



A plague of possums threatens New Zealand's biodiversity as surely as logging, albeit at a slower rate. Scientists calculate that possums have destroyed 80 percent of the Southern Ruahine rata-kamahi forest. Since possum eradication on Kapiti Island, bird numbers have increased two and half times.
Photo: Rod Morris

enough. The Wildlife Act needs some urgent changes. Protected species need habitat protection and especially threatened plant species which comprise 10 percent of our higher plant flora. The Wildlife Service, Botany Division of DSIR and the Conservation Department have spent millions of taxpayers money documenting the habitats of these threatened species (and their decline). Habitat protection is needed to ensure we do not extinguish more of our natural heritage.

Exotic Plants and Animals

After several decades of controls on exotic animal imports, the floodgates are now being opened again, aided and abetted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. We have

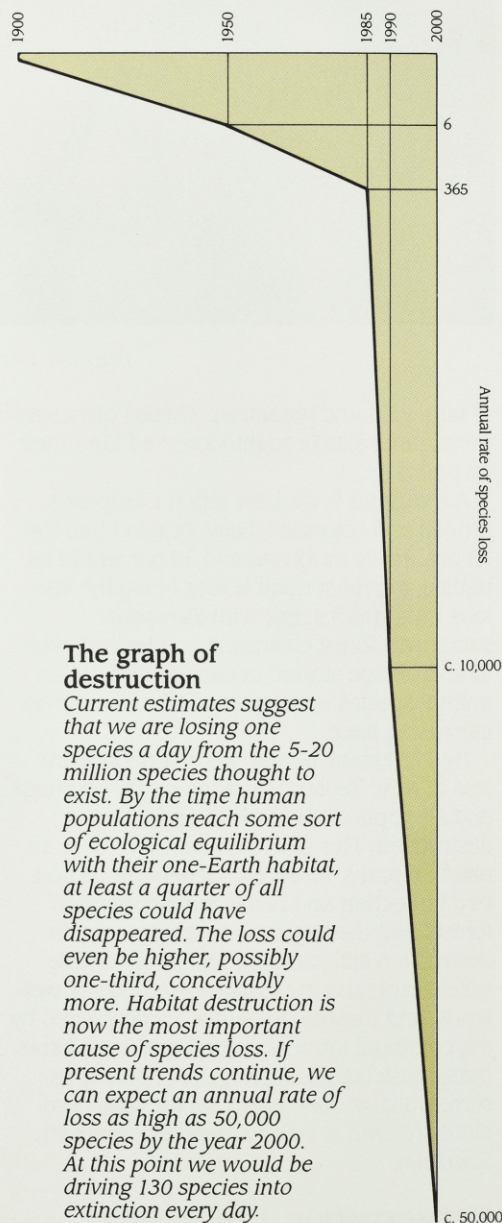
seen marron crayfish and chinchilla smuggled into New Zealand, and applications to import exotic abalone, catfish, crocodiles, antelopes and many more. We can expect in the next few years a new onslaught on our natural ecosystems from exotic pests, especially on our waterways, as some of these speculative farming ventures fail and the animals are released (for example, ferret releases from failed fitch farming, see *Forest & Bird* November 1989). Goat and deer escapes (the latter into Northland forests) are further examples of a mounting problem.

This situation will be exacerbated if some New Zealand deerstalker elements and would-be game managers in officialdom are able to relax control provisions for noxious

animals, such as thar and deer, and have them recognised as "game animals." This could prevent the eradication of deer and other noxious animals from threatened ecosystems in Fiordland or Northland or from islands, such as Great Barrier or D'Urville, or thar from the Southern Alps. It also ignores the fact that deer, goats, possums and other wild animals are pests which threaten New Zealand's biodiversity. Quite simply, control and, where achievable, extermination programmes, are vital to prevent some of our native species from becoming extinct or to head off unacceptable degradation of natural areas.

Hope for the Future?

In the last 150 years, one of the greatest uncontrolled experiments in natural history has occurred in New Zealand and in the process exacted a terrible toll in the rate of species and habitat loss. DSIR botanists have described the conversion of lowland New Zealand from natives to exotics as an event unparalleled in world botany.



The graph of destruction

Current estimates suggest that we are losing one species a day from the 5-20 million species thought to exist. By the time human populations reach some sort of ecological equilibrium with their one-Earth habitat, at least a quarter of all species could have disappeared. The loss could even be higher, possibly one-third, conceivably more. Habitat destruction is now the most important cause of species loss. If present trends continue, we can expect an annual rate of loss as high as 50,000 species by the year 2000. At this point we would be driving 130 species into extinction every day.