



Twenty years at the Conservation Coalface – a personal perspective

In October 1998, the Windy Hill Company shareholders approved a modest pest management project on their property in the south eastern area of Aotea Great Barrier Island. Back then there was no NZ Biodiversity Strategy, no Nationally Significant Biodiversity Sites on Private Land, or Regional Pest Management Strategies, let alone a Predator free NZ2050.

Our motivation was simple and straight forward – suppress plant and animal pests to allow for the rejuvenation of our bird life.

Twenty years later, with a plethora of plant and animal pests removed and bird numbers at the highest recorded abundance on the island, the Windy Hill Sanctuary has become a role model for many communities seeking similar outcomes. Along with other Sanctuaries, we are now at the forefront of a pest management movement that has taken off all over NZ.

Personally, it has been a tenacious journey – one of learning, communicating that learning, and being encouraged by support from other landowners, members of the community, and funding organisations. A highlight has been the loyalty received from a dedicated team of local people employed as field workers. Twenty two different people have played a role in the field work in the Sanctuary and associated contracts. Twenty two livelihoods have contributed to our local economy. As I have mentioned in previous newsletters, observing the self-esteem that grows in people from performing a valued job over time is uplifting.

The Coalface

However, these are challenging times for people involved in conservation.

Just as a national drive to eradicate stoats, rats and possums gathers momentum, conservationists are now under siege for their use of toxins as part of the toolbox of methodologies. On Aotea this year the community engaged in robust debate over the use of brodifacoum to eradicate the rats from Rakitu, a small island 10 kilometres off the eastern coast of Great Barrier. The Sanctuary participated by sharing local knowledge and experience of pest management. We documented the challenges and high cost of keeping rats at low densities. We wrote a series of 10 Citizen Science articles for the local paper documenting the outcome of our research. We pointed out the success of neighbouring island eradications by aerial drops of brodifacoum - the Mokohinaus, Little Barrier, Cuvier, and the Mercury Islands.

We hosted members of the newly formed Aotea Poison Free group on a Sanctuary site visit. From within this group we have been described on social media as the ‘most toxic place on the island’, our credibility in undertaking the Goodnature A24 project has been questioned in public meetings, and our restoration has been described as ‘smoke and mirrors’. Meanwhile, the Sanctuary has won the Eradication section of the inaugural Auckland Council Mayoral Conservation Awards and were the Conservation Heroes in an Auckland Council December publication. Ironic.

We face a conundrum – there is a genuine and reasonable resistance to more toxin use on the planet and at the same time the global loss of biodiversity is now being touted as significant as climate change. We do not yet have the tools to replace toxins for eradication purposes, and pest suppression on a landscape scale cannot be achieved by trapping alone.

Do we wait till better technology comes along and risk the further extinction of species – there are at least 6 bird species on the brink on Aotea – or do we continue to carefully use a well-researched set of toxins to help hold onto what we have left until the technology catches up?

We can mitigate the risk of toxin use but we cannot bring back a species once it disappears.

Trying things out

With our size (770 hectares) and a permanent field team, the Sanctuary has taken the opportunity to be experimental – a cornerstone of all science and conservation. Once we better understood sound pest management and monitoring programmes, we developed the capacity to trial and monitor methods, new equipment, and some of the locally designed Econode electronic devices. If we are to keep up with whatever the effects of climate change are on this habitat, we need to be adaptive, nimble, and cost effective.

Understanding the ‘science’ of pest management has been one of the highlights for me as I’ve learnt how robust even a simple trial must be to produce anything meaningful.

The two and a half year trial of the Goodnature A24 trap, which concluded August 2018, was the first trial undertaken in partnership with the Great Barrier Local Board, Auckland Council, DOC, and Goodnature Ltd. The high rat tracking tunnel rates over the trial period were a disappointing outcome especially as the Sanctuary had invested around \$25,000.

In August traps were removed and management reverted to our proven mix of standard traps and RatAbate, checked monthly. By November this year the tracking tunnel index in the trial area was down to 8% compared to an average of 33% with the A24s over the previous two and a half years. Clearly, when two species of rat are at already reduced levels, as they were at the start of this trial, these devices could not compete either in terms of effectiveness or economy. The annual cost of our standard management of 300 units over 50 hectares worked out at under \$6000 compared to \$11,000 for the A24s. The big expense with monthly checks is labour while for the A24s it is consumables - gas cannisters and lure devices.

The [final report](#) of the full trial and the [cost comparisons](#) have been widely disseminated to assist community groups and organisations to make informed decisions about where best to invest hard won conservation dollars.

What’s happening now

On Aotea people are beginning to understand that many native species can exist in less than favourable habitat, but they won’t survive if they can’t breed successfully because of predation.

Over 120 Aotea landowners have pest management undertaken commercially, groups of close neighbours are working together to keep rats and feral cats down, settlement pest management projects are being supported by our Local Board, and the Sanctuaries at Motu Kaikoura, Glenfern, and Windy Hill continue to be innovative in their approaches and contribute to community knowledge.

After 20 years, I must be honest, I am saddened that so little of this magnificent bush covered island has any form of protection from the grey tide of rats and feral cats. The few species being measured in unmanaged land are in decline. Even with the best bird counts on the island, the Sanctuary’s bird numbers are still dismal compared to islands or Sanctuaries where pests have been eradicated.

What keeps us going?

The joy of the 44 kaka nests our bird dog Chase has found over the last two seasons. The discovery just this week that the Sanctuary has a regionally significant population of healthy Ramarama - a plant being monitored as it is most susceptible to myrtle rust. The pacific geckos that live in my letterbox. These are the rewards of tenacity and commitment.



Aotea School Holiday Programme visit to Windy Hill

I would like to conclude with my heartfelt appreciation for our field team – Kevin, Henry, Abby, and Dave assisted by Rachel and Dean.

To the 53 people whose landholdings make up the Sanctuary, thank you for your ongoing encouragement, confidence and support.

To have sustained financial support for 20 years from stalwarts like the Great Barrier Local Board, Lotteries Environment, the Biodiversity Condition fund (DOC Community Partnerships Conservation Fund), Foundation North, WWF, Auckland Council, and our landowners is amazing – thank you.

Appreciation also goes to those businesses that continue to sponsor the restoration of this landscape known as Windy Hill and Rosalie Bay.

Xmas blessings
Restful holidays

Judy Gilbert QSM for Services to Conservation

A proud recipient for Windy Hill Sanctuary and Trustees John Ogden and Rose Harland

