

MANA

Island of Hope and Glory

New Zealand conservationists are well on the way to achieving a world first with the mice eradication programme on Mana Island. Melanie Hutton details progress.



On New Zealand's Mana Island, some 15 million mice are devouring insects, birds and lizards. The mouse population soared three years ago after cattle were removed from the island and the supply of grass and seeds increased. Officials are spreading anticoagulant poisons everywhere to fight the plague.

In rural areas, rabbits

MANA ISLAND leapt into national and international prominence in August 1989 when *Time* magazine reported a biblical scale mice plague on the 217 hectare island just north of Wellington. Headline grabbing the estimate of 15 million mice might have been, but *Time's* figure was scaled down by the Department of Conservation to a still astonishing 5 million of this ubiquitous pest.

Of course, no-one had ever carried out a thorough rodent census. But Phil Todd, who has been on the island for more than two years, tells of going out on summer nights from the Mana island ranger station and seeing the back lawn and path covered with hundreds of mice.

"They were attracted to the houses because of the food. During summer they were constantly in the ceilings and walls, spending a considerable time gnawing at the pinex and pink batts. If they got stuck in the hollows of the wall you could hear them for three days jumping up and down. When the poison was being laid, they gnawed through my ceiling into the cupboard in search for food," recalls Phil.

But now all that has changed. Over the last year Mana Island has been covered with poison bait to rid it of its huge mice population. Since August 1989 only one live mouse – a female which had not bred – has been discovered. Phil Todd and many others who took part in the eradication project are hoping it was the last of Mana's mice.

Although conservationists and DoC will have to monitor the island for mice for another 12 months, it appears at this date that the programme has been a success. For New Zealand this could mean another achievement in our internationally acclaimed island restoration programme. While mice have been cleared from other New Zealand islands such as the 2 ha Whenuakura Island off the Coromandel coast, Mana's 217 ha presented the exterminators with a massive challenge. Eradication of mice on an island this size had never been tried in the world before.

Lying 2.5 km distant from the mainland, Mana has so far been spared the depredations of noxious pests such as stoats and rats. Considering its farming history, Mana appears to have avoided rats through sheer good fortune. Rats are accomplished stowaways and numerous boats have visited the islands over the years, posing the threat of accidental introductions. Boats still travel to the island bringing workers, volunteers and visitors, but nowadays every precaution is taken by those authorised to take passengers, such as laying poison on the boats and anchoring away from the soon-to-be-demolished jetty.