

Taranaki Taku Tūranga - Towards a Predator-Free Taranaki

*David MacLeod, Chairman, Taranaki Regional Council
Speech notes, 30 May 2018*

Ready, willing and able

It's hugely gratifying but also humbling that the Government and Predator-Free 2050 Ltd are placing their trust and confidence in us.

This is a huge challenge for Taranaki. One of the biggest the region has ever faced. We're aiming to achieve something that's never been achieved by any other region. We're blazing a trail for the rest of the country to follow.

But on behalf of everyone here, indeed of everyone in the region, I can assure you of this, Minister: We are READY, WILLING and ABLE to take on this challenge.

I'd like to take some time to tell you why I'm confident of that.

We are READY because this region is already threaded with many strong strands of work to protect and enhance our indigenous biodiversity. You might say complete predator-free status is the logical end point, if not an inevitable one.

Examples include the Self-Help Possum Control Programme, which is the largest and longest running of its type in the country. This partnership between landholders and our Council has been running since the early 1990s. It covers almost all private land on the ring plain, and significant parts of the coast and hillcountry. A quarter of a million hectares all up.

It has successfully kept possum numbers at very low levels and a strong reason for Taranaki's continued TB Free status.

In more recent years we've extended this work into urban areas, with a voluntary programme in partnership with New Plymouth District Council. Again, we're seeing good community support, and we're starting to see good results. The region has shown it's READY.

But there's more. Taranaki has a host of strong, community-based campaigners walking their talk and making huge advances in predator control and biodiversity protection. Look at the projects here on the Mouna, up to the north at Parininihi, to the south at Lake Rotokare, or even in the eastern hillcountry at Purangi. And in between there are dozens of landowners doing similar work in small bush blocks and wetlands.

Taranaki has built up a small army of professionals and volunteers with commitment, expertise and staying power in the field of predator control and biodiversity protection. Once again, the region is READY.

And so it almost goes without saying that we are WILLING. All these projects I've just been describing are fine examples of people-power. They're driven by grassroots groups or iwi organisations with vision, determination and Willpower.

This willingness is also clearly evident in our own Council's work with farmers and other landholders across the region. Look at the take-up in our world-scale Riparian Management Programme, which has been voluntary since it started in the mid-1990s. Just about every dairy farmer has put their hand up for a tailored property plan. Our waterways are being protected with millions of plants and thousands of kilometres of fencing. Millions of dollars worth, all paid for by willing farmers.

And I must tell you that with 85% of planned fencing and 71% of planned planting already completed, we're starting to see very good results in terms of freshwater quality. It's not just me saying that, either. A recent study of Taranaki data by NIWA found a direct link between riparian protection and improved waterway quality, especially ecological health and reduced bacteria levels.

Taranaki landowners are willing to take on environmental challenges, and we're also seeing that in other programmes.

I mentioned that dozens of landowners are doing good work in their small bush blocks or wetlands. Most of these areas are what the Council has designated as Key Native Ecosystems, or KNEs.

This is another voluntary programme where we're seeing plenty of willingness. Since 2009, we've identified 252 KNEs, of which 199 are in full or partial private ownership.

And so far Council staff have worked closely with the owners of 110 of them, drawing up Biodiversity Plans that include predator control as well as fencing and restoration planting. The Council provides plenty of advice and some assistance, but it's the landowners who meet most of the cost and do most of the work. Because they're WILLING.

So, ladies, and gentlemen, I think you'll agree this region is ready, with its small army of willing professionals and volunteers with expertise and determination.

But there's another important ingredient that also demonstrates Taranaki is ABLE to take on the predator-free challenge.

That ingredient is the ability to unite for a common purpose. And to prove this point I need do no more than point to Wild for Taranaki.

This biodiversity trust is the first of its type in the country. It brings together the huge range of organisations and agencies involved in conservation work in this region. There were 44 of them, at last count and climbing.

Members include the iconic community-driven projects, all the post-settlement iwi organisations and hopefully Ngati Maru after their signing in the near future, all four councils in the region, DOC, and many, many others.

Wild for Taranaki is where we all can prioritise and coordinate our campaigns and their resourcing and share experiences and lessons. Its Restore Taranaki Initiative gives an overarching structure to the project we're announcing today and many others as well.

The biodiversity players of the region are demonstrating they can develop and sustain productive and respectful relationships to achieve shared goals.

Make no mistake, unity of purpose is essential if Taranaki is to successfully meet the challenge that's been laid out today. Success is in the hands of ALL the people of Taranaki. And as the project unfolds, we'll be reaching out to schools, community groups, farmers and residents in different areas right across the region. And we're confident they'll rally to the cause.

To some degree you might also say that we are able to accept this challenge because our region is relatively compact, compared with many others in the country. But I would add that the challenges posed by our terrain are no less complex than elsewhere.

Importantly, our ability to address these complexities also rests on rapid and relentless improvements in technology. The 'Internet of Things' will be a crucial part of our armory. Already, we're using remote sensors, wireless nodes and a trapping app to help us remove predators and prevent re-infestations.

The high-tech equipment makes the job more efficient, particularly in rural areas. It provides live trapping data - for example, sending a smartphone alert when a trap goes off. Data will also be collated about how, where and when predators are caught, helping the Council identify clusters and tweak the trapping network.

A virtual barrier, made up of natural barriers, traps and remote sensors, will prevent re-infestations and will be moved across the region as predators are removed from each area. It's exciting stuff and the technology is only going to get better.

Here and overseas, clever and resourceful minds are finding even better ways to get the job done quickly and efficiently. Watch this space.

Finally, and to bring me right back to where I started, the region is able to take up this challenge because it has won the support and confidence of the Government and Predator-Free 2050 Ltd. So once again, thank you Minister.