

## *Foreword*

Ninety-nine percent of all the species that have ever existed on Earth are extinct, including all species of humans except our own. Undoubtedly, as humans evolved from four legs to two, from forest to the plains, and from hunter-gatherer to agrarian society, we, and our forebears, contributed to some of these extinctions. In modern times, we continue to contribute to the extinction of species, and at an alarming rate. What makes our behavior different than in prehistoric times is that humans now recognize the impacts of our actions on species' persistence, and we can take action, if we so choose, to reverse species loss. Sometimes our response is too little too late, as with the passenger pigeon that once blotted the sky with its fecundity but today resides only in the dusty drawers of museum cabinets. But at other times humans are successful at saving species, and in those instances we should pause to celebrate our achievements, and to consider the ingredients that bring a species back from the brink of extinction.

Such is the story of the Channel Islands fox. Off the California coast lies a small chain of islands, distant enough to make movement of animals from the mainland rare and difficult, and isolated for long enough that those species that did reach the islands have adapted and evolved, like Darwin's finches. Indeed the Channel Islands have been called the American Galapagos, once home to pigmy mammoths and later the hunting grounds of the Chumash people. Today the islands are home to many indigenous animals and plants that have adapted to the wind-swept slopes and the dry Mediterranean climate. Among this unique biota is the island fox, an animal the size of a house cat and cuter than a golden marmoset (in my opinion). Island foxes are also brazenly unafraid of people, because until humans arrived they were the top predator on the islands. A hundred years of cattle and sheep grazing, and the introduction of non-native pigs, elk, deer, and turkeys attracted golden eagles to the islands where they found foxes to be easy prey. Island foxes had never confronted death from the sky, and thus did not hide from predators like their gray fox

cousins do on the mainland. When the populations were decimated and near extinction, the National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy and the Catalina Island Conservancy took action that was dramatic, heroic and, at times, controversial. Today the island fox is back, breeding in the wild and hunting the grassy slopes for grasshoppers and berries without danger from the skies, and protected from canine disease.

This book is the story of the foxes, but also the story of a dedicated group of people that I came to know, respect, and trust while I served as the Director of the National Park Service's Pacific West Region, which includes Channel Islands National Park. I claim no credit for their success, other than ensuring that they received the funding and occasionally the 'top cover' they needed to get the job done. But I can celebrate their success, and be inspired by their dogged dedication and their commitment to science. I can also hope that their actions inspire others. The elimination of introduced species to the islands and the recovery of island foxes sets the stage for a full restoration of the island ecosystem, giving us hope for other islands, other special places and for our fragile, unique, and beautiful planet.

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Conway (2007): 'There is little reason to expect that any terrestrial wild animal which competes with humans in some way, real or invented, or is larger than a 2-gallon [c.9 liters] bucket, will survive for long without increased protection and knowledgeable care.'