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# Historic placenames as a source in identifying bygone faunal distributions: a double-edged sword

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to exemplify how certain types of historic toponyms (placenames) can be employed as an aide to biogeographers in revealing past distributions of species and ecosystems, but also the need for additional interrogation of their likely veracity. Some of the toponyms bestowed by the Dutch explorer, Maerten van Delft, who surveyed the northern coasts of Australia's Melville Island and the Cobourg Peninsula in 1705, serve as examples for further examination. The expedition conferred 61 toponyms and topographic descriptors, some of which are enigmatic given what we know of the ostensive distribution of Australian fauna in the region at the time. Presumably, the names referred to animals seen on the expedition. Cartographic, documentary, linguistic, and natural science sources were consulted to analyse the meanings of the toponyms. It shows that some the toponyms were based on misidentification due to unfamiliarity of the endemic fauna, whilst one did not refer to an animal at all. Another toponym raises the tantalising prospect that thylacines were present on Melville and Greenhill Islands at the time.

## Highlights

- Historic toponyms may potentially reveal past biogeographical states.
- Six toponyms bestowed on a 1705 expedition to northern Australia denote fauna that were ostensibly sighted.
- The likelihood of the existence of four of the observed fauna, is questioned given they either did not exist there or are claimed to have extirpated by 1705.
- The data presented shows that toponyms may not always denote resident fauna.
- This article serves as a forewarning not to immediately interpret historic placename denotations literally, and the need for them to be linguistically, historically, and scientifically verified.

**Keywords:** Australian biogeography, Cobourg Peninsula, dingoes, emus, Maerten van Delft, Melville Island, thylacines, toponyms.

## Introduction

Geographical names (toponyms) primarily function to distinguish one geographic or civic feature from another, or to simply identify a feature. They are crucial for navigation, logistics, emergency services, and as will be shown, biogeographical inferences. A toponym's linguistic form often contains a descriptor of something associated with the location. Such names may be classified as 'associative toponyms' (Blair and Tent 2021), where the specific elements of the names denote something connected with the feature or its

context, e.g., *Shark Bay*, *Lizard Island*, *Pine Mountain*.<sup>1</sup> At times specific elements may contain a clue of a former biogeographical state of the feature. Some examples will serve to illustrate the point:

- A toponym providing a reminder of the once surrounding vegetation is *Cabbage Tree Bay*, in the Sydney suburb of Manly. The name was bestowed by early European settlers, who used cabbage tree palms (*Livistona australis*) as indicators of the presence of fresh water, because they grow in

<sup>1</sup>A toponym's *specific* element is akin to a 'given name', e.g., *Rocky Point*, whilst the **generic** element is like a 'family name', indicating to what geographic feature type the named location belongs, e.g., *Rocky Mountain* (Blair and Tent 2021).

moist, nutrient-rich soil (McDonald 1979). There are no cabbage tree palms there now.

- The common sobriquet for the Netherlands, *Holland*, and an element in the names of two of its provinces, *North Holland*, and *South Holland*, is derived from the Old Dutch *holtlant* ('woodland') (*Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT) 2022). The name originally referred to a county just south of Rotterdam. By 1064 the name was applied to the entire county. Of course, now there is little woodland left in those regions. (An apocryphal theory claimed *Holland* derived from *hol land* ('hollow land'); no doubt inspired by its low-lying topography).
- A reef off the coast of northern Viti Levu, Fiji, bears the name *Namuka* ('place of mosquitoes'). Since mosquitoes are not normally found on off-shore reefs, a possible inference, which can be tested, is that there used to be a mosquito-infested island there (Geraghty 2017).
- Spens (2007) found that lake names in northern Sweden 'were shown to be strongly associated with details regarding the fish fauna as well as the habitat.' (p. 329). Lakes with historical names containing *Rö-* (used to designate the presence brown trout), showed brown trout distribution was stable until the 1930s when extinctions began.

Numerous studies have found that historic toponyms provide environmental information that may enable researchers to reconstruct former distributions of species of flora and fauna (e.g., Aybes and Yalden 1995, Boisseau and Yalden 1998, García Latorre et al. 2001, Webster 2001, Cox et al. 2002, Moore 2002, Yalden 2002, Hough 2008, Sousa et al. 2010, Evans et al. 2012, Beconyte et al. 2019) (Appendix S1). In addition, such toponymic information is important because it can enable the re-establishment of the original ecosystems and facilitate in the monitoring of future ecological changes. However, care is needed when interpreting the meaning or referent of some toponyms. On occasion, a toponym that seems to have a transparent meaning, is in fact cryptic (see *Varkens Hoek* 'Pig Point', below). At other times, the name may be the consequence of a misidentification of something associated with the feature, resulting in a misleading name. One well-known example is that of *Rottnest Island* (off the coast of Perth, Australia). When the Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh stepped ashore in December 1696, he encountered what he thought were large bush rats, and being unfamiliar with the island's endemic quakkas (*Setonix brachyurus*), subsequently named it *Eijlandt Rottenest* ('Ratsnest Island') (Schilder 1985).

In the light of a toponym's ability to reveal a former biogeographic state of a feature, as well as its ability to camouflage its referent or meaning, the ensuing discussion will consider several toponyms bestowed during Maarten van Delft's 1705 expedition to the northern coasts of the New Holland (present-day Australia).

### The 1705 van Delft expedition

Little is known about the van Delft exploratory expedition to the west and north coasts of Bathurst Island, the north coasts of Melville Island and Cobourg Peninsula, and the west coast of Croker Island (Northern Territory, Australia) (Figures 1a, b, c). The *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC, 'United (Dutch) East India Company') sent out three vessels to explore the northern coasts of New Holland, the *Vossenbosch*, *Nova Hollandia*, and *Waijer*, under the overall command of van Delft. He was to sail from Batavia (present-day Jakarta) and follow the northern coasts of New Holland in an easterly direction—including the Gulf of Carpentaria surveyed by Tasman in 1644—up the west coast of Cape York Peninsula and then follow the south coast of New Guinea on the way back to Batavia. All the while, he was instructed to make accurate surveys of the coasts, islands, their inhabitants, and products (Leupe 1868, Heeres 1899, Robert 1973). The expedition never ventured further east than the west coast of Croker Island, because the ships' crews suffered serious illness due of the lack of adequate provisions. Many men died, including van Delft.

The only documentary evidence that remains of the expedition are the detailed anonymous manuscript chart, presumably made during the voyage (Figure 1a), and the report of 6 October, 1705 by the VOC Councillors Hendrick Swaardecroon and Cornelis Chastelijn (1856 [1705]). The report was compiled from two written journals kept during the expedition, as well as the verbal accounts of the officers who survived the expedition. Van Delft's journal, and those of the other officers are no longer extant. The anonymous manuscript chart of the voyage was not discovered until 1868 (Leupe 1868). This helps explain why none of van Delft's toponyms were adopted by the British, unlike many of the toponyms bestowed by other Dutch navigators between 1606 and 1756.

### Van Delft's toponyms

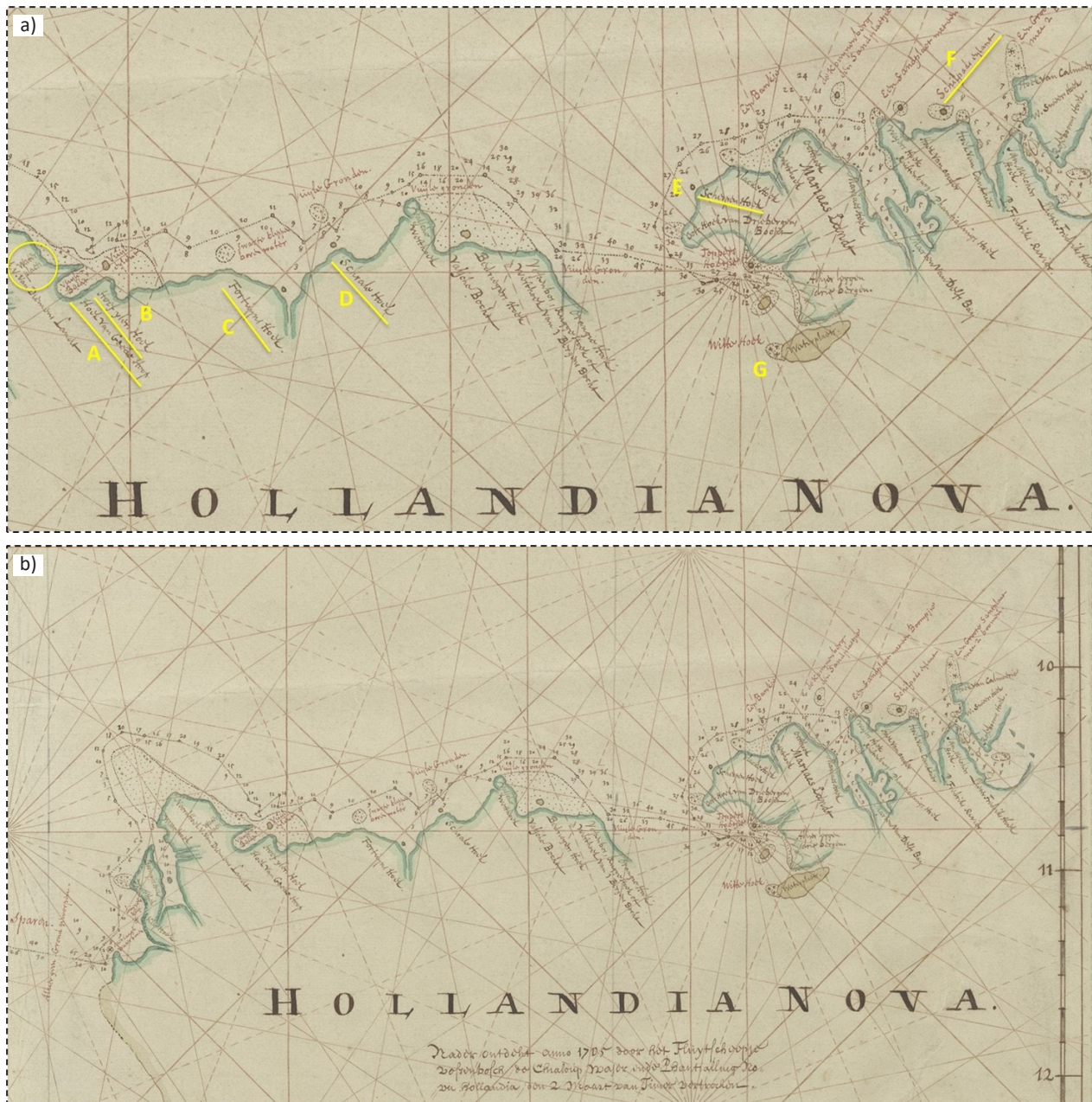
The Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report mentions several placenames not transcribed on the 1705 chart, indicating that independent simultaneous placename bestowal was practiced, probably by the skippers of each vessel. Although all the toponyms appearing on the chart are of interest to the toponymist, as illustrated by Tent (2021), it is the toponyms referring to animals in the Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report that should stir the interest of biogeographers. Table 1 itemises the six faunal toponyms in the report as they appear in order from west to east. Figures 1b & c highlight the locations of these toponyms (underlined) on the 1705 chart. Only the eastern-most name in the report and on the chart, viz. *Schilpads eilant~Eyland* (off the coast of Cobourg Peninsula), match one another.

Four toponyms in the report are enigmatic because according to current scientific understanding, cassowaries, pigs, tigers, and wolves never inhabited Melville Island or any of the northern reaches of today's Northern Territory. These toponyms, including (E) *Kaijmans-hoek* and (F) *Schilpads eilant~Eyland*, are considered below from linguistic (etymological)



**Table 1.** Toponyms named for animals during the van Delft expedition.

Figure 2 Reference	Swaardecroon & Chastelijn report appellations	<i>Hollandia Nova</i> chart (1705) appellations	Current appellation
A	<i>Casuarishoek</i> 'Cassowary Point'	<i>Hoek van Goede Hoop</i> 'Good Hope Point'	Purumpinelli Point
B	<i>Varckenshoek</i> 'Pig/Hog Point'	<i>Hoefysier Hoek</i> 'Horseshoe Point'	Cape Lavery
C	<i>Tijgers</i> -hoek 'Tiger Point'	<i>Fortuijns Hoek</i> 'Fortuijns Point'	Radford Point
D	<i>Wolven</i> -hoek 'Wolf Point'	<i>Schrale Hoek</i> 'Barren Point'	Point Jual
E	<i>Kajimans</i> -hoek 'Caiman Point'	<i>Scherpen Hoek</i> 'Sharp Point'	Lingi Point
F	<i>Schilpads</i> -eijland 'Turtle Island'	<i>Schilpads Eylant</i> 'Turtle Island'	Sandy Island No. 2



**Figure 1.** Region of northern Australia explored by van Delft. (a) Detail of Anon (1705). *Hollandia Nova, nader ontdeckt, Anno 1705, door het fluitschip Vossenbosch, de chialoup Wajer en de Phantialling Nova-Hollandia, den 2 Maart van Timor vertrocken.* ['New Holland, further discovered, Anno 1705, by the flute ship Vossenbosch, the chialoup Wajer and the Phantialling Nova-Hollandia, departed from Timor on March 2']. (b) Detail of Anon. (1705). *Hollandia Nova* [...] showing the location of the six toponyms (underlined) in the Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report bearing names of animals. (c) The region explored by van Delft in relation to the rest of Australia. The inset Google Earth image shows Bathurst and Melville Islands, Cobourg Peninsula and Croker Island in reference to the rectangular section on the map. Current toponyms are depicted. The region is currently known colloquially as 'The Top End'.

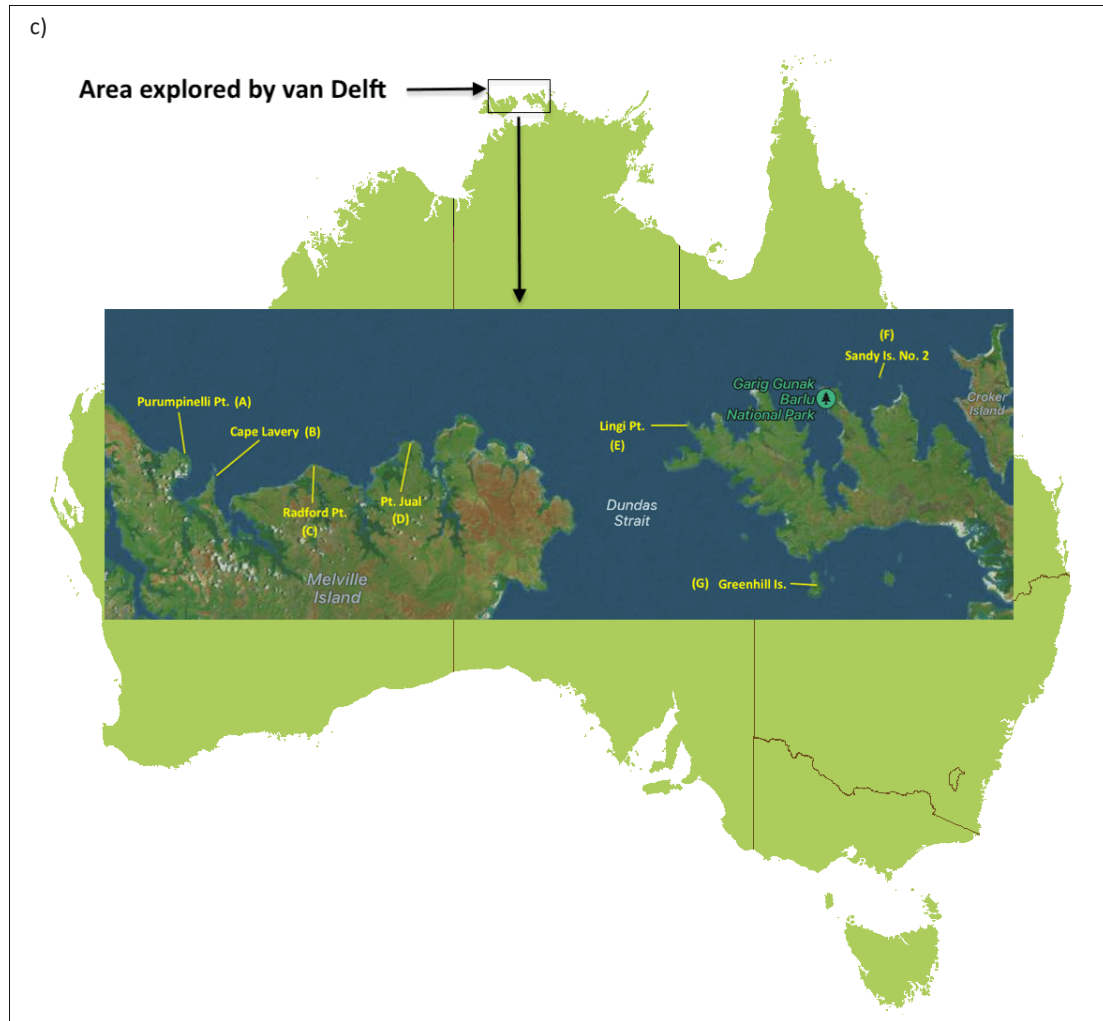


Figure 1. Continued...

and zoogeographical perspectives. Four of the names have a predictable and logical aetiology, though refer to extirpated or non-endemic animals, with two of the toponyms remaining enigmatic.

#### *Casuarishoek* ('Cassowary Point') aka *Hoek van Goede Hoop* (A)

*Casuaris*~*kasuaris* is the Dutch for 'cassowary' (derived from Malay *kasuari*) (WNT 2022). It is an intriguing name given cassowaries are not found in this region of Australia. At the time of European settlement of Australia, the southern cassowary lived in tropical rainforests of north-east Queensland, from the Paluma Range (north of Townsville) to the tip of Cape York (San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance 2021, Birdfact 2022, Birdlife Australia 2023). The obvious explanation for this toponym is that an emu or emus were sighted by van Delft and thought to be cassowaries. After all, both bird species are members of *Casuariidae* family; moreover, the Australian emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*) was unknown to Europeans until the late-eighteenth century. They were initially referred to as 'cassowaries' in the early days of British occupation of the continent.

An example of this is provided by Captain Arthur Phillip, First Governor of NSW (7 February 1788 – 10 December 1792) who offered a detailed description of the emu referring to it as the 'New Holland Cassowary':

NEW HOLLAND CASSOWARY. Order VI. Struthious. Genus LIX. Cassowary.

This is a species differing in many particulars from that generally known, and is a much larger bird, standing higher on its legs, and having the neck longer than in the common one. Total length seven feet two inches. The bill is not greatly different from that of the common Cassowary; but the horny appendage, or helmet on the top of the head, in this species is totally wanting: the whole of the head and neck is also covered with feathers, except the throat and fore part of the neck about half way, which are not so well feathered as the rest; whereas in the common Cassowary, the head and neck are bare and carunculated as in the turkey. [...]

(Phillip 1789 CHAPTER XXII Supplemental Account of Animals from New South Wales)



The existence of emu on Melville Island in 1705 is somewhat uncertain. Matthews (1914) argues that Groote Eylandt, Melville Island, and Bathurst Island (formed after the postglacial stabilisation of the sea level around 3000–4000 years ago) were large enough to support emu populations. Parallels may be drawn with King Island (off the north-west coast of Tasmania) and Kangaroo Island (off the south coast of South Australia), which also harboured emu populations prior to European occupation (Appendix S2). Emus were, however, ultimately extirpated on these islands because of over-hunting (Hermes 2018). Rock art depictions of emus are found on Groote Eylandt, suggesting they once also inhabited the island (Hermes 2018). This theory is supported to varying extents and degrees of confidence by various authors. McCarthy (1960) cautiously supports the notion, at least regarding Groote Eylandt. Hermes (2018) echoes the premise, claiming they were extirpated on several large northern Australian islands in the late Holocene, however, does not venture any specific time when this may have occurred. Ryeland et al. (2021) report that the current distribution of emus is commonly governed by past changes in climate and environment. They argue that Australia's landscape changed markedly when humans arrived some 65,000 years ago, which heralded the extinction of most megafauna within 20,000 years. Many species underwent shifts in geographic range leading to extirpation, all due to hunting and human induced effects upon the landscape. The distribution of emu populations was also affected by this. Matthews (1914) lists 167 bird species occurring on Melville Island, the emu is not among them. Likewise, Puruntatameri et al. (2001) and the Merlin Bird ID (Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2023) do not have the emu in their inventories. Harney and Elkin (1942) also report the absence of emus on the island. All this raises the question of when emus were eradicated on Melville Island. Was it before van Delft visited or after? If he saw an emu or emus, this would mean they were eradicated after 1705; if before, what kind of bird did van Delft see?

### *Varckenshoek* ('Pig/Hog Point') aka *Hoefyser Hoek* (B)

This is a cryptic toponym, given it hides its true denotation. It is well established that there were no pigs (spp. *Sus*) in Australia prior to European occupation, with perhaps the exception of the northern segment of Cape York Peninsula (Baldwin 1983). These pigs would have been introduced through human contact with New Guinea. Since pigs were not found elsewhere in Australia at the time, it is most unlikely van Delft's men saw any pigs. However, an initial thought may be that pigs were introduced to the region by Macassans, who visited there in search of trepang ('bêche-de-mer'), because pigs were endemic to the Indonesian archipelago. Several particularists refute this notion. Firstly, it is assumed the Macassans were predominantly Muslim (Tjandrasmita 1978, cited in MacIntosh 1996), and therefore probably would not have had pigs aboard their vessels. Secondly,

even if the Macassans did introduce pigs to Melville Island, it would have occurred *after* van Delft's visit in 1705. Macknight (1976, 1986, 2011, 2013) estimates Macassans started fishing in the region from between 1720 and 1750 onwards. If Macknight is correct, then it is unlikely van Delft's men saw any pigs. Finally, it is assumed Melville Island was only occasionally visited by Macassans (Macknight 1969, 1972, 1976, Russell 2004) because the islanders were said to be hostile towards outsiders (Searcy 1909, Macknight 1969, Mulvaney 1989, Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999). If the latter is accurate, then the chances of Macassans introducing pigs to Melville Island is undermined even further. A much more likely scenario is that the toponym derives from the sixteenth–eighteenth century Dutch colloquial maritime term *varcken~varcken~verken* ('pig') referring to a small ship's freshwater barrels, which were used to fetch water from shore (van Lennep 2012 [1856], Kooijmans and Schooneveld-Oosterling 2000, WNT 2022). The shape of the water casks may provide a clue as to the name. The ubiquity of the topographic descriptor *Waterplaets* ('Watering place') on Dutch charts between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries attests to the importance of freshwater sources to mariners.<sup>2</sup> We see *varcken* frequently used in Dutch mariners' journals, to refer to water casks, e.g.,

- From Jan Carstenszoon's journal of 1623 (my bolding of relevant terms):

Den 24<sup>n</sup> [Martio] is d'ondercoopman met beijde schuijten (terwijl met 't roer doende waeren) aen 't voorschr. eijlantien gevaren; om voor Aernem water (wesende daer van seer sober versien) te halen ende des avonts, met vier **varckens** vol, na overgroote moeijte weder aen boort gecomen.

(Heeres 1899 pp. 31–32)

[Transl. 'On the 24<sup>th</sup> [March] (while our men were engaged on the rudder) the under merchant rowed to the small island aforesaid with the two pinnaces, in order to get fresh water for the Aernem (which was very poorly supplied with the same) and in the evening returned on board again with four **casks** of water, which were filled with extreme difficulty.']

- From François Pelsaert's journal of 1629:

Ady 17 [September]. ...Derhalven, met dat het ancker viel, voer ick met den boot, mede nemende een **verken** water, een **ditto** broodt, ende en vaatgin wijn naar het hoogste eylandt, dat aldernaast was, daar komende vernamp jck geen volck, daar over wij ons verwonderden...

(Heeres 1899 p. 60)

<sup>2</sup> A 'topographic descriptor' is defined here as an appellation (consisting of a single word or a phrase) often found on manuscript charts which cannot be readily classified as toponym. Their function was to provide descriptions the topography, thereby serving as guides to navigation, warning of shallows, hidden reefs, places for victualling etc. For example, *shoal*, *blue mud*, *salty river*, *thick scrub*, *high mountain*, etc.

[Transl. 'On the 17<sup>th</sup> [September]. ...Therefore, when we had come to anchor, I went in a boat to the highest island, which was quite close to us, taking with me a **cask** of water, a **ditto** of bread, and a small vat of wine; when I had got there I did not see any one, at which we were greatly astonished...']

- From Abel Tasman's journal of 1642:

24 september

... 's Nachts in de tweede wacht cregen nog een boodt met 7 **varckens** water aen boort.

(Roeper and Wildeman 2006 p. 57)

[Transl. '... At night during the second watch received another boat with 7 **casks** of water on board.']

In view of this common maritime term, and the of proximity of *Varkenshoek* (i.e., *Hoefyser Hoek B*, Figure 1b) to the watering place to its east labelled *Water plaets* (circled), it seems entirely plausible the point was named for the use of water casks. The point may have afforded a suitable storage point for the casks as well as a launching site for boats to ferry casks to and from the mother ships. All in all, it seems very unlikely the point derives its name from the spp. *Sus*.

### *Tijgers-hoek* ('Tiger Point') aka *Fortuijns Hoek (C)*

This is the most intriguing and enigmatic of the six toponyms. The Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report mentions the name as shown in Figure 2.

The report also declares a tiger was sighted on an island in the third bay they explored, viz. the island marked *Waterplaets* ('Watering place', present day Greenhill Island) in *Driebergens Bocht* ('Three Mountains Bay', present-day Van Diemen Gulf) (Figures 1b & c, reference **G**). An excerpt from the report is given in Figure 3.



**Figure 4.** Indigenous rock art depiction of a thylacine at Ubirr Rock. (Source: Dave Pape, July 2, 2013. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/64279203@N00/9366535739>. Creative Commons).

De tweede inbocht na *Roosebooms*-baj hier vooren beschreven, tussehen de *Tijgers*- en *Wolven*-hoek, door de onsen gevisiteerd, vertoon zich als een wijde rivier, doch zout; en wijl daarin niets van opmerking is

**Figure 2.** Detail of Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report (1856 [1705] p. 200) mentioning the names *Tijgers*-[hoek] and *Wolven*-[hoek]. [Transl. 'The second inlet after *Roosebooms*-bay previously described, between the *Tiger*- and *Wolf*-point, visited by us, shows itself to be a wide river, though salty; and while there nothing of note in it ...'].]

geremarqueerd. Doch het zij daarmede hoe het wil, men sal maar alleen bij vervolg verder noteren, dat de Patsjallang door bovengenoemde felle stroomen en hol water niet verder dorste voortvaren, maar genootsaakt was na *Vossenbosch* terug te keeren, hebbende alvorens binnen desen boezem een eijland van vijf mijlen in het rond gevonden, daar zeer goed drinkwater en ook een tijger ontdekt is; alsmede partije sneppen op een

**Figure 3.** Detail of Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report (1856 [1705] p. 200) mentioning the sighting of a tiger. [Transl. '[...], because the Patsjallang, owing to the strength of the above-mentioned currents and hollow seas, did not dare proceed further, but was obliged to return to the *Vossenbosch*, having beforehand found inside this inlet an island of 5 miles in circumference, on which very good drinking water and also a tiger was discovered; ...'].<sup>3</sup>

This reference is independent of the point bearing the name *Tijgers*-hoek (Radford Point), its wording suggesting that they saw what was perceived to be an actual a tiger. To all outward appearances then, it seems that on at least two occasions a 'tiger' or 'tigers' were seen, one at *Tijgers*-hoek (**C**), and another on *Waterplaets* (**G**). Naturally, the motivation for the toponym cannot be put down to van Delft's men having seen the species *Panthera tigris*. It must have been a misidentification of some other animal. The inspiration for the name that understandably springs to mind is that a thylacine was sighted. However, this theory also has some problems given current scientific wisdom. Up until 2000 to 3000 years ago, the thylacine was widespread over continental Australia, extending north to New Guinea and south to Tasmania. That the thylacine occupied the northern reaches of the current Northern Territory is evidenced by the numerous Indigenous rock-paintings depicting them in Kakadu National Park (Figure 4) and Groote Eylandt (see Brandl 1972, Lewis 1977, Campbell 1999–2022). Although the precise reasons for the species' extinction or extirpation on the mainland are not completely certain, it is generally assumed it was largely due to the dingo (Douglas 1986, Heberle 2004, Australian Museum 2021, National Museum of Australia 2023). They *may*, however, have survived on coastal islands

<sup>3</sup> *Patsjallang* i.e., *pencalang* (formerly *pantchiallang* or *pantjalang*) is a traditional Malay sailing vessel, closed-in with a continuous deck, with one or two masts. Literally 'lookout ship' from *tjalang* 'to lookout'.



that were formed after the postglacial stabilisation of the sea level (approximately 3000–4000 years ago), including Melville and Greenhill Islands, however, there is no current scientific evidence (e.g., subfossil remains) to confirm this. When and how they may have become extinct there is presently unknown.

The only other researcher to have pondered the meaning of *Tijgers-hoek* is Gerritsen (2015), who, in a very brief chapter in his posthumously in-house published short compendium, raises a few of the issues presented above. He proposes that van Delft's men genuinely did see a thylacine on *Waterplaets* (Greenhill Island), and that they still might exist in isolated places and nearby islands, based on the unsubstantiated assumption they survived into the eighteenth century and beyond. Despite the lack of concrete and verifiable evidence of their continued existence elsewhere in Australia, the thylacine's sustained presence remains a contentious issue (see Paramonov 1967, Douglas 1990, Healy and Cropper 1994, Paddle 2000).

Another marginally conceivable aetiology for the name is the colloquial Dutch term *tijger*, which was used during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to refer to a brutish person (WNT 2022). The Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report provides detailed descriptions of the Indigenous peoples encountered by van Delft with whom the expedition's members had considerable interaction. The descriptions make clear the Dutch considered them to be primitive, cruel, and savage. However, the report never uses *tijger(s)* to refer to these people, even though van Delft's men may have used the term themselves and may have used it for a toponym themselves. The use of the colloquial *varcken* to refer to water casks could be interpreted to support this notion. However, when the reference to a tiger being discovered on *Waterplaets* (Greenhill Island), is considered, it seems quite clear it does not refer colloquially to a so-called 'savage' person, but to an animal perceived to be a tiger. Moreover, given the formal language used by Councillors Swaardecroon and Chastelijn in their official report, which was the norm for such documents, it is unlikely they would have used this colloquialism. Their use of the name *Tijgers-hoek* is most likely a direct citation of that name being given in the verbal account of van Delft's officers. The Councillors would not have considered this name surprising given it occurs within a cluster of other faunal toponyms. Moreover, they would not have been aware that pigs did not exist in the Southland given their ubiquity in the East Indies, New Guinea, and the wider Pacific, and as a consequence, would not have queried *Varckenshoek* either.

#### *Wolven-hoek* ('Wolf Point') aka *Schrale Hoek* (D)

The motivation for this name cannot be put down to the expedition having seen a wolf or wolves (*Canis lupis*) on Point Jual, given this species is not found in Australia. The most logical explanation is that it was a simple misidentification of the dingo (*Canis familiaris dingo*). Dingoes are plentiful on Melville Island (Harney and Elkin 1943, Davies et al. 2018, Jackson et al. 2019), and were attested to exist on Melville Island as early

as 1817. Citing Allan Cunningham's diary (the English botanist who accompanied Phillip Parker King on the HMS *Mermaid* survey of the Australian coasts between 1817 and 1820), Jackson et al. (2019 p. 206) note that Cunningham 'observed "three native dogs of a red colour" accompanying a group of Tiwi Islanders near St Asaph's Bay, Melville Island [...] on 16th May 1818 (Cunningham's diary quoted in Lee 1925 p. 387).' It is very probable that dingoes were on the island in van Delft's time.

The presence of dingoes on Melville Island raises another conundrum regarding the possible existence of thylacines at *Tijgers-hoek* (C) at the time. If thylacines were ostensibly extirpated on the mainland by dingoes between 2000 and 3000 years ago (Douglas 1986, Heberle 2004, Australian Museum 2021, National Museum of Australia 2023), then we must first question the possibility of thylacines' survival on Melville Island, and secondly, whether it was possible the two species to coexist there. This puzzle remains unresolved.

#### *Kaijmans-hoek* ('Caiman Point') aka *Scherpen Hoek* (E)

Like tigers and wolves, caimans (subfamily Caimaninae) are not found anywhere in Australia. They are uniquely found in Mexico, Central and South America. Nevertheless, the WNT entry for *kaaiman* declares the term was 'the usual name given by the Dutch in the East Indies for the frequently occurring species of crocodile (*Crocodilus biporcatus*)'. The toponym likely had its motivation in the saltwater crocodiles of northern Australia. This is, however, not the only instance crocodiles in the region were mistaken for another in the order Crocodylia. The explorer Phillip Parker King named three rivers at the south-eastern corner of the Van Diemen Gulf, the *Alligator Rivers*, when he came across numerous crocodiles in their lower reaches:

1818. May 8.

We saw very few birds, and those were chiefly cockatoos; but alligators were as numerous as in the other river, whence the name of Alligator Rivers were bestowed upon them.

(King 1825)

Apart from the understandable confusion of the order Crocodylia, this toponym cannot be seen in any way enigmatic.

#### *Schildpads Eyland* ('Turtle Island') (F)

This toponym is the most transparent of van Delft's faunal toponyms, the sandy islet (the current Sandy Island No. 2, adjacent Smith Point on the Cobourg Peninsula) clearly deriving its appellation from the turtles (Cheloniidae) seen on it. The Australian Flatback Sea Turtle (*Natator depressus*) was most likely the species van Delft saw given they are endemic to the region. Moreover, this species is known to lay its eggs on the island (Chatto 1998, Chatto and Baker 2008). Swaardecroon and Chastelijn declare van Delft reached the west coast of Melville Island on 2 April, and departed the northwest coast of Croker Island on 12 July. He would



have been at Sandy Island No. 2 only a few days prior to 12 July. This timeframe accords well with the breeding season of the Australian Flatback. Although they may breed during any month of the year, the breeding season peaks from June to August (Chatto, 1998).

## Conclusion

There are only seven toponyms on the anonymous chart of 1705 that correspond with those in the Swaardecroon and Chastelijn report, among a total of 61 distinct recorded toponyms which were bestowed during van Delft's expedition. The differences appear to indicate that the chart, made under the direction of its maker, van Delft of the *Vossenbosch* (Swaardecroon and Chastelijn 1856 [1705]), and the names in the report, ostensibly conferred by the skippers of the two other ships (Andries Rooseboom of the *Waijer*, and Pieter Frederickszoon of the *Nova Hollandia*), engaged in independent name bestowal, a view echoed by Venbrux (2002). Ultimately, van Delft may not have been aware of the alternative names.

Ignorance of the autochthonous fauna of Australia resulted in equating what van Delft's men saw with what they were familiar, which can explain the naming of *Wolven-hoek* and *Kajmans-hoek*. *Casuarishoek* is also quite transparent, however, questions remain as to whether emus existed on Melville Island at the time of van Delft's visit.

*Tijgers-hoek* is the truly enigmatic toponym. Did the expedition's men see a thylacine on Radford Point and Greenhill Island, or something else? If it can eventually be proven that thylacines had survived on these islands, at least until the early eighteenth century, then the mystery of the toponym will be solved. But until such time, the precise meaning of *Tijgers-hoek* and the report's reference to *tijgers* on Greenhill Island remains inscrutable. Pending definitive biogeographical evidence, we can only speculate as to the true aetiologies of *Casuarishoek* and *Tijgers-hoek*.

An alternative aetiology for van Delft's toponyms should also be considered, as a common place-naming practice among all European explorers was to copy a toponym from the homeland or one of their colonies and apply it to a newly 'discovered' geographic feature. This was a convenient means of 'planting the flag' on far flung places. Could any of the six van Delft faunal toponyms therefore be copies of ones from places within the VOC's sphere of influence?<sup>4</sup> Volume 1 of the *Grote Atlas van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* ('Comprehensive Atlas of the United (Dutch) East India Company'), which is the *Atlas Isaak de Graaf/Atlas Amsterdam* (see Schilder et al. 2006), contains a list of all the geographical names appearing in de Graaf's atlas. Apart from *Varckenshoek*, which appears six times in the atlas, I have not identified any other places bearing any of the remaining five names. Cape

<sup>4</sup> An example of such a copy is Tasman's *Pedra Branca* off Tasmania's south coast, copied from *Pedra Branca*, the rocky islets in the Singapore Strait. The offshore guano covered rocks of Tasmania reminded Tasman of the guano covered island near Singapore.

Lavery may, therefore, have been given the name *Varckenshoek* due to its resemblance to one of the other *Varckenshoeks* with which van Delft's men were familiar. Once again, without further historical evidence, this possibility remains hypothetical. However, it is my contention the toponym refers to a point where water casks were stored or collected.

Historical faunal toponyms may reveal much about former habitats and distributions, but as with determining the aetiology of any toponym, the precise details of the circumstances of its bestowal must be established by biogeographers as well as palaeontologists, historians, toponymists and linguists, before any definite biogeographical conclusions can be drawn. What may seem to be a transparent reference to some animal, may in fact be a false clue—*Varkenshoek* being a prime example of this.

The veracity of the purported observations of animals on Melville and Greenhill Islands as well as the Cobourg Peninsula by the van Delft expedition must be put under scrutiny. Until the journals of the expedition can be located, in concert with palaeontological evidence, there is currently no way this can be achieved.

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## Supplementary Material

The following materials are available as part of the online article at <https://escholarship.org/uc/fb>

**Appendix S1.** Summaries of a sample of studies using toponyms that provide evidence of former distributions and habitats of flora and fauna.

**Appendix S2.** An example a 1802 French toponym bearing the specific element *Casoars* 'Cassowaries' indicating emus were present on Kangaroo Island (South Australia) prior to their extirpation.

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