Predator-free goal needs bolder message

News Room 9-3-20

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There's a strategy and some new goals but are we any closer to being predator-free in 2050? David Williams reports

Four years ago, Prime Minister John Key made a pitch for the green vote.

"Our ambition is that by 2050 every single part of New Zealand will be completely free of rats, stoats and possums," Key's statement said, calling it the most ambitious conservation project attempted anywhere in the world.

It was a bolt from the blue, from a blue-striped coalition.

Many were delighted a government of any stripe would suggest such a thing. But enthusiasm was tempered by reality – a paltry $28 million investment over four years in joint-venture company Predator Free New Zealand, the need to develop new technology, and the difficulties of eradicating those mammalian nasties from cities.

Ultimately that pitch, carried to the election by Bill English, failed, but the lofty predator-free ambition remains.

Incoming Conservation Minister Eugenie Sage, of the Green Party, had to walk a tightrope.

On one hand, her party's confidence and supply agreement signalled significantly increased funding for the Department of Conservation and increase predator control. A mega-mast made that doubly important.

But the predator-free goal, announced by a previous government, can't be ignored.

Last November, Predator Free 2050 Ltd was granted $19.5 million by the Provincial Growth Fund – $6.5 million for product development and $12 million for "new regional large landscape predator control projects".

This Government's most ambitious predator-free project is called Te Manahuna Aoraki, a collaborative attempt, with a $4.5 million injection from taxpayers, to create a 310,000-hectare 'mainland island' in the South Island's upper Mackenzie Basin. (There are also predator-free projects in Waiheke Island, and Taranaki.)

What has been missing since the 2016 announcement, however, is a strategy that shows how this country can turn hopes and dreams into reality. Sage releases the country's predator-free 2050 strategy this morning – to mixed reaction.

"The strategy realises that we have to work towards those human issues and getting people to be involved." – James Russell

"It's good that DoC has finally built this strategy," says conservation biologist James Russell, from the University of Auckland. The ultimate goal is 30 years away, so the structure of how the country will get there is a bunch of high-level wants, hopes, and expectation. The five-year strategy is where the rubber hits the road, Russell says.

Key's announcement in 2016 laid out four goals by 2025 – all introduced predators eradicate from all offshore island nature reserves (the new plan calls them uninhabited offshore islands), one million more hectares of mainland New Zealand where predators are suppressed, show that complete eradication can be achieved in areas of at least 20,000 hectares on the mainland, and one new breakthrough scientific solution capable of removing at least one small mammal predator from the mainland.

This strategy adds three more goals – at least five eradication projects led by whānau, hapū, and iwi underway, possums or mustelids to be eradicated from at least one city, and effective tools or knowledge available for farmers.

(Māori were absent from the 2016 announcement, so the new document fixes that glaring omission. As to the predator-free city, could it be Wellington?)

Russell likes the spreading of the load to city and rural folk. "Previously the problem was posed as a technical problem – we just need more technology and we just need more money to use the technology – whereas this document has added these more human-centred issues," he says. "The strategy realises that we have to work towards those human issues and getting people to be involved."

University of Otago professor of philosophy and politics, Lisa Ellis, says without trust in the Government and commitment to the goals the strategy can't succeed, so it's important to have society's blessing.

Rod for its back?

Russell counted 86 time-indexed goals and expectations in the strategy – all of which are reasonably measurable. "I think the Department of Conservation has been very, very ambitious – so much so it may have created a rod for its own back."

The real adjustment the country needs to make, he says, is from suppression – knocking down predators to extremely low levels, but expecting them to bounce back – to complete eradication. That's easier on offshore islands. The real work, Russell says, is being able to do that on the mainland.

That'll probably require new technology, he says. The strategy doesn't identify what they are, but Russell's fairly forgiving: "I don't think anyone's going to expect scientists to predict whether we've got hovercars or brain implants by 2030."

He adds: "I suspect in 10 years we'll have technologies we've never thought of, which may make [predator elimination] possible but we'll also have other new challenges facing humanity which may completely derail it."

In a statement, Minister Sage describes the strategy as a major step forward. But the announcement isn't accompanied with a major funding boost and the 2025 goals will only be measured after two elections.

Ellis, the philosophy and politics professor, is worried about the report's tone. She says it's not frank enough about the scale of the challenge, which has been described as this country's conservation "moon shot".

The Government is struggling to halt the decline of native species, let alone turn them around. The Environment Aotearoa report, released last year, said almost two-thirds of rare ecosystems are threatened by collapse. This country has the highest proportion of threatened indigenous species in the world.

"It is my impression that a lot of New Zealanders think that because they and the Government value native, endemic species and the natural environment that someone is just taking care of it," Ellis says. "And it's just not true."

Another disappointment is the strategy doesn't mention gene editing technology, she says. "Of course, nobody should make a commitment to an unproven technology without society-wide consultation and without sufficient safeguards. But this is the stage where we should be talking about it."

Cost needs context

In an article published in the journal BioScience five years ago, University of Auckland's Russell estimated eradicating invasive predators from the country would cost $9 billion.

But he challenges any assertion it's "costly". Sure, he says, eradicating predators will be cost more than our current predator control programme, which sits at about $100 million a year. But compare that to the country's law and order spending, or motorways.

"The upgrade of the motorway off-ramp where I live in Auckland cost $100 million."

Russell wants to see a veritable Dragon's Den for new technologies, preferring a "fast fail" approach to scientists just tinkering away in the lab for years until they're confident of a new product. "Just get out there give it a go, and if it doesn't work just ditch it and move onto the next thing."

People are trying ambitious things, he says, the new strategy is sending the right messages, and the community and industry have a good "vibe" for the programme.

But shouldn't the country be spending more money now to bring the 2050 goal within sight earlier? Russell's non-committal. "Experience will show whether we should have invested more at the start."

This country has extraordinary species but they're extraordinarily vulnerable. Progress had better be quick. "By the end of those five years we'll have a pretty clear idea whether this is actually a realistic thing," Russell says.