

Magic bullet misses possum target

FOR New Zealand forests, possums are the Black Death. Sadly, a plague of furry gluttons was unleashed on the New Zealand environment in the mistaken view that they would sustain a fur industry and therefore the economy. As with so many 19th century introductions, the few protesting voices were ignored in what was fatefully thought to be the greater interest. A bright idea went catastrophically wrong, crushing a unique fauna and flora through sheer weight of numbers.

Today, it is Kiwi good, Possum bad; Kakapo good, Stoat bad; anything native good, anything introduced bad. New Zealanders are bombarded with that simple message from primary school to the interpretation panels at every national park headquarters. In New Zealand, you have to be a native animal to have an official right to life, unless you are lucky enough to be an introduced fish that really does sustain a functioning industry.

The mindset has become so universal that New Zealanders are bemused when someone suggests that killing wild animals might be morally wrong. Possums were introduced, it is explained kindly. The islands have been isolated since they broke off from Gondwanaland around 80 million years ago. There is a whole host of birds that gave up on wings because they lacked mammalian predators and the ground was the safest refuge from flying enemies. But now there are possums and deer and stoats, and they are out of balance, and they must be eradicated to protect native species. There endeth the lesson.

Oh, sure, possums should be killed humanely. But the bottom line is, we want them dead. Thus any mechanism for removing them from the environment must add to the common good.

What about the magic market? In the 1980s, New Zealand economic philosophy skidded dramatically to the right. Consequently, we are convinced that all problems have commercial solutions. Transform problems into commodities, create demand — and hey presto, possum-fur garments mean fewer possums, more jobs, and more kiwis as an added bonus! Do it effectively with possum fur and you not only solve an environmental problem, you have seen the economic light. You do not even have to own the possums, or the forest they live in, or get a permit for resource exploitation. Pay someone to catch them and the resource is yours, with a very, very hefty potential markup. Rather like fishing, although we would prefer it if our fish stocks had not plummeted.

But if commerce can reduce a desirable resource, like fish, surely commerce will also reduce an undesirable resource, like possums? History is replete with examples of free resources that were

routinely exploited beyond the point of commercial viability — that is, were not sustainably harvested. Seals, whales, lobsters, orange roughy, abalone, anchovies, cod, kauri, teak, jarrah, the list goes on. If anyone can go after it and make money in the process, then imposed quotas, market failures or devastating population crashes are virtually inevitable.

Here is the problem. For reasons that are less than clear to most of us, fishery operators seem to think that destruction of a resource is both appropriate and acceptable. But for pest control, we need possum-fur companies with the same general philosophy. In principle, the aim is to selflessly bankrupt oneself in the service of the ecosystem by over-exploiting the resource until commercial extinction is inevitable.

Right now the possum-fur companies are in full-throttle expansion mode, enjoying a free and abundant resource and cultivating lucrative niche markets in Japan and North America. Labour costs are low — rich possum trappers are quite difficult to find — but one hopes and assumes that they are happily employed. It is a mighty fine commercial opportunity, heavily promoted as more than environmentally friendly, because it provides significant environmental benefits.

Here is the key question: will these companies be happy to reduce possum numbers to the point where possums become so expensive to extract that they can quietly shut up shop in the contented glow of a job well done?

Fisheries aside, it is not exactly a winner of a business plan.

So why does it convince the sort of people who hand out sustainable business awards? After all, possum-fur companies could have concrete, testable mission statements like "To reduce possum numbers by 5% within the next five years." But, in reality they prefer inspirational slogans like "our dedication to environmental sustainability" and "fashion is a powerful vehicle for change." (1)

Let us be clear. It is hats off to Snowy Peak and their competitors for implementing sustainability themes in their operational structure. Many of their claims are right on. They are creating employment in isolated places, and they are establishing new standards for environmentally sensitive business practices. There are any number of good reasons to buy their products, but, sadly, pest control is not one of them.

Here is a curiosity. Humans excel at decimating native species, but have great difficulty decimating introduced ones. Even when the species was introduced with the specific objective of commercial exploitation, we can not keep them in check. The

Nile perch fishery in Lake Victoria? No matter how many perch are exported, the native cichlids are still disappearing. Foxes for hunting and sport in Australia? Unfortunately, the foxes rapidly outbred the hunting, and nobody much likes it as a sport any more.

But every example has a counter-example, and in New Zealand it is red deer. For a heady couple of decades, when deer were plentiful and foreign markets for velvet and wild venison were booming, commercial operators reduced deer populations to the point where sport hunters began complaining. For once in New Zealand history, humans drastically reduced a population of terrestrial mammals.

It was fun while it lasted. But falling venison prices eventually killed the industry and sent a generation of pilots on the tourist trail. Deer numbers in the wild have recovered, but it is now cheaper to farm them than pay for helicopter fuel, and easier to ensure that farmed meat is safe to export. However, the problems that killed the wild venison industry do not look likely for the possum industry. There will always be a niche market for high-priced fashion, and farming possums is difficult — imagine the farm conversion costs, not to mention the threat of escapees carrying bovine TB into the dairy farm next door.

The possum industry is doing very nicely. There are twenty-two companies in New Zealand making possum-fur socks, scarves, coats, jerseys, and for the truly gullible, nipple-warmers. But there is a strange silence on the subject of whether possum populations have diminished as a result. Funny how you do not see rave reviews about 1080 being obsolete because we have Ultimate Luxury Possum Leisure Socks. In fact, purveyors of 1080 seem to be doing rather nicely, too.

Why isn't the possum-fur industry drastically affecting possum numbers, in the manner of deer hunters, sealers, whalers and their ilk? Simple. The ratio of possum-fur garments to the population of breeding possums is very, very small. Possum companies presumably know full well that at current exploitation rates, they are not going out of business any time soon. They can safely and truthfully claim that a dead possum is a good possum, and argue convincingly that commercial growth is good for the environment. Those claims and associated business practices are sufficient to garner rafts of awards and accolades.

As a control mechanism, eco-fur is about as effective as a paper cup in a deluge. And when you consider the target market, you can see why. Eco-fur is for rich customers; tourists, Hollywood stars, and discerning left-leaning professionals. Possum-fur companies face the same dichotomy as winemakers in a world of rock-bottom supermarket prices. You can produce plenty of cheap high-volume product, or you can produce a little bit of very exclusive, expensive product, but you can't do both under the same brand. And if every kid in

New Zealand wears a school jersey made of possum fur, your product is not exclusive any more. You might as well be selling wool.

And we do. What is more, we sell it to ourselves. These days, Kiwi weekend warriors almost invariably wear Icebreaker, a company that has cornered the outdoor clothing market with a simple philosophy; fashion should be multi-purpose as well as eco-friendly. Who would not buy something that is not only sustainably produced, but allows you to ski in it, run a marathon in it, and wear it to the pub afterwards without your partner complaining about your fashion sense or your body odour?

But tourists and rich overseas department-store shoppers, bless them, do not get their four-wheel drives dirty or their feet wet. They may not be a big market and they may not be local, but they are just big enough to keep the possum-fur companies in business — yet small enough not to put any pressure on the free possum resource. And therein lies the reason why the possum-fur industry is not reducing possum numbers. The target market will always be tiny, because anything produced in New Zealand has to be expensive in order to cover the costs of producing it here. In fact, one suspects that any company supplying cheap possum-fur garments to the Warehouse would receive a swift rap on the knuckles from the industry. Not the right sort of customer, not good for the brand; if prices go down, possums will have to be shipped to China for cheaper processing — and there go the sustainability awards.

A fashion business is not a pest eradication company. Their aims are entirely different. One cannot do the job of the other, any more than we can expect fast food restaurants to make people healthy, or television to teach children to read. Fashion can make eco-friendly gestures, just as supermarkets can promote cloth rather than plastic bags; but possum-fur companies will never substitute for eradication programmes. If they could, quite simply, we would have no possums left.

REFERENCES

- ¹Snowy Peak blazes innovation trail. Commercial website, <http://www.snowypeak.co.nz/en/shared/downloads/blazes-innovation-trail.jpg>. Accessed 15 December 2006.

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