

Department of Conservation Protected Species and Predator Detection Dog Programmes

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While dogs pose a major risk to many protected species, trained dogs can be a valuable conservation tool. It is their outstanding scenting ability to detect cryptic, sometimes nocturnal and often cunning wildlife, or the scent of them, which we capitalise on as wildlife managers.

In many New Zealand threatened species recovery programmes (birds, lizards, frogs, invertebrate) and biodiversity restoration projects dogs play a significant role. This has occurred on both mainland and island sites, including many community based sanctuary projects.

These dog programmes cover both protected species detection dogs and predator detection dogs. They have been established to assist with the safe and effective use of dogs at some of our most sensitive conservation sites and on some of our most threatened wildlife species.

Protected species detection dogs

Richard Henry of Resolution Island fame in the 1890's was the first person in the New Zealand to use dogs to help capture kiwi and kakapo for relocation from the Fiordland mainland to the island. Protected species detection dogs have regularly been used to locate rare birds since the 1970's, and more recently lizards. This has included kakapo, takahe, kiwi, whio, pateke taiko, skinks and geckos, for both monitoring and translocation purposes. The contribution by dogs varies depending on what other capture techniques are available. Kakapo would possibly be extinct today if dogs had not been used to locate birds on Stewart Island and Fiordland for translocation to predator free islands before predators and old age eliminated these original remnant populations. Use of these dogs on the kiwi recovery projects has advanced the progress of these projects by at least ten years. These dogs have been a proven conservation management tool for over 30 years.

Predator detection dogs

Dogs assisted with the eradication of cats from a number of islands prior to 1987. Over the last 8 years the use of predator detection dogs has expanded and now support a number of threatened species recovery programmes where their role is to enhance other predator control methods. These dogs are used to detect the presence of mammalian predators including rodents (rat, mice), mustelids (stoat, weasel, ferret), cat and hedgehog. They are particularly useful when predator numbers are low when other predator detection methods (tracking tunnels, traps, chew sticks) have difficulty confirming their presence. Once detected by dogs, predators are killed using toxins, traps or shooting. Predator dogs are also used for: surveillance of supposedly predator free sites; audit of one off eradication and ongoing predator control programmes;

contingency purposes when a reinvasion or new incursion of predators occur at a sensitive site; quarantine purposes to avoid the accidental introduction of a predator; and as a tool to focus predator trap placement. Their value as another conservation management tool is widely recognised.

Certification System and SOP

A key goal of these programmes is for the handlers and dogs to be safe and successful. The dog programmes exist to support projects like yours on both privately owned land and public conservation land.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) operates a national certification system for all dogs and handlers working on species recovery programmes and biodiversity restoration projects that covers both protected species detection dogs and predator detection dogs. These certification systems have been operating for 20 years and 8 years respectively.

This certification system applies to all protected species conservation programmes operating on both public conservation land and private land where a DOC permit to handle protected species is required.

They do not cover animal control dogs used on goat, deer, pig, wallaby or possum that are covered by individual DOC conservancy certification systems.

Currently the following dogs and handlers are in the system. Some dogs are certified for more than one protected species.

Protected species: 26 handlers and 29 dogs

Predators: 11 handlers and 20 dogs

The certification system has recently been reviewed and is now guided by a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) that will be officially in the DOC system in November 2008 and available for use by all of us. A number of dog handlers, both private contractors and DOC staff, contributed significantly to this document.

To ensure appropriate standards and safety aspects are maintained there is a formal process for handlers wishing to join the programme and for the certification of handlers and dogs.

The steps are:

1. Handler application
2. Handler interview/selection
3. Interim (training/basic obedience) certificate for handler and dog - normally for 12 months
4. Full (detection/hunting) certificate - handler and dog, up to 3 years

All dogs and handlers must have an interim (training) certificate before being training commences on protected species or in the presence of protected species.

The SOP also includes a reporting system for incidents involving accidental injury or death to protected species by dogs working within the programme. This will ensure that we learn from the very odd incident that does occur.

In the predator dog programme the number of certified handlers and dogs is currently insufficient to meet the national needs of DOC and sanctuary projects like yours. This has necessitated implementation of a national annual planning and priority setting process starting each December for the use of DOC predator dog handlers. Projects like yours will have to forward an application for assistance.

People involved

Overall responsibility for these two dog programmes sits with the Karen Vincent and Carol West, Research & Development Section (R&D) in DOC Head Office.

The National Coordinator for these DOC dog programmes is John Cheyne, Hawkes Bay who is also a certifier for protected species and predator dogs. Scott Theobald, Whangarei is a full time predator dog handler and a certifier for other predator dogs. Dave Crouchley, Te Anau is also a certifier for protected species dogs.

For further information contact:

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Summary

Richard Henry led the world over 116 years ago by using dogs to assist with the capture of kakapo and kiwi for conservation purposes. Protected species and predator detection dogs are now proven conservation management tools and are widely used. Their use, however, does not necessarily guarantee absolute success with the conservation programmes we are all so passionate about. The timing of when to use a dog, type of trained and certified dog required, and which handler to use are all important considerations. The DOC dog programmes provide nationally consistent standards and certification system, supports handlers, and enables suitable dogs and handlers to be available to assist with a wide range of threatened species recovery programmes and biodiversity restoration projects.