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Controlling pests in New Zealand sanctuaries: Varying the spatial distribution of the standard grid system in a mainland conservation project.

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Abstract

A toxin reduction study was carried out in the Waitakere Ranges, west of Auckland City, New Zealand. The Auckland Council (previously called the Auckland Regional Council) manage more than 20, 000 hectares (ha) of native ecosystems within the Waitakere ranges using varying pest control methods and regimes. The 'Ark in the Park' (AiP) is part of this 20,000 ha protected habitat and it is intensely managed as a conservation reserve. AiP employs volunteers, Auckland Council staff, researchers, contractors and a full time project manager to monitor both pest and native species densities, deploy baits and traps, and inform the public of the importance of active pest management. The use of toxins to control pests can be controversial and decreasing poison usage and thereby reducing potential by catch of non-target species is an important and under studied aspect of conservation biology. In this study I tested the ability of pest control to meet targeted rodent densities when the density of bait stations was significantly reduced.

The study area was a 333 ha block of native forest adjoining the existing AiP conservation reserve, which at the time of the study represented 1200 ha of the Waitakere Ranges under pest control. The aim of the study was to replicate the standard AiP pest control methodology but reduce the density of poison bait stations. I then compared the density of rodents achieved within this reduced toxin study area with two control sites, one without rodent control and one with the standard rodent control methods used within AiP.

The existing AiP rat control methodology employs a 100 X 50 metre (m) grid of **Philproof**® bait stations, baited with pre-bagged Brodifacoum bait. In conjunction with this, mustelid (*Mustela spp*) and feral cat (*Felis catus*) control is carried out utilising existing track networks managed by the Auckland Council. In the current study this pest control programme was altered by increasing the distance between stations from 50m to 100m giving a control grid of 100 X 100m. Along the perimeter of this research grid, a

150m wide buffer was installed where bait stations are placed in a 100 X 50m pattern to reduce reinvasion of rats from non-pest controlled areas adjacent.

This study showed that at 100 X 100 m spacing overall rat density could be, as measured by baited tracking cards, controlled to 3%, with 10% density at the perimeter and 0% in the core of the area. As a direct result of this project additional areas under pest control have now been added to AiP with a current total pest controlled area of 2500 ha. In conclusion, this study has resulted in an additional 1200 ha of successfully pest controlled area in the Waitakere Ranges using significantly less toxin for the initial knockdown, lower costs, and less equipment and effort. It is recommended that future investigations examine whether the required rodent control is able to be sustained over much longer periods of time using the study technique trialled here.

Preface

Thesis outline.

The overall aim of this thesis was to examine whether an alternative baiting technique could be applied to an area that had not previously received pest control. An area adjacent to an existing pest control project was chosen, so that direct comparisons could be made, and the methods used for this existing area replicated, with only one variable changing. That variable forms the basis of the study for this thesis and enables me to ask the question: “Can we use a lower density of poison bait stations, and still achieve the low rodent densities necessary to meet conservation targets?” In brief, this is achieved by changing the standard pest control grid pattern of 100 X 50 m spacing, to 100 X 100 m spacing while keeping all other pest control processes the same. Rodent densities were then measured over time within the study area using baited tracking cards and compared with densities of rodents in areas with 100 X 50 m bait stations.

Thesis structure.

The thesis includes four chapters. The first chapter is a review of current literature on pest control in New Zealand and provides the background and justification for this study. The second chapter gives an overview of the existing pest control project, known as the ‘Ark in the Park’. This project’s pest control methodology is briefly described. The third chapter describes the experimental study with detailed methodology of how toxins were reduced. Chapter three also includes the main results from this research. In the final chapter I discuss the suitability of using reduced toxins to achieve rodent densities that not only provide native fauna with the opportunity to grow and maintain viable populations but also significantly reduce the costs of pest control. I make recommendations based on those findings and suggest areas of future research on this topic.

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Contents

Abstract	2
Preface	3
Acknowledgements	4
List of Figures	8
List of Tables.....	11
List of Plates.....	12
Chapter 1 General Introduction.....	13
1.1 General ecology of rodents.....	14
1.2 History of rodent control and monitoring in New Zealand.....	21
1.3 Summary.....	29
Chapter 2 Ark in the Park existing pest control project.....	31
2.1 Introduction.....	31
2.2 Design of the Ark in the Park project.....	37
Chapter 3 Toxin Reduction Study.....	44
3.1 Background.....	44
3.2 Method.....	45
3.3 Experimental design and statistical analysis.....	65
3.4 Results.....	67
3.5 Discussion.....	73
Chapter 4 Conclusions, recommendations and future research directions.....	75
4.1 Recommendations.....	80

4.2	Future research directions	82
4.3	Summary	85
Appendix I	Permit for research on ARC administered parkland.....	86
Appendix II	Brodificoum safety data sheet	89
References	92

List of Figures

Figure 2.1	Location of the Ark in the Park project and proximity to Auckland City (Reproduced by permission of M Colgan, AiP).....	32
Figure 2.2	Map showing the Archipelago concept, or ‘Arkipelago’ (Reproduced by permission of M Colgan, AiP). Numbers refer to; 1) Matuku reserve, 2) Forest Ridge Community group, 3) La Trobe restoration project, 4) Lone kauri restoration project, 5) Arataki community conservation group, 6) Whatipu community and AC partnership, 7) Huia Cornwallis landcare group, 8) AC pest control at Piha, 9) Costal dottrel protection, 10) Cultural flax weaving AC staff, 11) Riparian river care.....	34
Figure 2.3	Existing AiP predator control layout, showing bait lines, stoat traps, cat traps, tims traps, and main tracks. A ‘Block’ is an area as defined by a boundary formed by main tracks and/or roads. (Reproduced by permission of M Colgan, AiP).....	37
Figure 2.4	Total number of stoats caught in each year of the AiP operations.....	38
Figure 2.5	Total number of stoats per trap in the AiP since operations started in 2003. (Reproduced by permission of M Colgan, AiP).....	38
Figure 2.6	Rat monitoring in each block, main Auckland council formed tracks. (Reproduced by permission of M Colgan, AiP).....	39
Figure 2.7	Rat monitoring data showing relative density of rats dating back to the AiP inception in December 2002. Blue indicates relative rat indices, red indicates relative mouse indices. The green line indicates the number of monitoring tunnels that are checked, which has increased in number as the project has grown. Graph created from AiP archives.....	40

Figure 3.1	Plan map. GIS Map of the area indicating intended layout of the bait lines (red dashed lines). The perimeter of the research blocks is shown in yellow. The lines are numbered 1-23 east to west, which is the order in which they were installed..... 46
Figure 3.2	As-built map (GIS) of the research block, completed once all the research equipment is installed. Red lines indicate the ‘actual’ path of baitlines, known from mapping the GPS locations of bait stations once they are installed. 48
Figure 3.3	Comparison of different bait line grid layouts. The distance AB in the above diagrams represents the maximum distance from a bait station to any point with in a grid system. The rows of dots represent bait lines, each dot being a bait station. 62
Figure 3.4	Layout of the research area, with 30 tunnels in the managed area, 20 of these (tunnels 1-20) being in the ‘core’ of the block, and 10 of these (tunnels 21-30) being closer to the periphery. 10 control tunnels are installed to the North-east, in Spraggs bush which is an unmanaged area. 65
Figure 3.5	Rat monitoring results carried out before and after each of the three baiting rounds. Blue shows data from the control line in the non managed area, and grey shows data from the managed area, including monitoring from both the middle of the core area and monitoring from closer to the periphery..... 70
Figure 3.6	Rat monitoring results carried out in the core of the pest controlled study area carried out before and after each of the three baiting rounds. Blue shows the control monitoring of the non managed area and grey shows the managed area results from tunnels. 71

Figure 3.7	Rat monitoring results carried out in the core, but closer to the periphery of the managed study area (tunnels 21-30 of Fig 3.3) before and after each of the three baiting rounds. Blue shows the control monitoring of the non managed area and grey shows the managed area results from tunnels. 72
Figure 4.1	Present Ark in the Park managed area, showing the research block shaded and subsequent additional areas resulting from this research (Reproduced by permission of M Colgan, AiP). 77
Figure 4.2	Cross sectional view of mountainous terrain, with baitlines running along it toward the point of section. Each red dot represents the end on view of a bait line at the point of cross section. 79

List of Tables

Table 3.1	Maximum distance from a bait station to any point within the grid system of a managed area as measured on a plane (Fig 3.3).....	63
Table 3.2	Confidence intervals for percentage relative rat density results. Pre-bait is monitoring done before a baiting, and post-bait is a monitoring following baiting.	67
Table 3.3	Rat monitoring results 13/11/2009 to 10/05/2010. Rat monitoring results using black tracker tunnels with peanut butter as lure. All monitoring was carried out on fair to clear nights. 1 indicates presence of rats, 0 indicates no presence.....	68
Table 3.4	Comparison of existing Fenceline block (F block) as part of the AiP managed area vs the research block (AW block).....	69

List of Plates

Plate 1.1	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i> , Norway rat. Both male (Photos Andy Warneford and Idan Shapira).....	19
Plate 1.2	<i>Rattus rattus</i> , ship rat. Top two photographs are male, bottom two photographs are female (photos A Warneford).	20
Plate 1.3	Pestoff [®] bait in the standard delivery form of pellets. LD ⁵⁰ = Two pellets. 28	
Plate 2.1	Remnant native species populations present in and around the AiP area.	42
Plate 2.2	Native bird species translocated to the AiP since 2003.	43
Plate 3.1	Tools and equipment used during a day of installation work in the research block.....	50
Plate 3.2	Personal equipment used during day of work in the research block.....	51
Plate 3.3	Rodent control and monitoring equipment installed in the research block. ..	52
Plate 3.4	Belisle trap and trap enclosure box at left, top right DoC200 and bottom right the Fenn6 and Philproof [®] cover.	53
Plate 3.5	Bait station location marking showing double pink tape and triangle setup method.....	55
Plate 3.6	Contractors downloading information from a previous day's work before heading out again into the research block.....	59
Plate 3.7	A Garmin GPS. Up to five of these were in use at any one time during the research collecting important information.	60