WAIRARAPA MOANA,
a continuing challenge

Toitu he kainga, whatu nga-rongaro he tangata
The land still remains when the people have disappeared.

This is the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) Key Native Ecosystems programme's guiding statement. It is an appropriate statement to consider when we think of the treasure that is Wairarapa Moana.

It is often well meant when current land occupiers state *we are only temporary custodians, nurturing this land for future generations.* For some, the act of nurturing is about promoting development for economic gain. For others, it is about conservation and restoration of natural character. This is a common bind New Zealanders find themselves in; one of striking a balance between the economic, regulatory and environmental needs of communities.

In my job, as a biosecurity officer, I get to play a part in helping to minimise the actual and potential adverse and unintended effects of pest animals on the environment, economy, biodiversity and the community. I take much interest in optimising the ecological health within the Wairarapa Moana framework.

Key Native Ecosystems within Wairarapa Moana.

There are currently four KNE programmes within the Wairarapa Moana environs that target possums, rats, wild cats, ferrets, stoats, weasels and hedgehogs. All of these prey on our native wildlife. Servicing is carried out monthly to ensure these predators are maintained to very low levels. The areas are Waihora Stream (1098ha), Lake Nganoke (6ha), Lake Pounui/Wharepapa (875ha) and Tauherenikau (1450ha), which includes the well known racecourse and Donald's Bush Blocks. These projects, which started between 1998 and 2001, are locked into long-term maintenance programmes.

Farm development bared the land, making it conducive to rabbit breeding and survival.

Rabbits were first released in the Wairarapa near Carterton in 1857. There were further liberations in 1863 through 1867 and by 1870 they had become firmly established and were proving to be a nuisance. The Wairarapa Rabbit District was established in 1881 to combat the plague of rabbits.

An article in *Transactions and Proceedings* of the Royal Society of New Zealand in a 1889 issue reports that the rabbit problem was conquered in the South Wairarapa during the years 1884 - 1887. Rabbits were said to be infected with bladder-worm, rabbit-scab and rabbit-louse, attributing to their magical disappearance. Other remedies used were winter poisoning, the turning-out of the natural enemy – cats, ferrets, stoats, weasels and hawks, plus regular hunting with dogs.

During the depression years of the early 1930s, rabbits were back in plague proportions. Typically, rabbit-prone areas around Wairarapa Moana included the shingle-based areas within and adjacent to the Tauherenikau, Dry, Waihora, Taunui and Turanganui Rivers, as well as the light sandy soils of Kahutara and Whangaimoana.

The Wairarapa East Rabbit Board, formed in 1946 to eradicate rabbits, originally managed over 200,000 hectares but this was quickly reduced to 113,000 hectares following protests from some farmers who didn't have a rabbit problem. This protest no doubt included South Wairarapa landowners who farmed around the wetlands on heavy soil not favourable for rabbits. In August 1959 the South Wairarapa became part of the Wairarapa Rabbit Board, the body responsible for controlling and enforcing rabbit management. In 1967 the Rabbit Destruction Council was superseded by the Agricultural Pest Destruction Council and allowed possums, hares and rooks to be controlled, which meant the old nationwide 'rabbit killer policy' was scrapped.

The systematic breeding and release of rabbit predators during the 1880s ensured that they also became pests and today pose a significant threat to our native bat, lizard and bird species.

A folly indeed! Ferrets were legally protected in 1879 and stoats and weasels in 1884. These three members of the mustelid family found it just as easy to have a meal of native birds as they did of rabbits. In realisation of the increasing threat to wildlife, the law was amended in 1903 to allow the killing 'at will' of these predators. These days the introduction of the rabbit calicivirus disease has controled rabbit numbers but not so the wild cats and mustelids. The proficient control of these pests is just one of the challenges to be met to ensure the survival of rare and threatened native lizards and birds.

Possums were released around Featherston in 1872 and spread far and wide to become an environmental pest and threat to the local economy.

Possums were implicated in bovine tuberculosis (Tb) found on the north eastern side of Lake Wairarapa in 1988. The possums tended to live and stay in the dense crack willow *(Salix fragilis)* canopy of the trees for long periods. Because the ground under the willows is generally saturated it was said that the possums must have had webbed feet. An Agricultural Pest Destruction Council field officer at the time advocated spraying all of the willows with a herbicide to destroy the possum habitat. However, this would have resulted in destruction of the trees and the possums merely relocating to another habitat. Sanity prevailed and the spraying never eventuated. A dramatic reduction of the possums was achieved by conventional baiting techniques. By 2002 South Wairarapa was under intensive cyclic possum control, which is still ongoing.

Rooks established at Whangaimoana and Tuhitarata around 1930.

The growing numbers of rooks in the area and the damage they inflicted on crops saw the introduction of control measures in 1968. The current population is low and consists of two rookeries with less than forty birds.

Wairarapa Moana – into the future

So life goes on and we do what we can do. Risk management is an important issue. It takes years to get a good name and five minutes to get a bad one. There is a lot of regulation and high expectations from the community to get it right.

A practical solution for optimising regional biodiversity is to create 'stepping stones' or wildlife corridors for the movement and dispersal of some native species. Then wouldn't it be wonderful to report no exotic species as 'road kill?'. Although unrealistic, this would be a sure sign that we are gaining the upper hand in restoring our biological diversity.

We do well to remember that the land remains when the people have disappeared.

Text by Ray Clarey, Senior Biosecurity Officer, Greater Wellington Regional Council