

100 PER CENT POSSUM PURE



WIKI WITTE

A couple of possum trappers relaxing outside Te Mahoerangi. Bob Elery on the far left, Seamus Blee on the far right and a Te Mahoerangi volunteer in the middle.

A 1080 POISON AERIAL DROP IN MARLBOROUGH 12 YEARS AGO INSPIRED VOLUNTEERS TO FIND ANOTHER WAY TO GET RID OF POSSUMS, REPORTS PENNY JONES

In 1995 in their continuing bid to rid New Zealand of its possum pests, the Department of Conservation dropped 1080 poison over a targeted area in the Marlborough Sounds. Early the next morning, concerned local residents Steve McCellan and Bine Witte went for a walk in the area.

"There was just silence," said McCellan. "It was as if the bush had gone into a state of shock. The dawn chorus should have been in full swing but there wasn't even a fly buzzing. The only noises were trees creaking in the wind and animals dying horrible deaths."

They realised the 1080 had killed far more than just possums and made it their mission, not only to stop the dumping of poison into the environment but, most importantly, "to offer a working alternative using non-toxic, humane methods".

Common Bushtail possums were introduced to New Zealand by European settlers who wanted to establish a fur industry, but without any natural predators, their numbers skyrocketed. Their current population is estimated at more than 70 million and they devour seven million tonnes of vegetation a year; particularly broadleaved species like the northern rata. The structure of New Zealand forests is changing because the trees the possums don't eat replace the rata and take away a vital food source for birds such as kaka and tui.

Possums are also known to eat the eggs of kokako and kiwi and can spread tuberculosis to farms.

Authorities introduced 1080 to New Zealand in the 1950s and DoC believes it is currently the best method of keeping the possum population under control. It has been furiously debated because of serious concerns about the amount of damage it causes to non-target animals and the environment. Opponents say it is cruel, contaminates the ground and waterways and contradicts New Zealand's claim to be 'clean, pure and green'.

As McCellan and Bine sat in the silence of the 1080 aftermath, they began to develop a concept which would enable them to protect their land in Nydia Bay (Pelorus Sound) from further 1080 drops. They called it All Profits to the Environment (APE). APE is a business whose sole aim is to compete with current profit-focused practices of business but in an environmentally sustainable manner, with any profits being used to fund environmental projects.

Their first plan for APE was simple: to design and build an eco-friendly backpackers/campground half way along the Nydia Track, a two day tramp which passes through their land, and use the profits to employ full time possum trappers as an alternative to the aerial 1080 drops.

Activities at Nydia Bay started on a small scale. They had a "5-knot shack" (named for its naturally occurring air-conditioning) and some grass areas for tents, but over the last 10 years, with the help of hundreds of conservation-minded volunteers from all over the world, they've built Te Mahoerangi Backpackers and presented it as a "gift to all from the gifts of many".

Cat Allen, a national park ranger from California, had been volunteering there for two weeks. "I love the way they practice things here, it makes you really think. I've learned it's easy to compost, sort and recycle garbage; it's easy to be self-sufficient and less excessive and it's easy and much better to work with, rather than fight, the environment."

Mike (known to all as Millie), a jack of all trades from Southland, volunteers himself as a kind of environmental janitor for the project. "I'm proud of what we are achieving," he said. "It's meaningful. It has clear objectives and like all of the most powerful things, it comes straight from the heart."

Importantly, the possum campaign has been a resounding success. They now have two to three full-time, experienced possum trappers methodically working across 3000ha of land, laying lines, baiting traps and catching possums

Below: A local weka strolls around the grounds of Te Mahoerangi; Top right: One of the many fantails who ballet dance around the tramper as they walk the Nydia Track; Bottom right: Te Mahoerangi Backpackers is located half way along the Nydia Track and has been built entirely by volunteers. Profits from the backpackers' lodge pay possum trappers who keep the local population of possums under control and Nydia Bay 1080 free



every day. Their success rate is measured by DoC levels of acceptance for clearance and, "not only have we reached this level," McCellan said, "we've taken it to record lows."

This was recognised in 2005 when they won the accolade of the most successful anti-1080 poison campaign in New Zealand.

They achieved it. An eco-haven in an area free of 1080 since 1999 which they can truthfully claim is clean, pure green New Zealand.

"Our solution is a win-win from all angles," McCellan said. "The environment is not being polluted; only the target pests are killed; it's more humane; trappers can subsidise their income by selling the possum fur and it'll be a future employment generator. We've now demonstrated an alternative to the use of poison which I believe, with variations, could be used successfully nationwide.

"And it won't stop at possums," McCellan continued. "The aim is to get to the point where possum trappers are trained as general pest trappers and are killing stoats, wild cats, rats, German wasps and any other environmentally damaging pests. These are long-term and labour-intensive methods, but it's the only environmentally-friendly solution and therefore in our current environmental predicament, the only solution."

The creation of Te Mahoerangi also opened opportunities for support services.

"It became clear that the APE concept could apply to any type of business," McCellan explained. "So we set up the Mahoerangi Environmental Education Trust (MEET), the charitable trust through which APE profits are channelled to the environment." These profits are distributed through wages, training, equipment, education and research and already the Trust's aims have received recognition from E.O Wilson's world sanctuaries.com and a BBC World Challenge nomination.

The Rutherford YHA in Havelock (now known as the



Rutherford Eco-Lodge) has recently been brought under the MEET umbrella and provides an essential link in the chain. It is the base for the MEET Fleet Transport (a pick up/drop off service for people walking the Nydia track) and the MEET Mates Youth Group. Established in March, the group invites local children to conservation centred Friday night meetings and adventurous activities.

Havelock is also the gateway to Pelorus Sound, Te Mahoerangi and MEET's next big challenge: the creation of Whareatea Wildlife Conservation Sanctuary on remote D'urville Island. Whareatea will start with the construction of an environmental education facility/village offering environmental care training and then extend activities to care for the surrounding 20,000ha native reserve. Among other ideas, they aim to offer training in pest control, seed bank development, permaculture, composting and eco-housing design and build.

"We hope to start construction in summer 2008," McCellan said, "so watch

this space!"

In August this year, the 1080 debate resurfaced when the Environmental Risk Management Authority gave its approval for authorities to continue using 1080. The authority endorsed it as a "necessary evil," and DoC senior adviser Herb Christophers said that it will continue to be used for the "foreseeable future" because there is "no viable alternative".

"There is a viable alternative," McCellan countered. "We are getting there but as we've never had any external financial support it's slow going. We believe it's time to look at the big picture. People are disillusioned with all the damage we are doing to our environment and are actively looking for new ways to live. APE business opportunities are unlimited and could pave the way for a New Zealand future with conservation and the environment, quite rightly, at the centre."

Check out www.nydiatrack.org.nz to learn more about the project and how to MEET the APEs in the Marlborough Sounds. 📍