that have disappeared since AD 1500 (Bellard et al., 2016). However, their impact is not evenly distributed, with Oceania being the most affected continent.

The bunny

Australia has been one of the countries in the world where most species have gone extinct (Woinarski et al., 2015). Much of this has been due to invasive species, mostly brought over by early European settlers, which have outcompeted the native Australian fauna and flora (Woinarski et al., 2015; Bellard et al., 2016). One of the species responsible for this loss of biodiversity is the European rabbit (*Orytolagus cuniculus*), one of only 14 mammals species included in the list of the world's 100 worst invasive species (Lowe et al., 2000).

In Australia, the rabbit is not only responsible for environmental degradation but also for massive damage to the agricultural and livestock industries (Landsström, 2001). This has generated a backlash against the species, resulting in a series of containment strategies to slow the expansion of the rabbit throughout the country (Smith, 2006). The most popular ones are perhaps physical containment, through the use of fences and biological control, with the introduction of several diseases known to cause high mortality among rabbits (Moseby

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and Read, 2006; Landström, 2001). Yet, while these physical measures have been successful at reducing the impact of rabbits on the native Australian fauna, they have also been target of criticism by those that argue that the European rabbit has already attained a place in the history and culture of Australia (Smith, 2006; Wright, 2012).

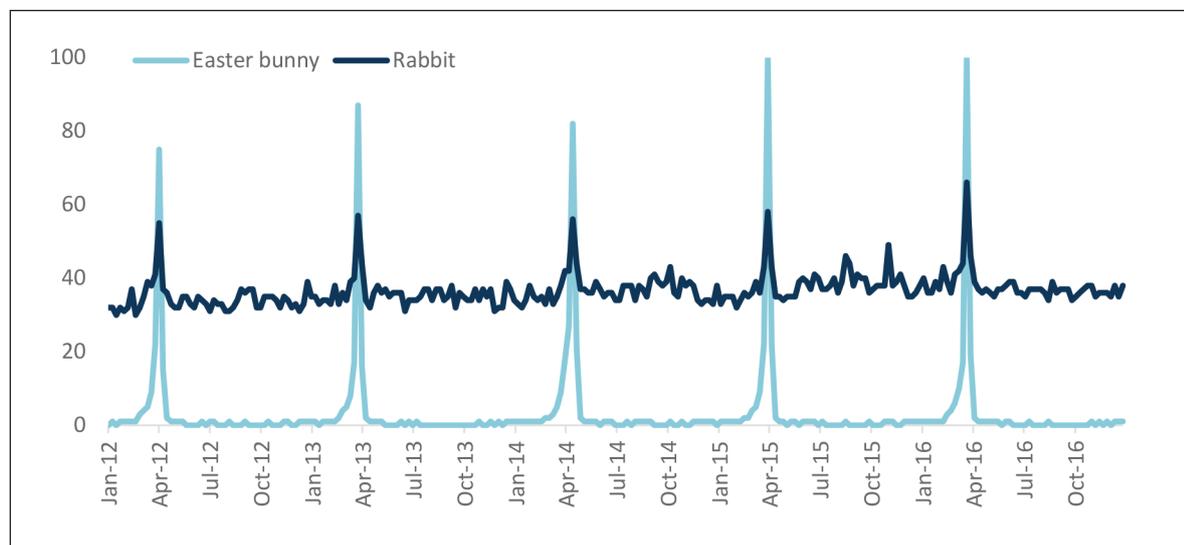
Currently, the rabbit's role in Australian culture is most notorious during Easter, a major national holiday, when it gets a center stage role as the “Easter bunny” responsible for distributing Easter chocolates. This tendency can be seen when looking at weekly trends in internet searches in Australia (see Figure 1), with searches for “Easter bunny” being highly seasonal as expected, but peaking at the same time as searches for “Rabbit”.

Businesses in Australia, and around the world, use the iconic Easter bunny as key part of their branding for Easter products, most notably chocolates (Harris et al., 2015; Naunton, 2011). These fictional characters often play a central role not only in attracting the attention of consumers, but also in shaping our collective memory and cultural meaning of a holiday, something perhaps best exemplified by Santa Claus and Christmas (Okleshen et al., 2000). Thus, the Easter bunny, with its lovable demeanor and cuddly appearance, has become a central part of the Easter experience (Smith, 2006) and is inextricably associated with the positive emotions the holiday conjures (Naunton, 2011).

This positive association reinforces the public appreciation for the European rabbit in Australia and emphasizes the cultural role of the species as an Australian cultural icon. In an effort to change this association, Australian conservationists have put forward an alternative Easter ambassador that better reflects the uniqueness of Australia's fauna: the Easter Bilby¹ (Landström, 2001; Smith, 2006).

In an effort to change the association with the iconic Easter bunny, Australian conservationists have put forward an alternative Easter ambassador that better reflects the uniqueness of Australia's fauna: the Easter Bilby.

Figure 1 **Weekly trends of Internet searches on Google, for the terms “Easter bunny” and “rabbit”, in Australia, for the years 2012 to 2016**



From greater to Easter Bilby

The greater bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*) is a small mammal endemic to Australia (Burbidge and Woinarski, 2016a). It is currently threatened with extinction, largely due to the impact of introduced carnivores, which become predators, and introduced herbivores, which degrade their habitat (Bradley et al., 2015).

A smaller species, the lesser bilby (*Macrotis leucura*), was last seen in 1931 as is considered to be extinct (Burbidge and Woinarski, 2016b), with the European rabbit being one of the culprits (Bellard et al., 2016). For that reason, the greater bilby is today more commonly known simply as bilby.

The idea of replacing the Easter bunny with a species native to Australia, in this case the bilby, had a somewhat nebulous origin with multiple people seemingly having the idea independently (Faithfull, 2000). The first published account seems to have emerged in the mid-1980s (Faithfull, 2000) but it was not until the early 1990s that the idea took off, with the support of the organization now known as Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA). In 1993, the RFA obtained the rights to the Easter Bilby trademark (Faithfull, 2000), ensuring that it would capture a percentage of the sales of any branded product. Given the seasonal nature of the trademark, a big focus were, of course, Easter chocolates (Faithfull, 2000).

With these efforts, the Easter Bilby became a brand supporting the eradication of rabbits in Australia. The positioning of this new brand revolved around the attributes of the bilby as a species, such as its cuteness and its endemic status to Australia as well as the benefit of giving consumers the opportunity to preserve unique Australian natural heritage and by extension identity, therefore linking to pride of place (Landström, 2001).

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Chocolate makers explored this opportunity to reposition their products and appeal to different customer segments by adopting a co-branding strategy, when two brand names of different companies are used on the same product or service.

Figure 2 **The greater bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*), a nocturnal marsupial endemic to Australia** (© Save the Bilby Fund)



when two brand names of different companies are used on the same product or service (Kotler et al., 2005).

The creation and launch of a new brand is however often challenging with the commercial marketing literature showing that the majority of new brands will fail, despite large initial investments (Cobb Walgren et al., 1995; Rooney, 1995). This is why conservationists have commonly relied heavily on the same small group of “tried and tested” conservation flagship species, usually large bodied mammals and birds, to fundraise and raise awareness for nature conservation (Smith et al., 2012; Veríssimo et al., 2017).

Drawing on the literature on brands and branding, we know that one of the major barriers to introducing new brands is competition, as the existence of a small set of very popular brands has been found to “block” the increase in brand-awareness of competing brands. Thus, it is easy to foresee a difficult job for the Easter Bilby in its quest to overthrow such a widely recognized icon as the Easter bunny.

Yet, much effort has been put into this seemingly Herculean task. In 1999, the Save the Bilby Fund was officially formed with the sole mission of saving the species, and, in 2005, the Australians recognized the second Sunday of September as the national bilby day, making the species the only in Australia to have an officially recognized day. At the same time, a variety of outreach activities have been developed to raise awareness of the species and its newfound role, from children’s books and school programs to festivals and exhibits at Zoos and Sanctuaries (Gambino et al., 2009; Faithfull, 2000).

Along the way, much has been written about the potential success or failure of the Easter Bilby as a marketing strategy to support conservation of Australian native species, and its potential to replace the Easter bunny in the long term (Faithfull, 2000; Smith, 2006; Garnett and Kessing, 2001). Yet, these discussions have at best been based on anecdotal data. To gain a more systematic insight into this issue, I aimed to measure over time how the value of the Easter Bilby has changed, in particular compared to its rival, the Easter bunny.

Where are they now?

Brand equity, or value, is a construct that due to its intangible nature is unsurprisingly hard to measure (Kotler et al., 2005). Here I focus first on customer-based brand equity to understand how the Australian society perceives the Easter Bilby as a new cultural construct. I then investigate the financial side of brand equity by looking at how the licensing of the Easter Bilby trademark has worked as a fundraising mechanism for species conservation (Lassar et al., 1995).

While the literature offers multiple ways of measuring customer-based brand equity (Lassar et al., 1995; Maio Mackay, 2001), in the context of conservation marketing (sensu Wright et al., 2015) two aspects that have been highlighted are the visibility and recognition (Veríssimo et al., 2014a). In term of visibility, I used media saliency as a proxy indicator. The power of the media to frame so-

cietal debates through influencing issue saliency is well documented both inside and outside the environmental context (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Veríssimo et al., 2014b). I operationalized this indicator by using the database Lexis Nexis Academic to search for articles in selected major Australian newspapers mentioning the terms “bilby”, “Easter Bilby” or “Easter bunny”. The newspapers were selected based on geographical coverage, circulation and coverage available in the Lexis Nexis Database (see Table 1). Political slant was not a consideration as the Australian press has been found to be generally centrist (Gans and Leigh, 2012).

I selected only publications with coverage starting in the mid-1980s when the concept of the Easter Bilby was created. Of these, I chose those with the highest circulation in their state, with the titles selected covering the states where 86% of the Australians live. Due to the variation in number of articles published through the years for each publication, as well as fluctuations in the coverage of the different newspapers in the Lexis Nexis Database, I estimated media salience by calculating the proportion of articles mentioning the terms of interest per year (see Figure 3). To obtain these estimates, I first calculated the total number of articles mentioning each of the terms of interest, and then estimated the number of articles indexed in the Lexis Nexis Academic database for the target publications in each year. This estimate was obtained by sampling the total number of articles indexed for three days per month at random, across all months of the year, for all publications.

The results suggest that as a brand the Easter Bilby enjoyed the most visibility around the time RFA first started to promote the concept, although even then it was never enough to surpass the Easter bunny. Yet, after that period, the media salience of the Easter Bilby in the press has declined, being currently almost residual. Interestingly, the bilby as a species has independently achieved higher salience in the press, with more visibility than the Easter bunny for almost a decade (see Figure 3, p. 66). Yet, in the last decade, the visibility of the bilby as

Table 1 **Selected Australian newspapers indexed in the database Lexis Nexis Academic, with continuous coverage starting before 1990, with state of publication and circulation figures for 2016 (Roy Morgan Research, 2017)**

Newspaper	State	Circulation
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	New South Wales	639 000
<i>The Courier Mail/The Sunday Mail</i>	Queensland	1 108 000
<i>Herald Sun/Sunday Herald Sun</i>	Victoria	1 712 000
<i>Hobart Mercury/Sunday Tasmanian</i>	Tasmania	121 000
<i>The Advertiser/Sunday Mail</i>	South Australia	743 000

a species has declined, being nearly always lower than the one enjoyed by the Easter bunny.

I next investigated the recognition enjoyed by the Easter Bilby, using as a proxy the temporal patterns of Google searches for the keywords “bilby”, “Easter bilby” and “Easter bunny” in Google Trends. I restricted the results to those searches made in Australia and aggregated the results yearly to eliminate the effects of seasonality (see Figure 4, p. 67).

The results suggest that in relative terms the Easter bunny has enjoyed an increase in recognition, being historically always more recognizable than the Easter Bilby, which has seen its online popularity decrease to residual levels (see Figure 4). Even more worryingly for conservationists, the bilby as a species seems to be also generating a declining amount of online interest, in the last few years being outcompeted by the Easter bunny. Another interesting trend, visible in the standard error bars, is that, while the interest in the Easter bunny has remained highly seasonal, the interest in the bilby is now less volatile, which suggest an interest in the species that is unrelated to the Easter holiday.

The two datasets on the performance of the Easter Bilby as a brand show a similar story. While the Easter Bilby was never in a position to rival with the Easter bunny, the popularity of the species seems to have grown independently of this seasonal concept. Evidence of this is the fact that the number of newspaper articles mentioning the species started rising before the Easter Bilby brand first appeared. This hints at the fact that the Easter Bilby as a brand is but one of a set of efforts to get the bilby into the public eye, and one with an increasingly secondary role. Yet, the bilby has a species seems to also suffer from a declining visibility and recognition, hinting at the fact that new strategies may be needed to promote it.

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Figure 3 **Media salience of the “bilby”, “Easter bilby” and “Easter bunny”, from 1985 to 2016, as measured by the yearly proportion of articles in Australian newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph, The Courier Mail/The Sunday Mail, Herald Sun/Sunday Herald Sun, Hobart Mercury/Sunday Tasmanian, The Advertiser/Sunday Mail*) that mentioned those concepts**

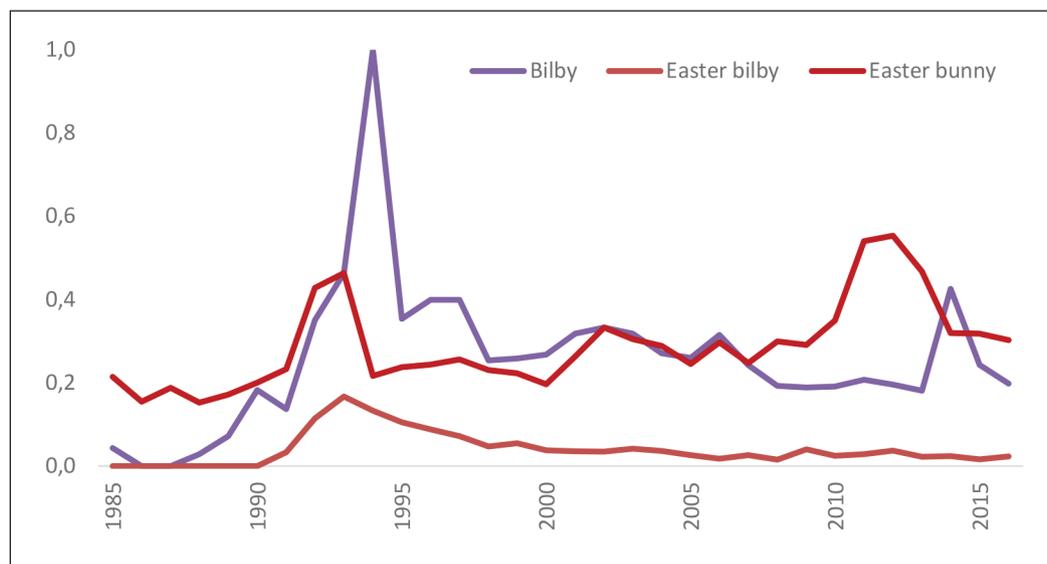
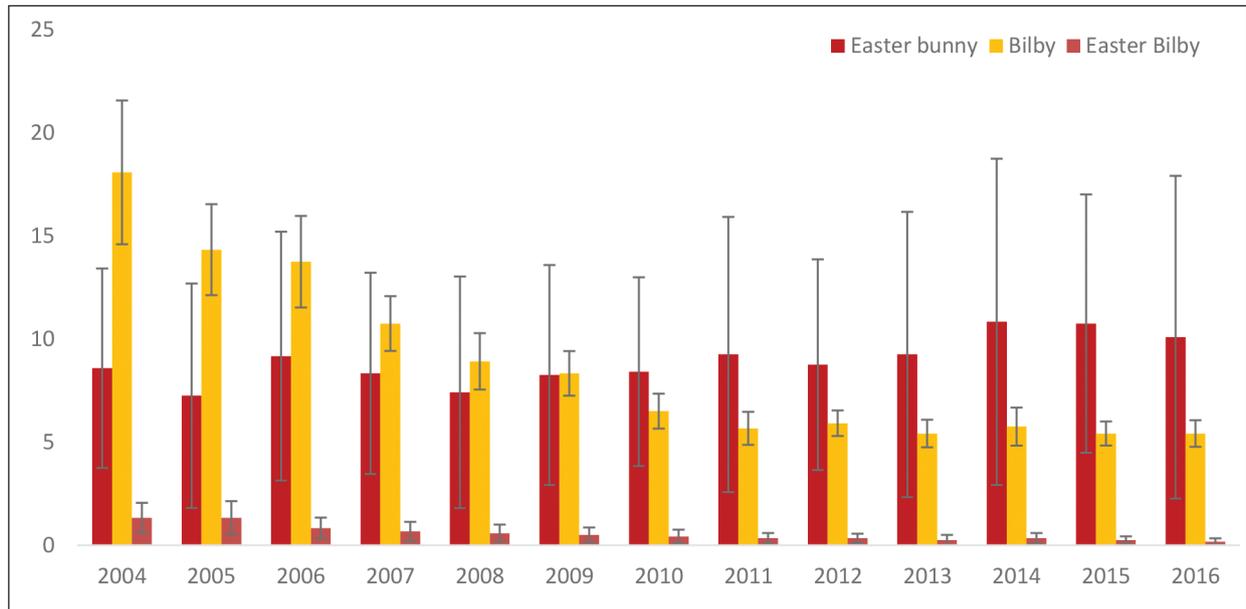


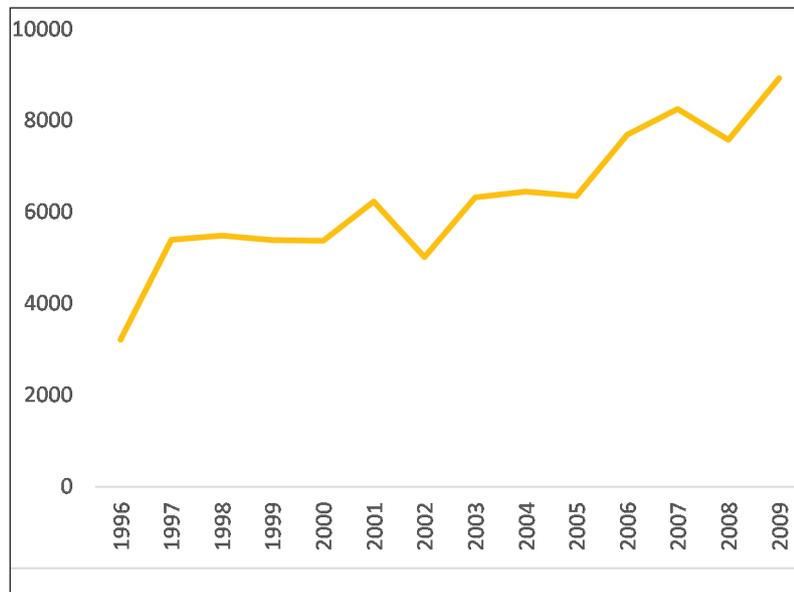
Figure 4 Mean yearly Google search volume for “bilby”, “Easter bilby” and “Easter bunny” from 2004 to 2016, with standard errors



The Easter Bilby as a fundraising tool

While the results suggest the customer-based brand equity of the Easter Bilby is declining, it is also important to look at how the brand is performing in term of financial brand equity (Lassar et al., 1995). I did this by looking at how royalties for the Easter Bilby trademark have varied from 1996 to 2009, the dataset available (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Yearly royalties, in 1996 AU\$, paid to the Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia by Haigh’s Chocolates for the use of the Easter Bilby trademark (Keryn Lapidge, Pers. Comm.)



The results seem to point to a paradox: royalties and therefore financial brand equity are growing steadily across time whereas customer-centered brand equity seems to be declining (Figure 5). Yet, this comparison should be prefaced by a more detailed look at the wider chocolate industry in Australia. First, the chocolate and confectionery industry in Australia has seen positive average growth in the past decades (Sivasailam, 2010; Euromonitor International, 2016). Given that the royalties given to RFA are tied to revenue made by Haigh's (Garnett and Kessing, 2001), there is a level of background growth that would be expected even in the absence of the branding of the Easter Bilby. Looking at the yearly revenue of the overall chocolate industry in Australia from 2001 to 2009, the closest dataset available, we can see this market segment grew at a mean annual rate of 3.2%, while the donations to RFA in the same period grew by 6.8%. Thus, about half of the growth seen in Figure 5 can be attributed to the background growth of the industry and is likely not related to the bilby.

Second, Haigh's stopped selling chocolate bunnies in 1995 which means that in the case of this company, customers have no possibility to choose between bilby and bunny. This absence of sales data on the sales of chocolate bunnies makes it more difficult to measure the added value of the Easter Bilby brand.

Third, Haigh's specifically targets the premium chocolate market and, in particular, the most environmentally and socially aware customers. This, coupled with the company's small market share at about 1% (Euromonitor International, 2016), means that it is possible to have opposite trends across Haigh's customer base and in the overall market. Even within Haigh's bilbies are but a small percentage of the overall sales, with 50 thousand bilbies sold in 2017, compared to 4.5 million Easter eggs (Cummins, 2017). Thus, the results suggest that the Easter Bilby as a brand is succeeding only in a premium niche customer segment, while progressively losing the mainstream appeal that would enable it to become a household icon that could rival the Easter bunny.

It is nonetheless important to bear in mind that the RFA is not the only organization fundraising from the sale of chocolate bilbies in Easter time. In 1999, the Save the Bilby Fund established a similar partnership with a different Australian chocolate maker, Darrell Lea. These would not have the Easter Bilby brand but a proportion of their sales revenue would be channeled to the Save the Bilby Fund to support bilby conservation. The Save the Bilby Fund raised AUS\$300,000 from Darrell Lea chocolates from 1999 to 2008 and nearly AUS\$100,000 in 2013-17 from Pink Lady and Cadbury's chocolates (Peggy Mucci, Pers. Comm.), after Darrell Lea went bankrupt. Yet, the lack of a detailed dataset on how these contributions have varied yearly make it difficult to understand if this data support or question the narrative described above.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the Easter Bilby continues to perform its role as a conservation flagship species, providing an important and increasing source of funding for the conservation of native Australian mammals, even if its overall customer-center brand equity seems to be declining. The question remains however, is this trend in financial brand equity sustainable in the long term, even

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in a premium market segment, given the decline in customer-based brand equity and, in that case, what can then be done to mainstream the Easter Bilby brand.

Mainstreaming the Easter Bilby

The goals for the Easter Bilby have been ambitious from the beginning. Despite much effort from conservationists, the concept seems to have never been a competitor for the Easter bunny. This maybe because of the lack of a more holistic brand management strategy. The Easter Bilby brand has mostly been treated solely as a name, which is but one of the components of a brand (Kotler et al., 2005). In order to grow into a mainstream entity, the Easter Bilby brand has to be actively managed to clearly define what the key attributes and benefits of the brand are and how these should be best promoted to different target audiences in Australia.

In this context, while RFA's ownership of the Easter Bilby trademark marks a rare occasion of truly innovative thinking by a conservation NGO in terms of fundraising, this direct link to the RFA and its mission statement may be hindering the adoption of the trademark by businesses. The eradication of invasive species is a highly controversial topic globally and no more so when the species targeted are mammals. In Australia, there has been much debate over the need and merit of eradicating rabbits (Smith, 2006, Wright, 2012).

This controversy could be seen as a liability by businesses hoping to engage with bilby conservation efforts and may be why currently the Save the Bilby Fund is fundraising a much larger amount from the sale of chocolate bilbies at Easter time than the RFA. One option to tackle this limitation would be for RFA to keep the trademark in order to restrict its use to ventures related to conservation, but allow the contributions to be channeled to other NGOs working on similar issues (Garnett and Kessing, 2001). This would likely allow a broader suite of business and other stakeholders to get involved and help mainstream the Easter Bilby concept. This would in turn allow for the Easter Bilby to move to products other than chocolates, a type of product whose promotion has some ethical implications that social marketers need to bear in mind.

The focus on the promotion of the Easter Bilby in the form of chocolate makes it part of the marketing strategy that incentivizes the consumption of what public health professionals have labelled high energy nutrient poor food (Grills, 2011). Furthermore, much of this marketing is done to children, a practice that while increasingly common in holidays such as Easter, Halloween or Christmas, has come under increasing criticism (Grills, 2011, Porter and Grills, 2013). In Australia, the National Preventative Health Taskforce recommends phasing out "the use of promotional characters, including celebrities and cartoon characters, used to market high energy nutrient poor food and beverages to children" due to its potential health impacts (National Preventative Health Taskforce, 2009). It is thus key for the Easter Bilby brand to diversify its focus into other products and even other sectors if it is to avoid an ethical conundrum.

It is key for the Easter Bilby brand to diversify its focus into other products and even other sectors if it is to avoid an ethical conundrum.

An effective marketing strategy for the Easter Bilby, will also require cooperation between biodiversity conservation stakeholders, so they can speak with one voice to industry, government parties and the Australian public. While it is key that more is done to achieve alignment, for example, between NGOs using the Easter Bilby brand, one key aspect that was missing until recently was the acknowledgement of the cultural and spiritual significance of the bilby to the Aboriginal peoples of Australia (Bradley et al., 2015; Paltridge, 2016). While the case has been made for the cultural value of the rabbit for Australians with European descent (Wright, 2012; Smith, 2006), less notice has been taken of the cultural importance of the bilby for the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, and the impact that the species decline has had to these stakeholders. Conservationists will need to be more inclusive if their messaging on the stewardship of Australian natural heritage is to resonate across Australian society.

The Easter Bilby offers a singular marketing-based approach to supporting biodiversity conservation, and showcases the kind of entrepreneurship that biodiversity conservation need in order to mobilize other stakeholders and raise much needed funds. While, the current move towards more ethical consumerism in Australia (Sivasailam, 2010) creates an opportunity for the Easter bilby to thrive, the next decade will likely determine the ultimate outcome of this effort to reduce the impact of invasive species.

Whatever the case, this is not only a matter of consequence to Australia but a potential blueprint to help conservationists in the many countries worldwide where invasive species are a threat to the local culture, economy and natural history.

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Note

1. “The term bilby is a loanword from the Yuwaalaraay Aboriginal language of northern New South Wales, meaning long-nosed rat. It is known as dalgite in Western Australia, and the nickname pinkie is sometimes used in South Australia. The Wiradjuri of New South Wales also call it ‘bilby’” (Planeta.com). (Editors’ Note)

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