



*The bruised bill of a kiwi from Picton's Kaipupu Wildlife Sanctuary. Photo: DOC*



**David Williams**

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ENVIRONMENT

# When can-do conservation goes wrong

***Badly-set traps allegedly injuring kiwi raises questions about the oversight of conservation volunteers. David Williams reports.***

In 2014, a year after a brutal restructure, the Department of Conservation announced a new strategic direction to get all New Zealanders involved in managing nature.

Director-general Lou Sanson, himself just a year into the job, said, in the department's (DOC) four-year statement of intent, that it would "work with iwi and community groups to protect, restore and manage our natural places and native species". Then Conservation Minister Nick Smith added: "Conservation is everyone's business and reflects who we are as a nation."

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But the seeds of a can-do conservation nation still need the nutrients of DOC guidance to grow properly. That's particularly true of a new generation of non-toxic traps that have to be used a certain way to avoid catching precious native birds.

Fast-forward four years and DOC is having to reiterate trap-setting guidance to community groups after problems at a South Island wildlife sanctuary. It's an example of how things can go wrong when DOC doesn't directly manage threatened wildlife – including our national bird.

### **Trap injuries and a cat find**

Juvenile rowi – the rarest of the five kiwi species – were quietly removed from Picton's Kaipupu Point Sounds Wildlife Sanctuary in September this year after five of the nine birds sustained bill injuries. The risk to the birds was heightened by a cat incursion.

The sanctuary – which is only accessible by boat, water taxi or kayak – is managed by a volunteer-based society. It takes rowi as part of DOC's Operation Nest Egg programme.

Problems emerged after winter, when self-resetting traps, made by Wellington conservation technology company Goodnature, were moved and rebaited, and some new devices were installed. Some were set at non-regulation height and orientation.

In early August, during routine health checks at Kaipupu, a rowi named Camo was found with a bruised bill. Over the next five weeks, four other birds were found with bill injuries. Three were severe enough to be sent to Dunedin's Wildlife Hospital for treatment. The lower bill of one bird, Tumanako, was so severely fractured it was fitted with a splint.

After cat poo was found within the 40ha fenced sanctuary, the remaining rowi at Kaipupu were taken to predator-free Motuara Island, in the Marlborough Sounds.

(The hospitalised rowi have been reunited with the others on Motuara. A feral cat was caught at Kaipupu on September 15 and killed.)

**“The injuries observed are consistent with A24s action and A24s are capable of being the cause.” – DOC report**

DOC's Operation Nest Egg is credited with lifting the rowi population from 180, in 1995, to about 500 today.

Rowi eggs are taken from Ōkarito Forest, in South Westland, hatched on the West Coast, and the chicks are then moved to Christchurch's Willowbank Wildlife Centre. Juvenile rowi are then taken to predator-free sanctuaries, like Motuara Island, before being released back to Ōkarito when they're at a weight and age when they're better able to defend themselves from stoats.

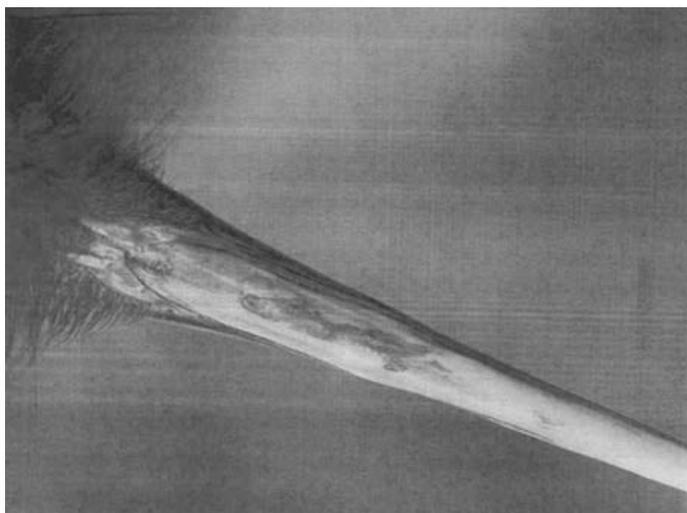
Kaipupu, which was created in 2005 and has an extensive trapping network tended by more than 70 volunteers, became an overflow for Motuara in 2016. Sixteen juvenile rowi have been returned to the wild from Kaipupu.

DOC views Kaipupu as a bit "leaky", in that it has rat incursions, mice, and the odd stoat every couple of years. The Picton harbour sanctuary, near the inter-island ferry terminal, is open to the public and attracts high visitor numbers at times, including tour groups and school children.

The recent proliferation of rowi bill injuries at Kaipupu was initially blamed on tourists carelessly shutting the lids of penguin boxes, in which the kiwi are often found. But a DOC report, provided to *Newsroom* under the Official Information Act, says that's unlikely as the boxes have been present for two seasons without any problem.

The "highly likely" cause was the winter reconfiguration of A24 traps. "The injuries observed are consistent with A24s action and A24s are capable of being the cause," the report says.

They're the first reported cases of kiwi "bycatch" in an A24 trap.



A fractured kiwi bill. Photo: DOC

In an email released to *Newsroom*, DOC ranger Tracey Dearlove said the series of injuries coincided with A24s being shifted. The traps were set "within reach of rowi and baited with meat", she said. "I'm amazed we haven't had far worse injuries considering."

(Kaipupu Point Mainland Island Society chair Gerald Harper responds to the meat bait claim, saying the manufacturer's lure is used in all A24 traps.)

Another DOC ranger, Guinevere Coleman, said in an email it was not possible for her and fellow ranger Iain Graham to say for sure that A24s were to blame. "But Iain took one of our dead kiwi out of the freezer and put it into an A24, and the impact on the bill was very similar to the injuries seeing on the three juveniles."

DOC threats director Amber Bill – who was formally advised of the Kaipupu incident by the Kiwi Recovery Group on October 24 – is more equivocal than her staff. In an emailed statement to *Newsroom*, she says the evidence pointing to A24s is "not conclusive". But, she adds, the incident seems to involve traps being set higher than recommended.

"DOC technical and science experts are working with operational teams to better understand the risk of A24 traps to kiwi and whether any practices need to be changed. We are keeping Goodnature informed of this work."

(A previous *Newsroom* story, about DOC's haphazard kea management, touched on **concerns about kea interaction** with A24s, which led to the development of a parrot-excluder, as well as confirmed kills by A24s of kaka and weka.)

### **Volunteers act immediately**

Once the likely cause of Kaipupu's kiwi bill injuries was identified, the volunteers acted immediately. They raised the sanctuary's A24s – which can be triggered multiple times thanks to a gas canister – to 1m above ground. Just in case, some penguin box lids were screwed shut.

Kaipupu's Harper says in an emailed statement that his group is trying to ensure all possible causes of injuries are removed ahead of future rowi chicks arriving at the sanctuary. "The arrival of rowi kiwi chicks at the sanctuary was a highlight for many in the local community and was the result of many years' hard work by volunteers, members and supporters. They provide a unique opportunity for national and international visitors and we are extremely grateful to be part of Operation Nest Egg."

Asked about traps being set at the wrong height and angle, Harper confirms that during reconfiguration of the trap layout over winter A24s "were replaced at heights outside the recommended height of 12cm from the ground".

Kaipupu's last newsletter, in October, didn't mention the bill injuries. It said: "This month, the tough decision was made to remove the kiwi present on the sanctuary early due to the detection of a feral cat within the fence. To minimise the impact on Kaipupu's native wildlife the response was very rapid and led to the fast capture of the cat." It was hoped new kiwi chicks would arrive at the end of summer, the newsletter said.

**“Our understanding is that every time they’ve been used [correctly] in the kiwi zones, and where there are juvenile kiwi, there has been no harm done.” – Robbie van Dam**

The DOC report into the Kaipupu incident recommended a camera-monitoring trial be done on baited, unset A24s on Motuara Island. That's being carried out now. The department should also establish formal best practice guidelines for using A24s in kiwi habitat, the report said, and publicise them widely.

Some DOC staff, community groups and members of the public are “unaware of the risks these traps pose to kiwi”, the report said, because there are “no best practice guidelines” for using A24 (or A12) traps in kiwi habitat.

Goodnature director Robbie van Dam takes exception to that – and he makes a good point.

Its 23-page installation guide, and instructional video, state A24s should be placed 12cm above ground, and vertically, in areas without weka. Van Dam: “Our understanding is that every time they’ve been used [correctly] in the kiwi zones, and where there are juvenile kiwi, there has been no harm done.”

He points to a DOC field trial of A24s at Northland's Trounson Kauri Park as a sign of success. In the 2015/16 breeding season, 32 percent of kiwi chicks survived to reach a safe weight – which Van Dam says is a higher proportion than traditional traps. He says the dry summer meant there were more kiwi fatalities by starvation than stoat predation.

DOC threats boss Bill confirms the Kiwi Recovery Group will be reiterating Goodnature's advice on setting A24s to people and groups working with kiwi "in the next week or so". But it appears any formal DOC guidelines might be some time away. Bill: "The development of best practice for new pest control tools needs to be evidence-based and involves monitoring use over time and often field trials."

### **Wrong angle, wrong height**

Kevin Hackwell, chief conservation adviser to Forest & Bird, sits on the Kiwi Recovery Group. He confirms Kaipupu was discussed at the group's last meeting.

The Picton group did two things wrong, he says – setting A24s at the wrong angle and the wrong height.

"Everybody's concerned that this happened. The people in Picton did it with all the best intentions. They were thinking they were doing something useful and then they had this god-awful consequence which they were shocked to find out."

Hackwell says the recovery group thinks DOC should reinforce the need to follow recommended trap settings and standard practices with all community groups, not just those that deal with kiwi.

Community groups are doing an important job, he says. But it emerges often – and even within DOC sometimes – that traps are shifted beyond the recommended heights or non-standard bait is used. "Those changes have real consequences. So many community groups, and people, think they know better."

## **“Something terrible happened, let's get something out of it.” – Kevin Hackwell**

It's clear from DOC emails that the rowi injuries are sensitive.

One email to a DOC staffer, from the Dunedin Wildlife Hospital, says "I know you are keen to keep this issue under wraps". Another email notes a discussion with Van Dam about keeping the initial evidence-gathering about what happened "in-house".

*Newsroom's* previous story shows the rollout of A24s – about 9500 traps on public conservation land – has been **controversial in the department**, with some staff warning against their use, in kea habitat in particular.

Will Kaipupu get rowi back? The society, its members and volunteers are keen, of course. But DOC has to weigh the benefits to its rowi breeding programme and also public access to the birds at the sanctuary.

An email sent by Kiwi Recovery Group leader Jessica Scrimgeour, a DOC ecologist, says the department's local rowi team still sees some use for the Kaipupu creche, to take pressure off Motuara.

Bill, the DOC threats boss, doesn't rule it out: "Future releases depend on whether or not there is a need to creche chicks there next year."

Whatever Kaipupu's future, Forest & Bird's Hackwell is keen for others to learn from their mistakes – and for the Kiwi Recovery Group to front up and get the message out.

"The mistake was made – it wasn't made deliberately, it was made with the best intentions – but it became very obvious, very quickly, it was a mistake," he says. "Something terrible happened, let's get something out of it."

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