

The business of saving species

Private enterprise is playing an increasing role in working with DOC to preserve our biodiversity. **Simon Day** reports.

RACHEL HUNTER'S long, slender arms are made for stealing kiwi eggs. Her hands disappear deep into a kiwi burrow to remove an egg the size of her palm. It glowed in the light of her headlamp before she placed it into a makeshift incubator – a foam-lined chilly bin.

Kiwi as, eh?

Our iconic national bird is in dangerous decline. There are just 70,000 left, when 100 years ago they would have numbered in the millions. The population continues to decline by around 3 per cent every year.

Completely vulnerable to predators as chicks, the kiwi has just a 5 per cent chance of survival in the wild.

Many other native species are also struggling to survive. The Conservation Department (DOC) lists 3592 indigenous flora and fauna as “threatened” or “at risk”. This is an increase of 803 species since 2005.

DOC should not, and cannot, be expected to cope with the enormity of the task of preserving New Zealand’s biodiversity on its own, said its director-general Al Morrison.

“We have about 600 species that are really threatened, and we are currently working with 100. We want to get to 300, but still that is only half,” Morrison said. “Someone has to pick up that slack.”

Increasingly it is private individuals and businesses that are trying to maintain the heritage of our unique native wildlife.

Hunter is the patron of the Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust (FLRT), a private initiative lead by Simon Hall, which has taken the conservation of New Zealand’s environment under its wing.

Hall, executive chairman of Tasti food manufacturing company, owns 23,762 hectares (58,717 acres) of forest in Hawke’s Bay that he has dedicated to the rejuvenation of New Zealand’s natural environment.

An avid hunter and trapper, Hall looks at the wilderness as his playground. Instead of a beachside bach he picked up his own piece of native bush for a “very good price”. “The average person doesn’t appreciate native forest so there is no competition. They don’t realise the true value of the land,” Hall said.

Hall established the FLRT to turn his land into a sanctuary for New Zealand’s native environment funded by the dividends of Tasti. Massive initiatives to trap and poison predators have allowed native species to return in significant numbers.

On the Maungataniwha property, a core area of 600ha has been laced with 300 traps for stoats, ferrets and weasels, and two aerial drops of 1080 have nearly destroyed the possum population.

This has seen the native bird and plant populations make strong recoveries.

Since kiwi were unexpectedly discovered on the property in 2007, it has become an established breeding source for the Operation Nest Egg project, a collaboration between DOC and a number of private players.

The annual conservation costs are in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, but it is an investment Hall gets a lot of satisfaction from.

“It is great not to just be writing the cheques,” he said.

“I am out there doing the egg lifts, releasing chicks and planting.”

The trust works in close collaboration with another private conservation project on Cape Kidnappers, in Hawke’s Bay, the Cape Sanctuary.

On the tip of the headland, 2500ha of land owned by some of the country’s more affluent residents has been turned into New Zealand’s largest privately owned wildlife sanctuary.

A 10.6 kilometre fence cuts off predators from the property owned by the Hansen family, Andy and Liz Lowe, and includes American millionaire Julian Robertson’s luxury golf course and resort.

Completed in 2007, the fence is two metres high and made of fine mesh that keeps out everything but





mice. A rolled cap stops predators from climbing over and a 400 millimetre buried skirt stops anything that tries to dig under.

"I have been hunting since I was seven or eight. Over my lifetime, the next 25 to 30 years, the bush went from being vibrant and full of birds to completely dead," Lowe said. "I realised we were losing our inheritance."

The sanctuary chose FLRT as its source population to establish kiwi on the cape.

The FLRT harvests eggs from a monitored nesting population of 22. The eggs are incubated and hatched at Kiwi Encounter in Rotorua then transported to Cape Kidnappers where the sanctuary is a creche for the kiwi during the weakest time in their life.

They are kept behind the predator-proof fence until they weigh 850 grams, when they are considered large enough to repel a stoat attack. The life cycle is then completed as the adolescent birds are taken back to Maungataniwha

Forest.

"We need each other. We owe [FLRT] a huge debt. They enabled us to establish kiwi on this place and there are not many places you can get kiwi now," said Dr John McLennan, ecologist and kiwi expert at the Cape Sanctuary.

The kiwi is the "poster species" that can attract broad interest in conservation work and, by removing predators for the sake of the kiwi, ecosystems benefit as a whole, McLennan said.

Since the establishment of the sanctuary New Zealand dotterel have returned to the cape and started breeding, and this past week red billed gulls and white fronted terns were found.

But for conservation to succeed in stemming the decline in native species, New Zealanders must understand the significance of our unique native biodiversity, Morrison said.

New Zealand's economic reliance on our environment should

make conservation a priority, he said.

Businesses are beginning to understand the pertinence of conservation participation.

Air New Zealand has partnered with DOC on biodiversity project the Great Walks and is the department's official carrier for species translocation.

"The environment is not a discretionary spend but a necessary investment to get the New Zealand economy in a good state," Morrison said.

"The health of New Zealand is connected directly to the environment."



Scan the main image on this page for a video of Rachel Hunter at Cape Sanctuary.



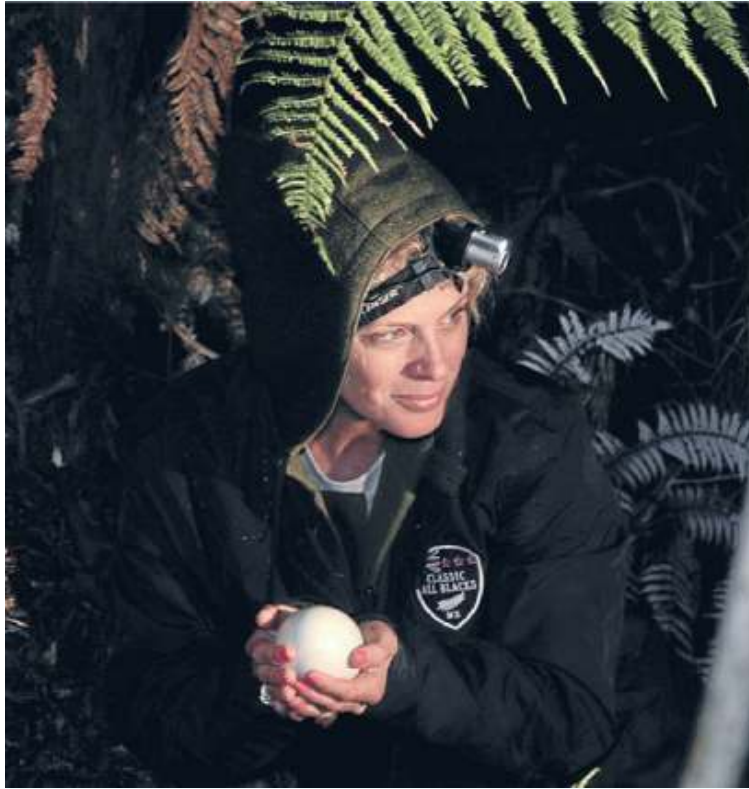
The bush went from being vibrant and full of birds to completely dead.

Andy Lowe, neighbour



Keeping track: Cape Sanctuary ecologist and kiwi expert John McLennan and Rachel Hunter fit a radio transmitter to Boar the kiwi.





As sure as eggs is eggs: When this egg hatches, the plan is to name the kiwi Hunter.



Lucky Dice: Rachel Hunter with Dice the kiwi at New Zealand's largest privately owned wildlife sanctuary at Cape Kidnappers, in Hawke's Bay.

Photos: Simon Day