



*A possum population explosion occurred on the West Coast in the 1950s and 1960s. The result is the deaths of beautiful rata forests in valleys such as the Mungo, a tributary of the Hokitika River. Photo: Mike Harding*

years. After two years of being subjected to intensive possum browsing, the tree's old leaves fall and the tree dies. From there the possums will move onto a neighbouring healthy tree. They work their way through an individual species, then move on to less palatable species until the forest is progressively destroyed," explains Bryan.

In his eyes, possums destroy more than just forest; they also do away with people's livelihoods. Bryan estimates that Northland's forests could attract tens of thousands of international hunting tourists a year. The attractions include pigs, goats, ducks and eels. Guided tramping and bird watching trips are other ventures which could be developed.

The action plan that he and colleagues have developed is positive, practical and achievable.

Together they have set up the New Zealand Conservancy Trust. Bryan is working on a voluntary basis to investigate forest products, establish guide cooperatives, "re-establish the place of professional hunters of goats, deer and possums, to involve people from town and countryside in shifting the balance with possums and goats more in favour of trees and birds."

During two weeks in May about 30

trappers and volunteers gathered at Tangihua Forest in an attempt to significantly reduce the possum population. Each volunteer accompanied a trapper and helped to pre-feed with peanut butter along the possum line. The following day the trappers placed cyanide bait where pre-feed had been consumed.

Dead possums were skinned or simply counted and any remaining cyanide baits were scrubbed, that is, smeared under foot into the wet ground where the moisture rendered them harmless.

During the time that the group worked at Tangihua Forest, thousands of possums were eradicated. In fact before the two weeks was up new grass was already growing on the possum runs emerging on the surrounding farmlands.

The Trust wants to see teenage conservation clubs set up throughout the country, based in schools but whose activities would be primarily after school and during weekends. The young people would learn bush skills, forest ecology and how to eradicate weeds and pests from native forests. Club members would be taught a variety of humane trapping methods as well as safe rifle handling.

Funds to purchase equipment would come from club membership fees, or

possibly corporate sponsors and the Lottery Board.

Bryan believes Northland is an ideal location from which to launch the club, with an initial aim to control possums.

In the medium term, while massive possum eradication programmes are put in place, the Trust is seeking international and domestic markets for a special possum product – leather. A trial of 200 skins have been tanned to produce a pliable, strong leather suitable for book binding or quality garments such as footwear. Samples of the leather will be flown to China to test consumer reaction.

Other possum products such as meat and petfood are currently being investigated. The Chinese have a similar bear-like animal which they are accustomed to eating. Some people find the possum smell in possum petfood offensive but cooking and masking techniques can overcome this in the manufacturing process. Possum petfood is rated highly; it gives Bryan's dogs lustrous coats and makes them thrive, he contends.

If you would like to know more about the NZ Conservancy Trust, write to Bryan Innes, PO Box 279, Whangarei, or phone (089) 482-196. 🦜