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UPDATE December 2014

It has been possum-busting business as usual for the OPBG, but there have been a few changes in the organisation since the last Newsletter, and some new initiatives have begun.

The AGM

The AGM was held at Macandrew Bay on the 25th September, when more than 50 people turned up to hear talks by Cathy Rufaut (OPBG Programme manager) and Haseeb Randhawa (Otago University Ecology Group), as well as elect some new Trustees and vote in office-bearers. Brendon Cross was (again) elected as Chair of the OPBG, with Moira Parker as Secretary: they must be doing something right!

Cathy gave an inspirational talk on what progress has been made on the Pest Free Peninsula project, and why it is so important; and Haseeb discussed the preliminary analyses (by Ecology second-year students) of the results of bird monitoring and tracking of rodents and mustelids. Although encouraging increases in populations of some native bird species are evident, the data are “noisy” and long-term rigorous monitoring is still needed to confirm any anecdotal trends. It will be interesting to see what changes are apparent in a year’s time. The University Ecology Group is keen to continue working with the OPBG on the monitoring and student teaching courses.

MOU with Department of Conservation

The Trust has nearly finalised a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Conservation. This will help formalize the working relationship between OPBG and DoC, especially access to technical expertise and assistance with pest control.

Changes in Trustees

Edward Ellison and Neville Peat, founding Trustees of the OPBG, have resigned from the trust. Both have contributed a great deal in terms of their local Peninsula knowledge, their expertise and their connections to organisations and landowners, and we are sorry to lose them. We will also lose Luke McClelland in the near future as he is moving to Nelson.

In their place, we welcome Hoani Langsbury and Moana Wesley as new Trustees.

The Trustees have also been fortunate in co-opting several local people to assist with Fundraising and Communications sub-committees, and with web site maintenance.

Web site

The OPBG web site has had a make-over, with quite a bit of background data added. Always worth a look, even if only to admire the photos in the new Gallery!

Meeting with Otago Conservation Board

Brendon, Bob and Cathy had half an hour of the OCB's time on 4th November, and were able to discuss many aspects of the OPBG's work and plans, including what we are doing with DoC's funds awarded for next year's possum work in Sector 4 (from Portobello back through to town).

Biological surveys

The monitoring of bird populations and vegetation plots to assess the impact of removing possums continues. If fundraising is successful, more tracking tunnel lines will be added, and lizard and insect monitoring will begin in parallel with the rodent monitoring. An entomologist has also started collating a list of beetle species on the Peninsula. So far, he has got to 110 species but suspects the total number will be at least equal to the number of vascular plants on the Peninsula. The composition of the beetle population in bush remnants can show the degree of previous modification of the bush, and also reflects the mammalian predator population (beetles being an important part of the diet of rodents and hedgehogs). The Nature Watch website (naturewatch.org.nz) is an excellent site to visit for photographs and observations of Peninsula flora and fauna. You can add your own records, too.

Operational matters

Trapping and poisoning (using bait stations and bait bags) are continuing in Taiaroa Bush and Okia Reserve, both "hot spots" with (previously) very high possum numbers in Sector 2. Although numbers are now much lower, these areas still need more intensive control to get numbers down to where we want them. You may have noticed yellow Timms traps and white chew cards between Allans Beach Rd and Weir Rd around the perimeter of Sector 3. These are out for surveillance purposes to identify if any possums are left in this buffer zone. After one weeks of deployment, we have trapped one possum and detected the presence of a second one. This work will be pulsed on and off for several months.

Possum sightings

Please remember to keep those possum sightings coming in (dead or alive, trap catch or road kill) by Email to Brenda Cameron (brenda.wayne@xtra.co.nz) or visit Brenda at the Portobello Deli. This is all useful information, and is another way in which we can assess progress in reducing numbers in the various sectors.

Where to next?

Many people are asking what will be happening once possum numbers are reduced to where we would like them. Possums (and hedgehogs) are the only mammals which can be removed without upsetting the wider predator/prey balance, hence the current focus. Moving beyond possums into addressing other pests such as rats, mice, mustelids, and rabbits involves concurrently addressing multiple species, and will be a major step for the Trust. Making an area the size of the Peninsula pest-free has never been attempted before, and the rural/urban

environment just adds to the complexity. It will not be easy – or cheap. Nevertheless, the Trust is committed to investigating the feasibility of taking on the next species and is gathering information on how to go about such an ambitious undertaking.

Kind regards, and a Happy Christmas.

Brendon Cross

Chair, Otago Peninsula Biodiversity Group