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CAWTHRON MARLBOROUGH ENVIRONMENT AWARDS

2019

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JUDGES' REPORT

LANDSCAPE AND HABITAT ENHANCEMENT

PICTON DAWN CHORUS

INTERVIEWED

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DATE

November 27, 2018

JUDGES

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INTRODUCTION

Picton Dawn Chorus is a trail-blazing project, combining urban and bush predator control to benefit a wildlife sanctuary. It is run by an Incorporated Society, with a dedicated committee and professional part-time coordinator.

Picton Dawn Chorus is tightly focused on protecting birdlife by reducing predator numbers in 2000ha in and around Picton and Waikawa. The aim is to create a halo around the Kaipupu Wildlife Sanctuary where it has proved difficult to completely eliminate pests that swim around the ends of the predator-proof fence.



This daunting task has been broken down into four geographic stages however maintaining volunteer enthusiasm and commitment is among the challenges. Solutions have included incentivising volunteers by reporting back bell-bird increases following trapping (more attractive than reporting rat deaths) and encouraging urban trappers to log kill numbers by offering prizes to people who send in results via a reporting app.

Picton Dawn Chorus is a nil-poison, trapping-only programme to avoid controversy around the use of toxins. Vandalism of traps is a problem mitigated by chaining traps to trees, involving young people and receiving good media coverage.

The group's ability to engage with the community, manage volunteers and continually seek to improve trapping techniques all add up to Picton Dawn Chorus leading the way for community-driven urban pest control.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Picton Dawn Chorus is a community-based rat, possum and mustelid trapping programme working to create a pest-free halo around Kaipupu Point Wildlife Sanctuary. The long-term aim is to trap predators on 2000ha in and around Picton and Waikawa.

There is a management committee and a paid coordinator, with three working groups covering planning/finance, garden trapping and bush trapping.

The Picton Dawn Chorus mailing list of 80 includes a hard-core 15-30 volunteers who in 2017-18 spent about 3650 hours on weekly checks and maintenance of about 400 traps in the town's reserves. Another 256 residents, mostly in Picton and Waikawa, have about 350 garden traps.

The idea of creating a pest-free halo around Kaipupu was first raised in July 2015.

The Incorporated Society of Picton Dawn Chorus was registered, and the idea introduced to more than 100 people at a public meeting in April 2016. The first traps went out in August 2016 just as Predator Free New Zealand was launched – fortuitous timing which has helped attract publicity and funding. To date more than \$200,000 has been raised, mostly from grants.

A formal Strategic Plan has been adopted and control of the 2000ha target area has been split into four manageable stages. The first year (2015-2016) was devoted to planning and preparation, including seeking specialist advice.

The first area for trapping was Victoria Domain, across the bay and the closest bush area to Kaipupu Point, which is easily accessed via a network of walking tracks. Stage 2 is urban Picton and Waikawa where the aim is one trap per five households (currently about 1/10). Stage 3 recently started on 80ha of public conservation land on Wedge Point adjoining the Kaipupu Sanctuary with the Link Pathway passing through.

A plan for remaining areas (Stage 4, covering the surrounding hills) will be developed once earlier stages are operating successfully.



Jawz rat traps are set out along tracks at 100m intervals with a small number of DOC 200 traps interspersed, targeting stoats as well as rats. Goodnature self-resetting traps are used in hard-to-reach areas and on private properties.

Annual trapping outcomes are monitored using chew cards and bird counts rather than simply counting pests caught. Coordination is a major effort, with chew cards out for the same three nights in May each year and five-minute bird counts in 30 locations, each counted three times over three weeks in October. Three years of data will be analysed for the first time this in 2019.

Judges were impressed that:

- The management structure ensures efficient use of people and resources
- A year of planning before pest control started provided time to seek expert advice, ensuring best practice trapping
- The focus is on a straightforward, achievable goal (pest control) despite the temptation to diversify, such as controlling plant pests and planting native trees
- The professional coordinator brings relevant skills and experience. She balances volunteers' passion with pragmatism, ensures project focus and momentum and oversees publicity
- Volunteers are encouraged to be innovative, with technologies tweaked rather than reinvented (e.g. trialing blood and bone as a calcium-rich rat bait and building a mouse-trap into some rat traps to discover whether trapped mice subsequently attract rats)
- Strong connections with related groups in Marlborough and nationally, especially Kaipupu Point Mainland Island Society - some common committee members and a joint workshop held in 2016. Also good links with DOC, which provided access to its GIS system for managing pest trapping and monitoring data, although this is no longer used
- Picton Dawn Chorus provides a focus for retirees who are its main members, using their skills to benefit the Picton environment and community while supporting national Predator-Free NZ goals. Involvement keeps people fit and socially connected
- Picton Dawn Chorus has a high profile in Picton, Marlborough and New Zealand due to a strong publicity focus including a website, video, Facebook page, newsletters and frequent media coverage
- Marketing has been to a high standard from the outset starting with a professionally produced film paid for by sponsors
- More than \$200,000 has been raised from grants, funds and bequests. Sources include the Marlborough District Council, Kiwibank and the Rātā Foundation, which is guiding the group towards sustainable funding including sponsorship.

PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

Managing the data: There is a lot of data to keep track of - volunteers and their trap-line preferences, records of pests trapped as well as finances. Initially the project tapped into a DOC database for catch data then the more targeted TrapNZ (created by Groundtruth). The coordinator manages the volunteer database and financial records.

Keeping volunteers engaged: Volunteers are mostly retirees, inexperienced in pest control. Where possible, traps are beside walking tracks. Any traps that proved difficult to use were replaced with user-friendly versions, including the T Rex rat trap. Volunteers are allocated trapping lines suited to individual capabilities. Volunteers can lose interest without positive reinforcement. The Picton Dawn Chorus Committee has pulled out a snippet of data (bellbird numbers) from long-term monitoring results. Counts have gone from 25 bellbirds seen or heard in 2016, to 41 in 2018.

Getting the right trap: After one accidental trapping of a weka, traps were modified to eliminate this problem. To increase responsibility and provide a sense of ownership, traps were initially sold to householders at a Pop-Up Shop with different versions for different locations. Picton Dawn Chorus is working on providing traps at no cost to the local community

Vandalism: Traps have been vandalised, thrown in creeks, kicked over and stolen. They are now chained to trees and staked.

Avoiding toxins: The use of 1080 to control predators is controversial, and many people are opposed to cats being trapped. Picton Dawn Chorus has a trapping-only policy and supports the concept of electronic tagging and night-time containment of cats.

Reporting back: It's hard to get urban trappers to feed back results. They are sent regular reminders to check traps and record kills through The Urban Rat Project (used by organisations doing similar work in Auckland and the Waikato). Running a competition increased reports received but there is still room for improvement.

Succession planning: Employing a project coordinator ensures continuity but there are still concerns with the ageing demographic of the volunteers and committee.

SUMMARY

This voluntary group of mostly retired people takes a professional approach to predator control and is achieving good results. Just over two years since the first traps went out, more than 4000 pests have been killed and over \$200,000 raised to support the project.

The judges see Picton Dawn Chorus as an exemplar for community-driven urban pest control. Its volunteers should be proud of the way they are tackling a challenging task which will have significant ecological benefits.



This project sets a high bar for similar initiatives as part of Predator Free New Zealand 2050 – the ambitious goal of ridding NZ of introduced predators that threaten our natural taonga, our economy and primary sector.

The judges acknowledge and support Picton Dawn Chorus's philosophy of achievable predator control, resisting the temptation to diversify into weed control and planting.

Expert advice has been sought from the outset, from project design (including trap selection and placement) to monitoring outcomes.

A regularly updated Strategic Plan revisits trapping progress and goals, communication messages and methods, approaches to funding, administration and key relationships. This, plus annual reports provide credibility, direction and an opportunity to measure achievements.

Judges praised the spirit of innovation shown by Picton Dawn Chorus, including:

- Tweaking existing technology. Experiments include using blood and bone as a calcium-rich rat bait and building mouse traps into the front of rat traps
- Traps are randomly numbered which makes it easier to infill on lines without causing confusion
- Weather-proof labelling has been developed
- Volunteers build the traps themselves, to a length which avoids weka being trapped
- The mix of traps that proved effective at Victoria Domain, has been extended to Wedge Point (50m intervals rather than 100m, and more in places where kills are higher, e.g. where a track crosses a stream)
- Governance is separated from management with overlapping membership of the management committee and working groups that report back monthly
- The volunteer database is well managed and tasks are tailored to suit individuals. The coordinator has a personal relationship with volunteers.

SUGGESTIONS

- The EnviroHub in Picton (now closed) was a focus for the Picton Dawn Chorus administrator and volunteers and for selling and storing traps. Continue to explore opportunities to re-open the Hub with partner/compatible organisations. This could align with the possible development of a biodiversity forum for Marlborough involving DOC, the Marlborough District Council and community groups
- Seek commercial sponsorship including national/international companies. This is an aspirational “hearts and minds” project with significance and applicability well beyond Picton and Marlborough. It has high visibility at the northern gateway to the South Island
- Include social impacts on the Picton community in monitoring
- Consider sharing coordinator positions (fulltime, part-time) with Kaipupu Point. This could create efficiencies and increase opportunities for delivering a combined biodiversity protection message
- Seek to engage volunteers from a wider age group, such as school parents/families, young professionals, local businesses, Outward Bound
- Mice are by-kill at this stage. Consider targeting them in future. Trap boxes at 600mm may be long enough to include both rat and mouse traps. Mouse-excluders over the bait can be incorporated in traps to protect bait intended for rats and stoats.