



Mokomoko Newsletter

Number 16
11th December 2019

Hello everyone

A lot has happened since we last communicated some time ago, but it takes time to achieve good things! If there's one thing we've learnt about community conservation, it's don't be in a hurry. Here's the latest news.

Lizard translocations

In December last year, we translocated 36 Otago skinks and 33 grand skinks into the Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary, collected from the western part of their range. The western populations are not protected from predators, so DOC salvaged skinks from the wild a few years ago and put them into captivity to breed and preserve their special genetic constitution. However, they bred poorly in captivity so most were translocated to our sanctuary. Three subsequent surveys by volunteers found good numbers of grand skinks (17) but only 3 Otago skinks. We worried the Otago skink translocation had failed, however, a survey a couple of weeks ago by experienced DOC staff and Carey Knox (Wildland Consultants) found 16 Otago skinks. Also, DOC and volunteers found another 4 grand skinks. This is a fantastic result and a tremendous relief.



Volunteer, Sam Turner, stalking lizards during the recent successful survey (Photo: Anna Yeoman)

It's normal to re-sight only a portion of released lizards as some individuals remain very elusive, some disperse widely, and some die (3 found dead so far), but these numbers are indicative of a successful first stage of re-establishing the skinks in the sanctuary. Also, quite a few animals were found in pairs which bodes well for seeing babies in the near future. We may start to see young this coming autumn.

See this video of the recent skink survey, put together by Anna Yeoman www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIXcLS-4lc



Aerial shot of the 14-ha Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary, including the small 0.3-ha fence in the foreground where pilot studies took place before lizards were translocated to the big fence (Photo: Bradley White)

In March last year, we translocated 86 jewelled geckos into the damp grassy gully of the sanctuary. Carey Knox and volunteers collected geckos from areas where they are widespread and abundant in the Lammermoor range. Carey has since been monitoring the translocated geckos inside the sanctuary. It's specialist work, and Carey has an amazing ability to find these beautiful animals. So far, Carey has found 36 geckos and 4 babies after only a handful of surveys. All females have been gravid with two embryos. Carey is delighted by this result and is confident the geckos will establish and thrive. Again, it is normal to re-sight only a portion of released animals, especially for jewelled geckos as they are very cryptic, but this rate of re-sighting is very encouraging.



A spectacular jewelled gecko released into the Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary last year (Photo: Carey Knox)

Overall, we are very pleased with progress. Lizards translocations are not always successful, but so far so good! We are hoping to translocate green skinks into the sanctuary next spring.

Grant Norbury and Carey will present the results of this work at the World Congress on Herpetology in Dunedin in January (www.wchnz.com/wch2020).

Mouse incursion

A few months ago, we had a second mouse incursion into the sanctuary. The first was in 2017 due to a suspected biosecurity breach. The second incursion may have been through a 1-cm gap found under the frame of one of the flood swing gates, perhaps due to slumping of the concrete base. We have since plugged the gap and eradicated the mice. All sanctuaries leak mice so it's a matter of constant surveillance and dealing to them when they breach.

Students and teacher fellow

We are lucky to have attracted some talented people lately.

Anna Yeoman, a Masters of Science Communication student, is overhauling the COET website and creating a wonderful resource for schools and the general public on lizards and wider dryland biodiversity and conservation. Anna is also creating videos about the trust's work, a magazine article, and an article in the weekend ODT which will be published on December 21st. The new website will be live on that date, but you can check Anna's progress now at www.mokomokosanctuary.com.



Anna Yeoman

Sam Turner, a Masters of Wildlife Management student, is monitoring common lizard species (McCann's skink, grass skink and schist gecko) that occur naturally inside and outside the sanctuary. Sam is trying to understand whether these species benefit from removal of predators. This is not a given if the modified habitat is unable to support higher densities than already occur now.



Sam Turner

Alistair Banks, a teacher from Clyde Primary School, will begin a teacher fellowship with COET in February, sponsored by the NZ Royal Society. Alistair will undertake lizard monitoring and develop science skills and knowledge that he will take back to the classroom.



Alistair Banks

Award

COET recently received an award from DOC during conservation week for 'game changing' conservation work. We are very proud to receive this award on behalf of funders and volunteers.

Thank you again to our sponsors and volunteers who give their time to conservation. We are forever grateful.

Trustees of the Central Otago Ecological Trust