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Report to the Rural Services and Wairarapa Committee
from Ray Clarey, Senior Biosecurity Officer, Animals

Predator Control – Mt Bruce National Wildlife Centre

1. Purpose

To seek Committee approval for funding of a predator control programme on private land adjacent to the Department of Conservation's Mt Bruce Scenic Reserve.

2. Background

The Mt Bruce Scenic Reserve is a 942 hectare remnant of what was once a majestic native rainforest that stretched for 70 kilometres from Masterton to Norsewood. It was once a vibrant ecosystem teeming with insects, land snails, frogs, lizards, tuatara and thousands of native birds including kaka, kakapo and huia. The following quotation is attributed to William Colenso after walking through the Mt Bruce area in 1846. "We passed through the most primeval forest of any that I have seen in New Zealand."

Sadly, this last remaining remnant is not pristine anymore but it is being brought back to life. The Department of Conservation (DOC) has a statutory responsibility for the management and rehabilitation of the Mt Bruce Reserve. DOC's mission is to conserve the natural and historic heritage for all to enjoy, now and in the future. It embarked on this mission with the re-introduction of North Island kaka four years ago. This small population of 34 free flying kaka has survived and now breeds in the forest.

The Reserve has the designation of Wildlife Centre and is administered by a Trust. The National Wildlife Centre Trust represents the wider community interest, owns the buildings at Mt Bruce and has a mission to promote conservation education. This has been so successful that Mt Bruce is the most popular ecological tourism destination after Kaikoura Whale Watch. There are between 30,000 and 40,000 visitors annually, many of whom are overseas tourists. The Wildlife Centre is renowned as a primary breeding facility for rare and endangered native species such as hihi, shore plover and Campbell Island teal.

The Wildlife Centre and Scenic Reserve has an international reputation and is considered an icon in the history of conservation in New Zealand.

2.1 The Long-Term Vision

The long-term vision is for Mt Bruce to be a restored and thriving forest ecosystem supporting a full complement of the Region's wildlife and natural systems. A nationally important premier breeding facility and a centre for education and learning in Te Ao Maori, conservation and eco tourism will complement the restored forest. Mount Bruce is intended be a national showcase, demonstrating a unique partnership in conservation at work, between the Trust Board, Rangitaane O Wairarapa, local and central government agencies and the community. A Masterton based DOC officer expressed it as "an internationally recognised tourism destination and open air laboratory supported by New Zealand experts in ecological restoration".

2.2 Memorandum of Understanding

This vision has led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the National Wildlife Centre Trust, Department of Conservation and Rangitaane O Wairarapa. The parties agree to respect, promote, and assist each other with achieving each organisation's objectives in regard to conservation based activity at Mt Bruce/Pukaha. The objectives of the Trust and DOC have been outlined earlier. The Rangitaane mission is to re-acquaint Rangitaane people with the history and ecology of Mt Bruce/Pukaha and to develop their people through employment, training, and development of new qualifications in ecological tourism and indigenous ecological tourism.

3. The Project

For the Mt Bruce Scenic Reserve to be home to viable breeding populations of the world's rarest bird species such as kaka, kokako and kiwi, an ongoing integrated pest and predator control programme is required. Once the Reserve and a buffer area on surrounding private land is pest and predator free, it is anticipated that a 50 percent growth in native bird populations will occur in the first breeding season. This will compound every year for at least five years. This is what occurred at the 'mainland island' project in Te Urewera National Park. This means that the Mt Bruce Reserve may one day be populated by up to 600 kaka, 400 kokako, 500 kiwi and thousands of tui, fantail, waxeye and other species. There will be a spill over effect onto the surrounding countryside, similar to what is occurring at the Karori Sanctuary.

The parties to the Memorandum of Understanding have already commenced the first steps towards a predator free environment. The National Wildlife Centre Trust has raised the money, and local Iwi (with the support of DOC and Work and Income) have almost completed cutting 130 kilometres of service tracks in contours around the Reserve. The tracks are required to provide access to a matrix of bait/trap sites. The control programme will require a large amount of hardware comprising 2,000 rat traps, 1,000 bait stations, 1,000 Fenn traps and 200 cat traps plus a significant amount of labour. The initial

operational cost is estimated at \$74,000 with an annual maintenance budget of \$18,000. The target pests are possums, rats, stoats, and wild cats.

3.1 Community Involvement

It has been communicated from the onset of the restoration programme that community support would be essential for its long term success. This has been addressed in part by the public sponsorship drive to support a hectare of pest control at \$25 per year. The sponsorship has been supported exceedingly well.

There have been other promotions organised by the parties to the Memorandum of Understanding and the proposal has received a considerable amount of interest from local and national media.

3.2 Landcare Group

The formation of a Landcare Group is being promoted to facilitate the involvement and support of the local Mt Bruce community and neighbours of the Reserve. An invitation was extended to these occupiers, as well as Horizons.mw. and our Council, to a meeting at Mt Bruce on 8th May this year. Andrew Stewart from the Landcare Trust facilitated a workshop to identify key issues and options as the first step to forming a 'Friends of Mt Bruce' Landcare Group. The theme of the workshop centred on first steps, an ideal outcome, and how to get there. One of the main issues identified was the need for a co-ordinated approach to pest animal (predator) control around the periphery of the Reserve. Opinions varied about the size of a buffer zone, but there was unanimous support for the two regional councils to take a lead role.

One of the priority actions from the workshop was for a meeting to be convened between Horizons.mw., WRC, DOC and landowner representatives. It was made clear to the meeting participants that although the idea of a buffer zone had merit, the proposal would require the approval of both Councils.

A summary of the Mount Bruce landowner workshop is appended. Andrew Stewart of the National Landcare Trust compiled this.

4. Past and Current WRC Pest Management at Mount Bruce

The Mount Bruce Reserve and surrounding farmed land has been subject to cyclic programmes for Bovine Tb vector control since 1984. The fact that the regional boundary bisects the reserve has on occasions created difficulties in co-ordinating vector control between the two Councils. The two Councils are striving to improve the level of co-ordination, using the Animal Health Board Technical Review process to cement the co-operative approach. The WRC portion of the Reserve has been treated with aerial 1080 baiting on a four to five year cycle. The adjacent farmed land has received ground-based control on a one to two year cycle. The last cycle of ground baiting was carried out earlier this year.

No further Bovine Tb vector control will be necessary within the Reserve with the advent of the DOC led predator control programme. Bovine Tb vector control will continue in the remainder of the operational area until it is declared “Tb Free”. Vector control requirements would, however, be minimal within a well-maintained predator buffer, should one be established.

4.1 Key Native Ecosystems

There are no active Key Native Ecosystem (KNE) programmes in the area principally because of the ongoing Bovine Tb programme and extremely low possum population. It is also important to note that the current KNE prioritisation process excludes DOC land, focusing solely on ecological protection on private land. However, many of the highest ranking KNE reside adjacent to DOC land, as large parcels of contiguous habitat offers greater biodiversity opportunities. Biosecurity staff strongly support the Mt Bruce initiative, despite it not achieving KNE status, as it provides a unique opportunity to progress our own biodiversity objectives with strong iwi and wider community support already in place.

The predator control concept is already being applied to KNE works in the Wairarapa with cyclic culling programmes of stoats, ferrets, wild cats and possums in the wildlife corridors along the Ruamahanga River from Masterton to Martinborough and in the Tauherenikau District. The Upper Ruamahanga River environs from Mount Bruce to Masterton are also a significant wildlife corridor as it contains a bounty of suitable habitat for native fauna and is close to the Tararua Forest Park.

5. Control Options

If a predator control buffer was not extended around the Reserve, then only the core 300 hectares could be kept predator free. The remaining 600 plus hectares would be prone to predator re-invasion. Native species in two thirds of the Reserve would be under constant threat. This is the firm opinion of DOC officers working at the Reserve.

There is an intention to release kiwi in the Reserve. They will be allowed to range free and will venture out of the forest onto the adjacent farmed land. This is a normal trait for kiwi. A predator buffer on the neighbouring farmed land will assist in kiwi re-establishing more quickly.

If neither regional council commits to a predator buffer, then it is likely that adjacent landowners will be encouraged through the Landcare Group to undertake predator control. Council may be requested to assist with such a programme through education and advice, and perhaps the subsidised provision of traps and bait. Co-ordinating a land owner initiative would be difficult given the access and terrain, and the fact that many of the occupiers do not reside on their land. There may well be commitment initially but it would soon wane. This was expressed by locals at the 8th May Mount Bruce workshop. They looked to the regional councils to promote and undertake such works.

Predator control is a multi-disciplined task requiring a committed methodical approach. The use of traps and poisons demands high standards. There are animal welfare issues at stake.

There is little doubt that the Mount Bruce National Wildlife Centre will become more popular than ever because of the predator control programme. It is already a major tourist attraction and is located at the north-eastern gateway to our Region.

WRC involvement provides an opportunity to make Mount Bruce a specific ecological project on behalf of the regional community. This could occur even if Council inputs were restricted to predator control works on private land.

6. Funding

The cost of providing a 1,800 hectare WRC predator buffer has been estimated at \$68,000 for the first year and \$25,000 per annum thereafter.

To derive the most benefit from the proposed buffer programme, it would be advantageous to commence the work early in the new financial year, to co-ordinate with the DOC predator control programme.

The Biosecurity KNE proposed 2002/03 budget does not allow sufficient funds to undertake a programme of the magnitude of the proposed Mount Bruce Buffer. It would be possible if most of the planned new KNE programmes were deferred. The following amounts have been budgeted per Territorial Authority area for new programmes in 2002-2003.

Kapiti Coast District	\$23,000
Porirua City	\$11,500
Wellington City	\$36,650
Masterton District	<u>\$ 8,000</u>
Total	<u>\$79,150</u>

These are Council costs and are matched dollar for dollar by the Western Zone TLA's. Deferral of those works would, therefore, inhibit the spending of an additional \$71,150 on KNE works in the Region.

Other options open to the Council include -

- Do nothing. Maintain adjacent land under the existing Bovine Tb possum control programme.
- Agree to consider funding WRC costs from any savings identified at the six month budget review process in January 2003. Field work would be delayed until funding approval was provided.
- Consider whether this item could be a late addition to the KNE budget for 2002/03 or should wait for the Long Term Council Community Plan process for inclusion in future years budgets.

7. Communications

DOC and the National Wildlife Centre have been very proactive in raising awareness about the long-term vision for the Mount Bruce Scenic Reserve. Many informative newsletters and information sheets have been produced. The current sale of hectare blocks to fund annual predator control costs is an initiative that is being actively supported by the wider community.

Should Council support the funding of a predator control programme adjacent to the Reserve, there will be many opportunities for media coverage. Joint press releases with DOC and the National Wildlife Centre should be considered. Adjacent landowners should also be contacted and advised of the Council's decision.

8. Recommendation

- (1) *That the Committee agree in principle to commit resources to assist the National Wildlife Trust, Rangitaane O Wairarapa and the Department of Conservation with the Mount Bruce Reserve restoration programme.*
- (2) *That the Committee agree in principle to fund a predator control programme on properties within the Wellington Region, adjacent to the Mount Bruce Scenic Reserve.*
- (3) *That the Committee give consideration to possible ways of funding the \$68,000 required for the first year's programme.*

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