

The rabbit problem as told by Roni Harrison

Rabbits were a problem from the start. In 1993 an eradication of rats and mustelids was carried out successfully by DoC, Dick Veitch in charge of that. By September 1998 when we took over, the rabbit population had increased markedly. Initially we thought that with the men shooting regularly during the week and at night time we would be able to manage the population down. This was not to be the case and as time went on the burrows became larger, undermining the land, less grassy areas, holes stock could break their legs in, starving rabbits were stripping trees of bark, eating native tree seedlings that were planted by volunteers, cavorting around in the sunshine in broad daylight in increasing numbers.

Shooting continued regularly, help with this being offered by Ditch, experienced pest control officer for DoC. He and a mate would come over to help, staying in the top house in their free time. Although we could not offer a wage I fed them and they became part of the wider Motuihe family of volunteers.

Weeds being exposed by the rabbits digging were taking over pasture with mature trees in danger of falling when soil was burrowed away from their root system. It was amazing just how much damage these cute looking little creatures could do. We hired a helicopter in January 2000 to spray weeds although rabbits continued to expose more immediately.

On reflection many factors determined my effort in putting together the eradication of rabbits plan for Resource Consent. The conservation volunteers were becoming less enthusiastic as their next visit showed the damage to their previous efforts. The farm was riddled with burrows and stock at risk of broken legs and death. Heritage sites were being demolished and lost to future generations. Weeds were on the increase. DoC were very helpful with Beau Fraser and Simon Mowbray supportive, giving me a copy of an application form to guide me.

The consultations and detail required took many hours of intense effort but my proudly 80 pages, leaving no stone unturned, was eventually able to be lodged with Auckland Regional Council and granted. It also became evident that as a single individual or director of a limited company trading I was not eligible to be granted funding to help with this rabbit pest eradication. Although sympathetic, funding agencies approached were universal in their refusal. I resolved to at least start by putting my master card and visa up and hoped that announcement would bring sponsorship out of the woodwork somewhere. You could have knocked me down with a feather when DoC found the funds to take over, thanks in great part to John Ombler who was Conservator and had visited us with wife Kathy, showing interest in what we were trying to achieve. I knew there was keen competition for what funding DoC had available and I had also been writing to Sandra Lee, in fact anyone who might be in a position to help or influence someone. Forming a Restoration Trust was another method that could have helped funding but it was all taking time.

Before the DoC rabbit eradication began we had to barge stock off Motuihe, the best option being Motukorea. But there were already 60 head over there, and with an extra 44 head from Motuihe we were very worried that there wouldn't be enough feed for them all depending on how long this

eradication was going to take. The priority was to eradicate the rabbits, however long it took, so we bit the bullet as they were in no way ready for sale, loose loaded, and barged them over to Motukorea

Of course the rabbit eradication undertaken by DoC would have a very beneficial effect on the pasture, but public areas had to be monitored and kept safe after the initial drop, even though it was illegal to land. Terry, contracted by DoC, had many days of intensive patrolling to find and gather up carcasses from the foreshore and beach areas. This was to prevent the accidental secondary poisoning of any dogs, brought to shore by their owners to have a run and toilet after a day out on the boat. It was felt that the rule breakers might even have children in their boats as well as dogs.

Don Thompson the DoC contractor to complete the rabbit eradication spent long periods on the island and became a friend. He was invaluable in spotting anything going wrong anywhere on the land as he travelled about his business. Often helped out too when an extra pair of hands made all the difference. He was a good stockman quiet and steady at close quarters.

Numerous burrowing discovered in the embankment beside and around the dam was a cause for concern, weakening the structure which was vital for stock troughs. Torrential rain would put pressure on the dam as channels flowed into it, but it held and we were very glad to celebrate fewer rabbits around as Don tried to achieve his total eradication goal.