

conservation**briefs**

Have gun, will travel

International conservation agencies are tapping into a New Zealand team, specialising in pest control, to save habitats that for decades have been under threat.

New South Wales conservation authorities hired the Paeroa-based Prohunt organisation to eradicate goats from Lord Howe Island, where the pests defied attempts spanning more than 50 years to get rid of them. Now Prohunt has been contracted to eradicate thousands of goats from the Galapagos Islands.

In New Zealand the professional hunting team is used widely in the North Island, by local authorities and the Department of Conservation, to remove goats, deer and pigs from water catchment areas, national parks, conservation parks, and other protected lands.

The Galapagos Islands, in the Pacific Ocean off Ecuador, are recognised as one of the world's greatest wildlife preserves but for years they have been under increasing threat from goats which progressively strip away natural food resources, nesting areas and shelter. The islands are treasured for their huge land tortoises, diverse birdlife and numerous rare plants, and attract up to 70,000 tourists annually.

In 1997 worried Galapagos conservation leaders held an international workshop on goat eradication and eco-restoration

for the islands, and opinion pointed to the New Zealand-based Prohunt organisation as a leader in this type of pest control.

Norm Macdonald, director of Prohunt, says a team-member will go to the Galapagos early this year, taking with him four specially-trained, goat-bailing dogs, needed for work in the dense bush which covers parts of the islands. Nine other members of the team and additional dogs will be sent over later, and the eradication project is expected to start about the middle of this year.

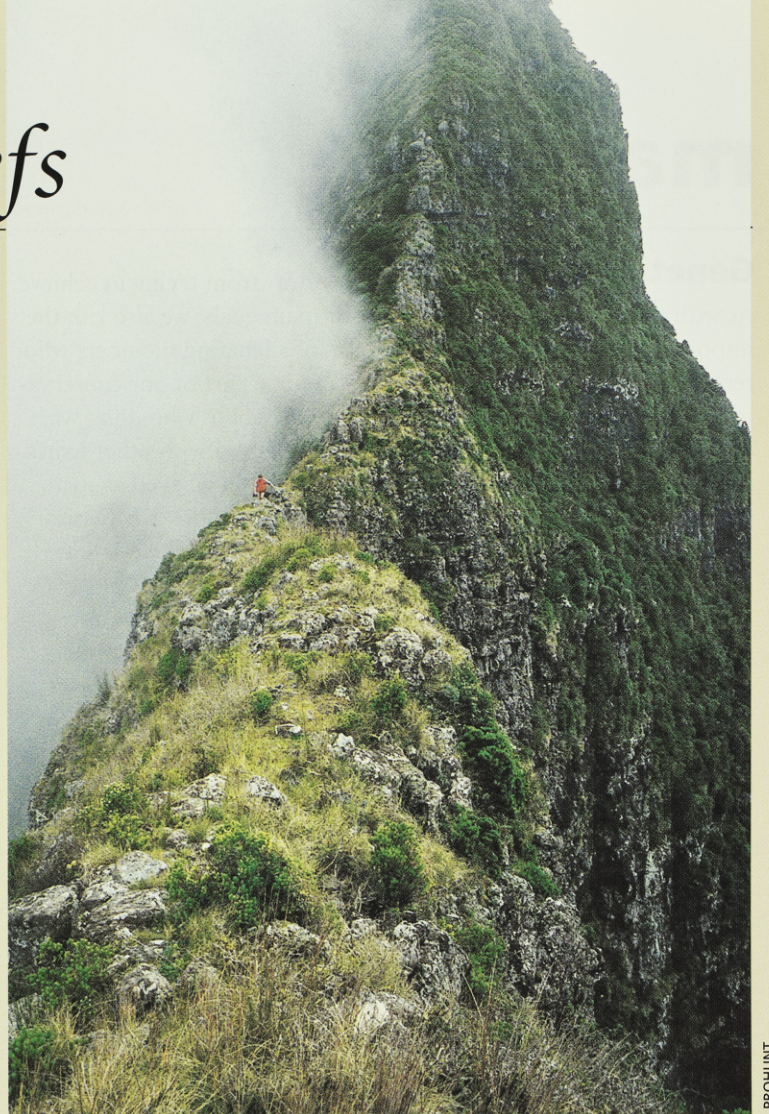
'Each of our dogs has been trained to leave other wildlife alone,' says Norm Macdonald. 'We have tried to make them target-specific, so they will be interested in goats only.'

'On Lord Howe, not one of our six dogs took the slightest interest in the native woodhens, in spite of the birds being numerous and very tame.'

Norm Macdonald, aged 43, has been a professional hunter for almost 25 years, with a special interest in goats. He has also worked on controlling deer, pig and possum, and Prohunt, which he formed in 1994, is now becoming interested in mustelid control (ferrets, weasels and stoats).

'Our method of goat control differs from normal hunting techniques,' he says.

'As well as using a helicopter to



PROHUNT

Hunting goats on rugged Lord Howe Island.

reach goats on really steep areas, we work as a hunting team rather than as individuals.'

The team has developed what they call the 'WOD' (Wall of Death) hunting method — using up to eight hunters, with dogs, strung out at 100-metre to 150-metre intervals and moving through an area in line abreast. Each member is in contact with others through hand-held high-frequency radios. With the dogs working either side of each hunter they guarantee to eradicate at least 90 per cent of goats on each sweep. Areas are worked through at least twice, the second sweep often within a few days of the first.

Prohunt is often called in to clean up areas 'no-one else wants to take on,' according to Norm Macdonald. Members of the team are known for the brilliant flame-orange jerkins they are required to wear whenever they hunt.

On the Galapagos the hunters

will work in relays, using a helicopter to reach mobs of goats on the islands' many steep bluffs. The helicopter will also be used to transport men and dogs quickly from one hunting location to another.

The hunting dogs, each worth about \$10,000, may have to wear specially-made leather boots because much of the islands are covered in sharp volcanic scoria.

Eradication work will be carried out under the scrutiny of international conservation and animal rights agencies. On Lord Howe Island, a senior representative of the Australian RSPCA spent three days observing the hunters, and according to Prohunt the methods used were seen as acceptable. Similar techniques will be used in the Galapagos. Norm Macdonald says it may take five years to complete the job.

Other international conservation agencies, including more Australians, are understood to be interested in using the Prohunt organisation for pest control work elsewhere in the world.

— Kingsley Field



PROHUNT

Hunting dogs are worth around \$10,000 when trained to avoid native species.