

Restoring what has been lost

Fishers help native birds



Kokako feeding in the hand, before release.

While extinction of a species means that it is not possible to turn back the clock, an initiative involving a Te Anau-based fishing company has resulted in the next best thing. Malcolm Lawson reports.



Fiordland Lobster Company CEO Mike Schuck.

New Zealand has an array of native bird species that are unlike any seen elsewhere in the world. Inherent in their uniqueness is the call they make.

We are all aware that in many cases the populations, especially on the mainland islands, have been decimated by a number of causes. The South Island kokako is one bird that has succumbed to the man-made ravages of deforestation and the introduction of pest and predators and is now believed to be extinct. The last evidence of their existence was in 1967, meaning that since that time the Fiordland bush has been robbed of one of the most haunting bird calls of all.

October 21 saw the start of the reversal of that legacy when 10 North Island kokako were released on Secretary Island at the mouth of Doubtful Sound by members of the Department of Conservation in Te Anau. The birds had been relocated from Mapara near Te Kuiti.

Two major events have allowed this to happen, the first being a major undertaking to rid the island of all pests and predators; and the second being a partnership between DOC and the Fiordland Lobster Company Ltd (FLC) to finance the capture and relocation of the birds.

It is often said that fishermen are conservationists. This concept is not understood or accepted by many members of the public, but why did FLC get involved in this project? According to Mike Schuck, FLC's CEO, the initiative to become involved in environmental projects came from the directors of the company. They wanted to put something back into Fiordland.

Most people who visit Fiordland find that within a very short period of time they strike up some affinity with the area. It is that sort of place: fishermen cannot work in the area without forming a connection. "Our fishermen moor near to the islands and work close by so it made sense to do something in this area. We have a role to play in looking after the area and in setting an example as a member of the local community," says Mike.

The interesting aspect of this is that the company did not set out to gain any advertising or marketing advantage from their involvement. Almost all of their product is exported and their buyers are geographically removed from these events to the degree that it has no influence on them.

One positive point that Mike highlights as coming from the publicity is the strengthening of the relationship between the local rock lobster industry, DOC, and the local community. "It shows that we can work together, and as a result everyone wins."

This is not the first time that the company or their fishermen have been involved in environmental projects: the first two marine reserves in Fiordland were promoted by the Fiordland Fishermen's Association; the "Great Fiordland Coastal Clean Up" was the result of discussions and observations of fishermen and helicopter pilots; and Fiordland fishermen were instrumental in the formation of the Fiordland Marine Guardians. This latest initiative is a continuation of support from FLC for island restoration projects that began with the funding of pest eradication followed by the reintroduction of mohua (yellowhead) and robin onto Pigeon Island in Dusky Sound.

"It is good for fishing companies to be seen to be doing this sort of thing. It changes the public perception of fishermen from being users of a resource to one of contributing to the environment."

Al Morrison, the Director-General of DOC had this to say about the relationship between his Department and FLC: "Conservation and business have a common objective. They are both central to ensuring the links between thriving species, healthy environments and the flow of ecosystem services from them. These services include clean water, stable soil, fresh air, stored carbon, sustainable food production and healthy people. They determine our prosperity and ensure our survival. And yet too often conservation and business interests struggle to understand that common interest and work together to achieve it. The Fiordland Lobster Company is one that gets it."

This is just one example of a fishing company that has been prepared to walk the walk when it comes to environmental awareness. It has lost nothing but has gained plenty. In fact it could be argued that by its actions, all of the commercial fishing industry has gained.

There are many other fishing companies that are already committed to environmental projects. Is this the stimulus for even more individuals and companies to take the step up?

Depending on the success of this initial venture it is hoped to release another 20 kokako onto Secretary Island in the future and eventually to other pest- and predator-free islands.

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