

## 1080 – the poison we love to hate

A new book is out on the impossibly vexed subject of using 1080 poison to kill pests.

Which got me remembering that at various times I've been a possum hunter, trapper and poisoner, and I've dabbled in the fur trade. I've also eliminated my fair share of introduced bird species, even shot a goat or two.

Sound unlikely for someone who's a lifetime urban dweller? Fair enough. I should put it in perspective.

When I was a kid, our family lived on Mangorei Rd not far from Devon St and our property ran down into a gully, which adjoined a farmlet. It's all housing now, but in those days there was bush and a lot of wildlife.

We began with shanghais, then Dad bought slug guns, the last of which was a beast, a .22 with a telescopic sight that once felled a pheasant from a couple of hundred metres.

We knocked off mynahs, starlings and sparrows by the dozens, but there was unwritten code that tui, kereru, piwakawaka and anything else native were sacrosanct.

Next came a .22 rifle, and night-time excursions up into Egmont National Park, where we potted our first possums from out the car window.

We graduated to rabbits on Wit Alexander's farmlet in the gully where Telford Rest Home nestles these days, then headed out to Kaimata to shoot possums on an uncle's farm.

In the early 60s, my brother and I - still at high school - got serious about possum eradication and persuaded Dad to buy us 45 gin traps. We ran them in various patches of bush around the city, using white rags, white paint and various bait concoctions to entice the prey.

We caught hundreds, despatching them with a bit of pipe, taking care not to damage the pelts since we were now in the fur trade. We learned to get the tails off still joined to the rest of the fur.

But then, disaster. The week we took our first accumulation of dried skins to the trader, the world fur market collapsed. We got bugger all for months of work, although Mum's garden benefited from all the buried carcasses.

This singularly devastating event is mentioned in Dave Hansford's book, 'Protecting Paradise: 1080 and the fight to save New Zealand's wildlife', a well-researched and reasoned account of all the things that have had an impact on what was originally - before well-meaning but thoughtless colonists imported several ark-loads of foreign animals - one of the world's most unusual natural environments.

JT column - 1080

The fur trade is never going to make much difference to the elimination of pests, but 1080 is, a conclusion Hansford reaches after what is most probably the most exhaustive and scientifically thorough examination of the issue ever published (including Jan Wright's game-changing report in 2011).

This is a controversy with some very gnarly characters involved - conspiracy theorists, hardline hunters, social media nihilists, dissident farmers, hippies, and parents whipped into a frenzy of fear.

We saw the impact of that last week when a school cancelled a field trip to a DOC hut in Egmont National Park when the teacher learned a 1080 aerial drop was about to happen.

You can understand her concern - poison pellets dropping on her charges from the sky was an horrific prospect.

The fact the school wasn't alerted makes it even worse. Hansford laments the position DOC finds itself in over 1080, but he would have to agree such an omission – bad weather changes notwithstanding - hardly reinforces public confidence.

Almost equally worrying was a claim by campaigner Chris Wilkes that one of the hazards is 1080-laced dust that comes from helicopter drops.

That's nonsense, according to detailed analysis in Hansford's book, so Wilkes needs to put up some science on his claim or retract it.

Hansford demonstrates that the wild west days of careless aerial drops dispersing far too much 1080 are gone, and this poison – properly handled - is the only way to decimate pests at the start of any campaign.

The interesting news is that sophisticated, self-setting killing traps are now available to maintain low pest infestation after the initial 1080 assault.

Taranaki has a big stake in the debate in the form of Project Mouna, which aims to get rid of possums, rats, stoats and goats from Egmont National Park and re-establish native bird species.

If you want to know more about all this, I recommend Hansford's book (it's online). And check out Project Mouna on its website.