

Pioneering conservationists return

A Heritage Festival event at Waiheke Library last Sunday explored the beginnings of predator eradication in the Hauraki Gulf.

Former Blackpool Primary teacher Alistair McDonald and students were honoured for initiating the first-ever rat eradication on Maria Island (the Noises) in 1960. Alistair recounted how the project helped to change the face of conservation around the world.

Kevin Hackwell, chief conservation adviser for the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, explained how and



Above – Alistair McDonald with two former students Elaine Brown and Sally Church. Left – An article published in the Forest and Bird magazine written by one of the pioneering students Wes Burns who was chairperson of the 1960 Junior Forest and Bird Society.

From a Junior Member

WAIHEKE ISLAND—During the Christmas holidays a number of our Junior Forest and Bird group were on a boating trip off Waiheke Island when we decided to pay a short visit to a group of small islands called the David Rocks. Strangely enough, as we approached the main island in our two dinghies very few birds arose as they usually do when humans approach the island. We were taken aback when we discovered the cause of this. We found the island was literally riddled with rats and to make matters worse we estimated that there were about one thousand dead sea birds on the island. They were scattered all over the island and it was obvious that the rats had not killed these small birds (for there were no gulls among them) for food but they had killed them for pleasure. We saw many large rats, too, and estimated the population of these to be approximately two hundred. We returned about a week later and distributed rat poison to various parts of the island, and being satisfied with our second mission we departed, hoping that we had exterminated the rat population and that the bird population would restore itself to what it had been before. These holidays we intend to return to see if the rats have been entirely exterminated.

For your own general interest we had a display in conjunction with one of Waiheke's Horticultural Shows to raise money for poison. We raised about one pound and spent it on rat poison. We used this upon rats and sent an example of the rat to Internal Affairs Department. They sent us a five pound grant to get started on the poisoning of rats. The rats we exterminated on the David Rocks were not the first lot of rats we poisoned. We completely wiped out colonies of rats inhabiting some small islands off Rocky Bay, a small town on the eastern end of Waiheke.

Everything we have accomplished and all the trips we have had studying wild life, etc., have been made possible by Mr. Alistair McDonald, a local teacher who is very keen in studying all types of wild life. Under his able guidance our small society has flourished, and during the holidays we benefit greatly from his help and teaching.

Although we are only a small society we have rallied many of the local boys and girls and have a President, who is myself, and a Secretary, who is Miss Julie Brown.—Wesley Burns, 14 years.

why Alistair and the students became world leaders in ridding Maria Island of rats. Kevin says New Zealand has been leading island rat eradication for the past 50 years - all starting with Alistair and his team of students on Maria Island.

“Alistair and the students were conducting seabird monitoring in the Hauraki Gulf over their summer holidays and were horrified when they came to Maria Island and found hundreds of dead seabirds.

“When they returned to Waiheke, they fundraised one pound at the horticultural show to buy rat poison.”

The group then went back to Maria Island and laid the bait. After sending one of the dead rats to the Department of Internal Affairs, they were given a

five-pound grant to continue their work.

Don Merton was a young field officer in the Hauraki Gulf at this time. He visited Maria Island with Alistair and was impressed with what they had accomplished in terms of saving the seabirds. Don went on to enjoy a well-acclaimed conservation career in New Zealand which included many other island eradications.

“Sue Neureuter, whose family owns the Noises Islands, played soundtracks of seabirds by day and night as they sound currently, which was inspiring,” says Jo Ritchie, Te Korowai o Waiheke operations manager. Jo then went on to explain Waiheke's next ambitious project - the stoat eradication programme beginning in January 2020. •

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Mayor's salute to conservation hero

Planting, trapping, clearing and weeding for almost two decades at Whakanewha has earned volunteer John Smeed a salute for being an unsung environmental hero.

The 80-year-old, who can often be seen zipping about the island on his bicycle, says his conservation work keeps him fit and gives him the satisfaction of a "job well done".

One of the longest-standing volunteers at the regional park, John met with Auckland Mayor Phil Goff as part of the second Mayoral Conservation Awards celebrating those who volunteer to protect and enhance Auckland's environment.

A former dairy farmer and horticulturalist, John spends at least three days a week at Whakanewha where he has taken on the role of managing the nursery; he is currently preparing 2000 seedlings for replanting.

"You get satisfaction from doing a good job," he told *Gulf News*. "It also keeps old age at bay and I just like doing it. It's an excuse to be in the outdoors - good for the eyes."

Whakanewha park ranger Natasha Beletzky was pleased to see John receive recognition for all his hard work - the nursery he runs was one of just four finalists.

Thousands of trees have been delivered from John's nursery, which has also hosted many outreach and education events from schools and community groups.

"He is amazing. He does everything that you can imagine," said Natasha, "from fixing tools and setting up a garden shed, to building shelves for the nursery. He carries out bait-lines maintenance, fills them up with baits when we have the pulse. Then there is planting and rodent monitoring which involves - just the same as doing bait-lines - a lot of walking around varied and uneven terrain.

"In the nursery, he helps grow the trees, sowing and re-potting seedlings, picking seeds. He is getting ready for next year planting around 2000 shrubs and trees. He has a wide range of species in the nursery and all of them in different stages



John Smeed has spent 20 years safeguarding the future of Whakanewha's native plants and trees. Photo Liza Hamilton

(two, three or four years old)."

Because of Whakanewha's remote location, transporting trees for revegetation has been a real challenge - so John's work running the nursery has been vital to supply native trees here for replanting. Interestingly the seed collection comes from the island as well, preserving the area's gene bank.

"Thousands of trees have been delivered from the nursery and many of them are more than 20 years old today, which means that we now have bush where 20 years ago it was grassland," says Natasha.

"Now we have a nice bush restored with a great variety of species and uncountable natives birds where today that bush is their home."

Congratulating the finalists and winners, Mr Goff said conservation volunteers and community groups give more than 250,000 hours a year of their time to look after the environment and make the region a better place for generations to come. "It's great to recognise the

immense contribution they make to conservation efforts across Auckland."

• *Liza Hamilton*



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