

September 2004



TRUE COLOURS



Bridget Abernethy,
Executive Director
of Project Crimson.

Possum Crisis

Between the 2nd and the 9th of August this year, New Zealand celebrated Conservation Week. Of all the things to be highlighted over that week, it was the possum crisis that jumped out at me, through a fundraising event for the National Parks and Conservation Foundation.

The focus of the evening was a lively debate entitled “A possum by any other brand name or business is still a possum,” which included New Zealand Race Relations Commissioner and Project Crimson Trustee, Joris de Bres.

His message: The real immigration issue in New Zealand is the possum. Get tough on possum crime.

Underlying the humour and fun of the debate were some gruesome facts. Every night 70 million possums chew their way through 21,000 tonnes of choice green shoots, fruits, berries and leaves in our native forests. They feast on birds’ eggs, baby chicks and insects.

They are a major pest on farmlands. They can be the carrier and transmitter of the disease Bovine tuberculosis (TB) in many parts of the country which threatens our reputation as an exporter of world class beef and venison.

Possums occupy 90 per cent of the mainland in New Zealand and exist on at least 13 offshore islands.

The North Island has two thirds of the possum population and the South Island, one third.

Pohutukawa and rata are a preferred food for possums as are kiwi and kokako chicks and eggs.

An established rata tree (over 100 years old) can die in three years of possums browsing in it. Possums tend to return night after night to the same tree – and after stripping it – go to another one of the same species.

Broadleaved hardwood forests, particularly those with the canopy dominated by kamahi, rata and/or pohutukawa, are under major threat of mortality and in some cases widespread devastation.

Over 80 million dollars of public funds each year are sunk into stopping possums eating our indigenous forests and to mitigate the risk of tuberculosis in New Zealand.

In comparison, Project Crimson has had a minor involvement in the war on possums, by way of a range of initiatives including the possum-proof fence at Cape Brett Peninsula (Rakaumangamanga) and through the funding round each year, where we see an increasing portion of the funds dedicated to possum control.

It was Joris who reminded the audience that back in the 1920’s, “the possum ... got his passage paid for, on the spurious grounds that he would contribute to economic growth.”

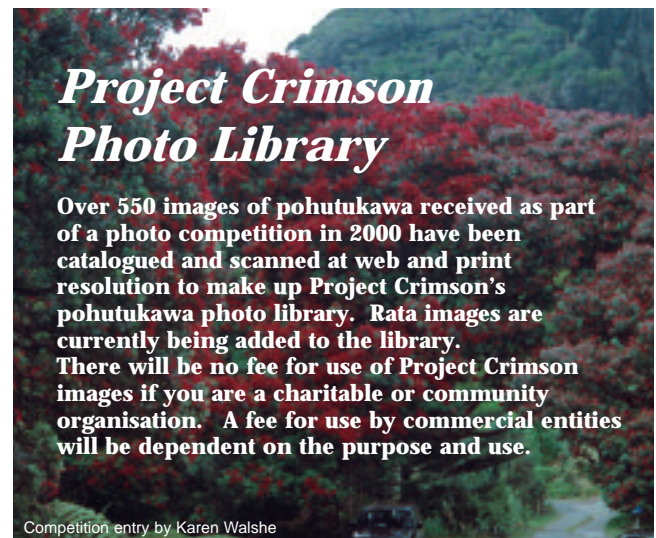
He said, “Behind those innocent eyes, those winsome peepers, is a ruthless herbivore and eco-terrorist that has no respect for our country. The brush-tailed possum has moved into our top real estate areas and turned them into possum ghettos. While we argue about who owns

the beaches, he’s busy stripping away our coastal pohutukawa.”

Humour aside, it is clear that the war against possums in New Zealand is far from won.

You can help control the possum numbers in New Zealand by either controlling possums on your own property or by contacting one of the agencies involved in possum control work such as the Department of Conservation, the Animal Health Board, regional councils and many conservation organisations like Forest and Bird, Landcare Research and Project Crimson.

Bridget



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Possum Control Methods

The main control techniques used are trapping, shooting and poisoning. Skilled operators employ a range of methods depending on the behaviours and numbers of possums in the area.

A trapper will lay a line of traps along a possum run and check them nightly.

Operators who hold poison licenses use a range of poison like cyanide and 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate) and are required to follow strict protocols governing their use.

Large and inaccessible areas can be treated with aerial applications of bait laced with 1080. They can be spread by helicopter or plane.

Possum fencing is used in a variety of places around the country including the aforementioned fence at the Cape Brett Peninsula, the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary (completely predator proof) and Cape Lambert in Malborough. While these fences are very effective, the installation, maintenance and ongoing management make them extremely expensive.



Photo courtesy of Rod Morris



John Topliff on the southern banks of the Waikanae River

How local heroes can make a difference

Ten years ago people would walk up and down the banks of the Waikanae River (north of Wellington) and remark on how beautiful it was, but to local conservationist and member of the Friends of the Waikanae River, John Topliff, it was a wasteland of exotic trees and weeds.

“People used to walk to up the river and say to me ‘isn’t it beautiful’ and I would say compared to the highway it’s beautiful”, says John.

“But in fact it was an exotic wasteland. We had a long way to go to get it back to its original state.”

The Waikanae area - with its mild weather, beautiful setting and proximity to many facilities - has experienced rapid population growth in recent years. It has shifted from being a much sought after holiday destination for Wellingtonians, to become an outer suburb of Wellington with people commuting each day to the city.

The Waikanae River is one of the distinctive natural features which draws people to the area and is highly valued by the local community. It flows from the western foothills of the Tararua Ranges, to the sea about 50km north of Wellington. For John Topliff, the health of the river has been a labour of love for ten years. When the Friends of Waikanae River group was established five years ago with a vision of restoring the natural ecology of the river, from the sea through to State Highway 1, John signed up.

Since then he has put in around 20-30 hours a week of scrub and weed cutting and has seen thousands of native species planted, many by his own hand.

“I don’t feel like I have done anything” says John. “It’s all Tane’s work. He works 24 hours a day. We are not the restorers, we only assist the restorer.”

“Up until five years ago most of the Waikanae River, particularly the southern bank, was an exotic wasteland of poplars, crack willow, blackberry and others.”

“Since then over 17,000 natives trees have been planted, including kahikatea (some of which are now up to four metres tall), northern rata, puketea, rimu, miro, matai and kohekohe, amongst others.”

In this relatively short period of time, the group has gone a long way to improving the native corridor from the sea to the Tararua ranges, with birds from Kapiti Island even coming in from off the coast. The Friends of Waikanae River celebrate the increase in tui, bellbird and kaka from Kapiti Island, which are making their way up and down this restored corridor.

Project Crimson has supported the Friends of Waikanae River since 2001 with grants for purchasing northern rata trees.

“Over 200 northern rata have been planted thanks to the support of the Project Crimson Trust. Some didn’t make it in the early days of planting but now we have a good group that have made it to 1.2 metres tall.”

The Friends of the River has representation from the Greater Wellington Regional Council, Kapiti Coast District Council, Te Ati Awa (iwi) and locals. A Memorandum of Understanding between the Greater Wellington Regional Council, the Kapiti Coast District Council and Friends of Waikanae River will ensure the work to restore the natural ecology of the Waikanae River continues.

“When the day comes that my energy runs out, I hope some younger people will step up to take care of this beautiful environment. If we have a clear plan of action and we all participate, it will not be an onerous task for any one person.”

For more information on Friends of the Waikanae River contact Ferriel Falconer on (04) 904 3579.

To contact Project Crimson: Phone (09) 414 0466

Annual Conference of the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network

A diverse range of people and organisations from all over the country, including Project Crimson, met for the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network's AGM and annual conference in Auckland on Saturday 7 August.

The focus of the conference was to learn and discuss how to improve New Zealand native plant life.

Conference speakers included Ewen Cameron (Curator of the Auckland Museum), Kevin Prime (Environment Court Commissioner and 'Conservationist of the Decade' for Northland) and Hugo Baynes (Auckland Zoo's Team Leader - Horticulture), each of whom gave different insights into plant conservation.

In addition to the keynote speakers, and a range of workshops, Bec Stanley, DoC Auckland

Conservancy Botanist, ran a field trip to visit a number of threatened plant sites in Auckland City.

The New Zealand Plant Conservation Network was established in 2003. Its organisational vision is that -

"No indigenous species of plant will become extinct nor be placed at risk of extinction as a result of human action or indifference, and that the rich, diverse and unique plant life of New Zealand will be recognised, cherished and restored."

Project Crimson supports the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network because both organisations are committed to protecting and enhancing the natural environment as a whole.



According to President of the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network, Mike Oates, "the organisation is looking to expand and increase its membership and further develop programmes to implement the new Global Strategy for Plant Conservation".

The Network's website is possibly New Zealand's most comprehensive resource for information about indigenous plant species and communities. In particular, there are fact-sheets for all New Zealand's threatened vascular plants.

There is also a tool for generating threatened plant lists and another for recording discoveries of threatened plant populations. The site features other valuable tools, including search engines for finding other members and people involved in plant conservation and funding sources for plant conservation.

To view the website, and for more information about the Network visit www.nzpcn.org.nz

Project Crimson teams up with Mazda

Mazda New Zealand donated two Mazda Bounty 4wd utility vehicles to the Project Crimson Trust early last month, in support of the work that Project Crimson is doing for pohutukawa and rata trees.

"Mazda both overseas and locally is a strong supporter of activities that enhance and protect the environment," said Mazda New Zealand Managing Director Peter Aitken. "Working with Project Crimson is one way of ensuring future generations in New Zealand will continue to enjoy the pohutukawa and rata trees."

In support of this alliance, vehicle fleet operators Custom Fleet have thrown in maintenance, servicing, licensing and insurance while Fully Equipped has supplied the canopies and the deck liners.

At the presentation of the vehicles at Carter Holt Harvey's Manukau offices, Project Crimson Chairman and Carter Holt Harvey Chief Operating Officer Devon McLean spoke to the assembled group about the importance of community and organisational support for the Trust.

"Project Crimson relies upon partnerships with the community and businesses to achieve its goals," said Mr McLean. "The Mazda partnership is a welcome addition to the Project Crimson family."

The vehicles have been adorned with large red pohutukawa flowers on the back to make them easily recognisable and gain public awareness about the Trust.

The vehicles will be driven by Project Crimson Executive Director Bridget Abernethy, based in Wellington, and South Island-based Trustee Philip Simpson.



Mike Lee

Mike Lee has been a Project Crimson Trustee since 1992. Originally nominated for the Trust by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, Mike – a long term resident of Waiheke Island – was the founding chairman of the Forest & Bird Hauraki Islands Branch in 1982. He also organised the formation of the Great Barrier Island section in 1990.



An active conservationist Mike has been involved in Project Crimson with the collection of seeds and the production and supply of thousands of eco-sourced

pohutukawa trees, notably for Waiheke, Motuihe, Rakino, Pakatoa, Rotoroa and Great Barrier Islands in the Hauraki Gulf and on Puketutu Island and Mangere Inlet in the Manukau Harbour.

Mike has been an Auckland Regional Councillor for all but three of the past 13 years. A former chairman of regional parks, he is currently deputy chairman of the ARC finance committee. A former Ship's Officer, he has worked as a contractor for Watercare Services for the past seven years on planning and communications, during which time he initiated and managed the setting up of the popular Rain Forest Express bush tramway in the Waitakere Ranges. He also managed community liaison and communications for the successful Project Manukau half billion dollar upgrade of the Mangere wastewater treatment plant.

Mike holds an MSc (hons) in biological sciences from Auckland University. Mike is a writer and a regular contributor of articles specialising in natural history, politics and public transport. He is the Chairman of the Motuihe Trust restoration (technical) subcommittee.

Mike has been a member of the government appointed Nature Heritage Fund since 2001, and was actively involved in the recent purchase of Kaikoura Island.

Creating a Crimson Coromandel Coast

Project Crimson, The Department of Conservation (DoC) and three Port Charles families have been working for a number of years to restore coastal pohutukawa to this magnificent area on the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula.

Geoffrey and Reihana Robinson have been working to restore coastal pohutukawa stands. Their four-year project has involved new planting, restoration of damaged ancient specimens and the promotion of conditions for natural seeding and regeneration of pohutukawa. The work involves ongoing maintenance and pest control. Project Crimson has provided funds to the Robinsons each year since 2000 to assist with the purchase of eco-sourced pohutukawa and possum control work.

One step further up Port Charles Road, the Whiting-O'Keefes are adding to the restoration effort on their 100 hectares. Initially a working farm, grazing was ceased on much of this coastal land in 1996 in order to return the area to native species.

Project Crimson has supported the work of this family since 2002 with funding each year for purchasing eco-sourced pohutukawa from the local nursery.

As well as planting pohutukawa and other native species, Quinn and Pat Whiting-O'Keefe are working hard to rid the land of the aggressive kikuyu weed, a problem for juvenile trees, and to tackle the possums through ongoing pest-control work.

A successful community planting day was initiated by the Whiting-O'Keefes in January this year, with 35 people turning up to help plant the native trees and support the restoration work in Port Charles.

"The community participants enjoyed it very much," said Pat Whiting O'Keefe. "Several people have been back to check on the trees and others often ask how they are doing."

Paul Barlow and his family, also in the neighbourhood, are in the process of establishing a five hectare conservation lot on their coastal property, where they have planted a host of native species including pohutukawa, nikau palms, and karaka. "We started the re-vegetation project in August 2003," says Mr Barlow. "We have planted approximately 2,000 trees since then, with another 1,000 planned for this winter season."

Environment Waikato has supported the Barlow re-vegetation plans with funding for fencing, while DoC has supplied flax plants and valuable advice.

DoC has also released onto the property a number of brown teal, an endangered native New Zealand duck. These birds enjoy roosting amongst the roots of existing pohutukawa.

Project Crimson's contribution to the Barlows through the 2004 funding round was 350 eco-sourced pohutukawa seedlings which we are currently growing in a local nursery and will be ready to plant in 2005.

A successful planting day on the Whiting-O'Keefes' coastal property



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