

More rats on the way out...

ULVA ISLAND, in the centre of Stewart Island's Paterson Inlet, is the latest island to be targeted for rat eradication. The poisoning of Norway rats, the only introduced mammals on the island, began in July and will continue over three 25-day periods.

If the operation is successful, Ulva Island, at 270 hectares, will be the largest island in New Zealand cleared of rats. The project co-ordinator, DoC's Lindsay Chadderton, said the techniques would differ from those used successfully on Fiordland's Breaksea Island in 1988. Bait stations would be set further apart, on a 100-m square grid, and rebaited only every second day. A third of the island will be poisoned at a time – a technique known as a rolling front. Three workers will complete the whole operation.



TIM HIGHAM

Rat-buster Lindsay Chadderton with one of his bait stations on Ulva Island.

Scientists Rowley Taylor and Bruce Thomas will use radio tracking equipment to study the home ranges of rats and their behaviour before

and during the poisoning operation.

Mr Chadderton said the techniques were being tried out on the island as a possible

forerunner for the important large sanctuary islands of Codfish, Kapiti and Little Barrier. Ulva is renowned for its abundant weka, kakariki and kaka, and is a regular tourist boat stop on cruises of Paterson Inlet.

Weka were banded before the operation, to assess any ill effects from the scavenging of dead rats and of baits removed by rats. Weka could be re-introduced from neighbouring islands if their numbers were significantly reduced. Mr Chadderton said South Island saddlebacks would probably be re-introduced to the island when it was predator-free, and kiwi, riflemen and weta may also be considered.

Ulva Island will remain an open sanctuary and DoC will run an education campaign among boat owners to help reduce the risk of rodent re-introduction.

Tim Higham

Dances with MAF

THE CONSERVATION work done by Forest and Bird often depends on a lot of hard and painstaking research. Obtaining information from government departments for this research is not always simple. Particularly from some departments.

A recent decision by the Ombudsman upholding a Forest and Bird complaint against the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries closes one chapter in a drawn-out saga and highlights the often long and tortuous path to obtaining information that all New Zealanders have a right to.

For more than 30 years the old Official Secrets Act placed severe restrictions on public access to government information and made the unauthorised disclosure by state employees of even the most trivial piece of information a criminal offence. In 1982 this all changed with the passing of the Official Information Act which gives the public the right to government informa-

tion, unless there are sound reasons for not releasing it. Requests need to be met within 20 working days and the Ombudsman has the power to review departmental decisions and rule on whether a decision is in line with the Act.

In August 1990 Forest and Bird requested a list from MAF of the names and sizes of all squid fishing vessels. Over 100 Hooker's sea lions were drowning in the nets of trawlers each year around the Auckland Islands, and Forest and Bird had suggested the industry change to using jiggers, which use sea-lion-safe lines, to catch squid. Part of the argument hinged on whether or not jiggers were large enough to work in rough subantarctic seas.

MAF replied that they would not release the information because it was "commercially sensitive". Forest and Bird complained to the Ombudsman and the information on vessel sizes was eventually released. The information

showed that there were many jiggering vessels considerably larger than some of the trawlers working around the Auckland Islands. It strengthened the case for changing to jiggers in this area.

However, for supplying the information MAF billed us for \$259.20. On protest they agreed to waive the charges, but advised that they would charge Forest and Bird for all future requests.

Meanwhile the West Coast hoki fishery had begun, and the society requested weekly updates from MAF on the number of fur seals caught by the fishing fleets. MAF agreed to supply the information at a cost of \$20 per week. Forest and Bird regarded this charge as outrageous as the information was being prepared for government officials anyway. So the society laid another complaint with the Ombudsman.

Then in August last year MAF agreed, as a result of a "review of charges and procedures", not to charge for the

information on seal captures.

Earlier this year the saga finally seemed at an end. The Ombudsman advised Forest and Bird that MAF had produced a policy statement on the release of information. MAF's new policy was that each request would be assessed on its own merits.

Although many Official Information requests from the society to MAF Fisheries are dealt with quickly and courteously, there still seems to be reluctance among some staff to comply with the spirit of open government. Currently Forest and Bird has a further four complaints with the Ombudsman about the refusal of MAF Fisheries to release information.

Remember that it is your right to obtain government information. The government is obliged to provide you with information about its activities. If your request is not satisfied you can appeal to the Ombudsman for a review of the decision.

Alan Tennyson