

# Community Dialogue on Pest Controls

A Forest and Bird initiative in the Bay of Plenty brought together 50 people from many community and governmental groups to brainstorm the question 'how do we win the war on animal pests in the patches of bush on our back doorstep?'

Seven branches of Forest and Bird were among 16 community groups who attended the day-long seminar at Lake Okareka, charged to share information, 'without reservation, in the absence of self-interest, for the common good of conservation'.

What the groups divulged about the successes and failures of their community-led pest control projects has broad implications, reaching well beyond the bounds of the central North Island region they call home.

Their experience comes from a diversity of landscapes — from the dense rainforests of Urewera National Park, to the isolated bush 'island' on the volcanic cone of Maungatautari, to the backyards of the settlement of Lake Tarawera. Through trial and error the groups came up with different optimal-control methods for rats, possums, stoats and feral cats.

The key message was that the right prescription for pest control in a given land patch varies with vegetation, terrain, climate, target-animal behaviour (which may be population-specific or variable throughout a species' range), and proximity to human habitation. Every pest-control project must have the flexibility to respond to variability in these conditions, and to changes in them over time.

Healthy, open relationships with project partners like the Department of Conservation, regional councils (also at the meeting) and the wider community, are also keys to responding effectively to the inevitable changes in predator dynamics.

In turn, to make sure that a

project is using the most effective, integrated methods to combat animal pests, a robust monitoring process is paramount. As Dr Carolyn King from the University of Waikato so eloquently put it, 'counting piles of dead pests is not enough. Only the protected species itself can tell us if control is benefiting its population density or breeding success'.

Effectively monitoring any protected species depends very much on the nature of the creature, as discovered by several community groups who have had varying success. The Kaharoa Kokako Trust, for instance, found it relatively easy to measure an increase in breeding activity in the strikingly vocal North Island kokako following intense possum and rat control; the Otanewainuku Kiwi Trust found it considerably more difficult to determine what exactly was happening in their population of secretive, nocturnal brown kiwi following stoat control.

Throughout the day, the status quo on how to achieve conservation outcomes for the nation was repeatedly challenged. Where is the right balance between humanely trapping an animal and ensuring that the trap is not so lethal that it poses a serious danger to the volunteer setting it? Where is the right balance between use of exclusionary tactics like predator-proof fences and use of control tactics which potentially benefit a greater diversity of native species without providing a permanent solution?

Workshop participants are still deliberating on these. Nonetheless, one thing that became abundantly clear is that an increasing number of community groups are involving themselves in pest control, 'owning' problems they see in their area, and achieving conservation outcomes that probably would never have occurred otherwise.

An over-riding message for the



Bob Scopes (Lake Tarawera) with bait station for use in settled areas.

day was that community groups involved in pest control projects can work smarter by communicating with each other. The face-to-face workshop model was highly effective for information-sharing, for building partnerships and for problem-solving.

Is the message that we have to poison forever? No, because we cannot, but we can buy some

time, re-group, and together develop a more effective strategy to win the war on animal pests.

— MEGAN HARRIS AND ADRIENNE GRANT. *The Animal Pest Control Workshop* was hosted by Rotorua Branch of Forest and Bird, with technical support from DoC's Bay of Plenty Conservancy. For a full copy of the workshop proceedings, contact Rotorua Branch of Forest and Bird, PO Box 1489, Rotorua.

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