



Goodwill Hunting

For ten years, John Gaukrodger sat in front of angry public meetings about 1080. He figured there had to be a better way. It was about stopping to let elderly ladies cross the street.

A while back, a box of chocolates arrived on John Gaukrodger's desk. It's a good start to any working day, but he was especially pleased to learn it had come from the local newspaper, which had awarded John – Coromandel Area Manager for the Department of Conservation – and his staff a bouquet for fixing up an old walking track.

He got letters too, from grateful parents who could now do the walk with a pram. People wrote in saying they no longer had to don gumboots just to go for a stroll.



So what has any of this got to do with saving threatened species? Everything, says John. It's all credit in what he calls the 'goodwill bank.'

"It comes down to the simplest of things," he says. "How the Department appears in the community. Behaviour, appearances, perceptions.

"I tell staff that if they're out in a DOC vehicle and a DOC uniform, to be good citizens; stop to let that elderly lady cross the street.

"We've achieved a level of credibility from 10 years of hard community relations work. That makes it easier when we have to do the hard yards over issues like 1080."

The Coromandel Range rears up sharply behind John's office and the township of Thames, a bushy spine of old volcanic plugs and domes. It looks green and verdant – it snags every cloud from the west – but it's infested with possums, rats and stoats, and John and his team want to do

And perversely, John says he gets a lot more calls about "sick" pigeons nowadays. "They ring in and say, 'I think this pigeon's been poisoned by 1080.' When we go round to check the birds out, we find that they've been feasting on berries, and are simply too full to fly. There's so much more food for them now."

something about it.

There's a lot at stake. Further up the coast on 700m Mt Moehau, near Coromandel's tip, the peninsula's last kiwi population are holding on in a specially managed 17,000 ha sanctuary. High on the cloudy tops live Hochstetter's and Archey's frogs, the most ancient on earth. Coromandel striped geckoes are so rare here that years of searches have turned up just two. Bats and kaka still roost in old hollow trees in the forest, and dactylanthus, a strange, woody parasitic plant, has recently been found.

Then there are the creeping things: the Moehau stag beetle, a couple of endemic weta, a stick insect.

Add to that some still-extensive tracts of coastal kohekohe and pohutukawa forest, and largely intact forest sequences from mountaintop to seashore, and John says there's plenty worth fighting for.

But ground-based control, using bait stations, is out of the question over much of the central Coromandel Range, in terrain you can barely stand up on. It's incredibly steep, and large tracts are simply unreachable.

To get a meaningful result, it's vital to put a bait in front of every possum, every rat, and the only way to do that over most of Coromandel is from the air.

But many have come here for the lifestyle, which is unashamedly alternative. That means some have a philosophical discomfort, if not outright opposition, to the notion of combating pests with poison.

John has his work cut out to convince people of the safety and efficacy of, not to mention the need for, 1080.

"We started a community relations programme back in 1992, and for over 10 years, we've been maintaining that approach, keeping the information going out. Enabling people to make their own decisions about whether they thought this was an acceptable way or not."

He has a policy of never letting a single letter to the editor go unchallenged. Keep reminding people of the reasons why. "We spend a lot of time on ministerials, photocopying, mail-outs, meetings. It takes us a lot of time, but we keep putting it out there."

But there's a payback. Bit by bit, John and his staff are gathering more and more support from the community.

Programme manager Fin Buchanan remembers the

difficulties in early years. "The hardest work was selling the first aerial operation to the public back in 1995. When they realised the rivers weren't running green, and all the birds were still alive, when we did it again in 1995 it was considerably easier.

"When we did the public relations work for the 2002 drop, it was a piece of cake by comparison. The landowners had been through it all twice before; they felt comfortable with it. They knew we were being straight up. It gets easier each time."

Now things are at the point where neighbours are asking if their own properties can be included in future operations.

But that doesn't mean John and his staff can afford to relax. The Area Office still organises regular hui, inviting all sides of the debate to the table to share information or have

their questions answered. No one came to the first, but John persisted. Nowadays they get 40-plus in attendance. Iwi, farmers,

life-stylers. All sorts. "They all get their input," he says.

"It's a two-pronged approach; keeping people informed with the latest and best information about the toxins, and keeping them up to date with deteriorating trends in the forests from predators and browsers."

And he can say it with conviction. When communities called for alternatives like trapping and different toxins, John delivered. He mounted a control operation using traps and cyanide. It failed to make the 5 per cent RTC target.

It helps that people are starting to see the positive results of 1080 control. The Moehau kiwi project enjoys a 70 per cent breeding success rate; the envy of other kiwi programmes. Kaka are coming back to the forest; there are lots more young ones about now. Fantail breeding success surged 50 per cent after control on Moehau.

"Apart from 1080, we have few practical tools at our disposal."

The Department would like to re-introduce some of those species lost to predators in years past – hihi, kokako, tieke – but until the rats can be controlled says John, "that could remain just a vision, rather than a reality for Moehau".

To tackle the rats effectively, he'd like to mount an aerial operation over Moehau, "because people are starting to understand the significance of the rat problem. They have a greater awareness now of the benefits of 1080".

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