

## ***Cane Toads: An Unnatural History (1987)***

Review By JANET MASLIN, Published: March 21, 1988

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Ugly even by toad standards, the cane toad is revealed to be an amazingly resourceful creature. It was imported to Australia from Hawaii in 1935 - to illustrate this, the director, Mark Lewis, shows glimpses of a train trip across Australia, from a toad's-eye view - in hopes that it would destroy a grub that threatened the sugar cane crop. However, the toads' lack of interest in eating grubs was matched only by their eagerness to multiply. There are now millions of cane toads in Queensland, descended from an original group of only 101. And as one of the film's interviewees puts it, "the total conquest of northern Australia is but a hop, skip and jump."

Mr. Lewis can hardly be blamed for having some fun at these creatures' expense. He displays a large statue of a toad on a pedestal as one Queensland resident explains why this would be a good tourist attraction, then makes the monument disappear as we learn that the measure was voted down. The bookbinder who sent the Prince and Princess of Wales a volume bound in toadskin for a wedding gift is allowed a chance to show off his wares. Mr. Lewis illustrates the toads' voracious and indiscriminate eating habits by filming one as it hungrily stalks a Ping-Pong ball. He underscores their unusual tenacity by depicting the mating ritual whereby the male attaches himself to the back of a female for a long period of time. "Strange that the male should be so intent as to fail to notice the female's condition," marvels one scientist, since the female lies squashed in the middle of a road and has been dead for hours.

"Cane Toads" is funny, but it's also well balanced; it captures the real danger that the toads pose to their new environment. Their skin secretes a deadly poison (which also doubles as a hallucinogenic drug for some Australians, the film reveals), and as a result they have caused great damage to other species. They have also multiplied at a frightening rate, which is why some of the Australians whom Mr. Lewis interviews have such enterprising ways of killing them. Staunchly on the toads' side, on the other hand, is one sweet-faced elderly woman who says, "If anyone tried to hurt one of my toads, there'd be a lot of noise and they'd realize I wasn't a lady."