

Biodiversity values come first

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Once it became apparent that possums were having a significant and detrimental impact on the unique biodiversity values of New Zealand, various methods of control were tried. One of the earliest was a bounty system in the 1950s. This continued for over 10 years, cost the government millions of dollars and was a complete failure — with the possum population increasing and expanding at the time.

Secondly your correspondent states that pre-1980 “NZ did not have a problem with possums because the fur industry kept them under control”.

This is simply wrong! Possums were then and continue to be one of the most destructive mammalian pests of New Zealand’s unique environment.

Yes, possums were trapped throughout the country and in the eyes of the industry, their numbers may have been kept under control. Unfortunately from NZ’s biodiversity point of view, this control was far from effective and did little to halt possum impacts.

The Department of Conservation is actively working with the fur industry and has been for some time.

The entire Public Conservation Lands administered by the Gisborne/Whakatane area have been broken up into small, manageable possum blocks. All of these are available through a database booking system for fur harvesters to secure for the purposes of trapping possums. With the current price spike for possum fur, it is not surprising that the majority of these are now taken. This is indicative of fur harvesting being largely driven by market returns and the price paid.

So why is the tax payer of New Zealand not getting effective possum control for free over the land administered by DoC? The reason is simple economics.

The target required by the department for possums to be reduced to, and sustained at, to protect and preserve New Zealand’s unique biodiversity values is much lower than what is commercially viable for the fur industry.

Simply put, it is not cost effective for the fur harvester to continue trapping an area to reduce possums to the target level that the biodiversity values within the forest ecosystem require. It is better for them to move to another block where no control has occurred, possum numbers are high and they can make a better financial return for their efforts.

Some, like your correspondent, may consider this possum control. The reality is the unique biodiversity values are getting little if any protection.

Any control must be better than none though? Unfortunately this is not the case and from the work DoC has done with the fur industry, and knowledge of possum densities and how these impact on forest biodiversity values, we know that the industry only removes the “cream off the top” of the possum population and little more.

This is because to maximise their financial returns, possum trappers tend to focus their efforts where access is easiest and catch rates are highest. This tends to be spurs, ridges and river terraces. Because this is often only a small proportion of any area, the overall control is actually quite low and much of the area and habitat receive no control at all. When it becomes uneconomic to continue and the possum trapper moves on, these areas are quickly replenished with possums from the surrounding untrapped areas.

The Department of Conservation is there to protect biodiversity values, whereas the fur harvester is there to maximise their financial return. It is not a matter of right or wrong necessarily but more differing objectives not always being compatible.

This said, DoC has and is continuing to work with the fur and possum control industry to see what opportunities and efficiencies can be achieved by working together.

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