

Science was Twisted into Advocacy in the FNDC Dog Control Policy Advice

Regrettably, the FNDC proposed Dog Control Policy is being promoted on the basis of misrepresentations of the facts and the science. The following commentary exposes them.

Text in italics is the proposal as presented to the Community Board for approval on 14 August 2017.

2) Discussion and options *The Bay of Islands and Whangaroa Community Board has to choose if it intends to protect its native bird population from dogs.*

This is a false dichotomy. No. The Community Board may have to choose HOW to protect our native bird population, only

- a. **if the Council is empowered to pass by-laws for the protection of wildlife. This purpose is not specified in Sections 145 and 146 of the Local Government Act and therefore may likely be deemed an improper purpose, and**
- b. **if there really is a problem in the Board's area justifying and requiring the severity of the proposed actions.**

The motive of the policy draft is revealed in this first sentence.

There are two vulnerable groups: shore birds and flightless birds. At present, brown kiwi are in decline and the population is rising in the urban areas, together with an increase in visitor numbers. The Department of Conservation website states that: "Northland brown kiwi once lived all over Northland. By the 1980s kiwi were locally extinct in many areas. This was largely caused by predation from introduced mammals... The brown kiwi is one of our most common kiwi species; however, the population is steadily declining by about 2–3% a year. Without ongoing support, experts estimate brown kiwi will be extinct in the wild within two generations."

Wrong. According to DOC, the Northland population is increasing under present management: Northland is considered to be a stronghold for brown kiwi, as it contains around 32% of the total New Zealand population. If current management effort is maintained, this population is expected to climb from 8000 birds in 2008 to 8500 birds by 2018. This estimate is based on a 3% annual decline for unmanaged populations and an annual increase of 9% in managed locations (Hugh Robertson, unpubl. data in Holzapfel et al. 2008).¹

Research studies show that: "Dogs known to have killed kiwi in Northland include farm dogs, hunting dogs, and family pets including Rottweilers, Labradors, fox terriers, and a poodle (Pierce, R.J. and Sporle, W. 1997, Causes of kiwi mortality in Northland. Wellington: Department of Conservation). "In Northland, it has been shown that the average lifespan of an adult brown kiwi is only 13–14 years rather than the 30–40 years in all other brown kiwi populations due mainly to predation by dogs,"

That claim is based on one study in the Whangarei area in which 22 kiwi were reportedly killed by dogs over a period of 15 years. No evidence was given as to how these were clustered in time or

Science was Twisted into Advocacy in the FNDC Dog Control Policy Advice

place. Extrapolating and generalising this to the whole of Northland without due caution is indefensible.

and, “for some populations (e.g. in Northland), dogs have surpassed mustelids as the main agent of decline.” (DOC, Draft Kiwi Recovery Plan 2017-27).

The claim implies that some 250 kiwi are killed by dogs in Northland every year. There is no evidence of anything approaching that number. On the Russell peninsula there have been only 3 reported dog kills in the last 17 years according to Laurence Gordon who pioneered the Russell Peninsular Kiwi project in 2001². Far more have been killed on the roads.

Council submitted in support of the Plan and requested engagement with DOC at a national level. DOC have responded agreement that local regulation may play a larger role in protecting wildlife and discussions with government agencies, including Document number A1888474 Page 7 of 10 the Department of Internal affairs and DOC have taken place to better align policy responses at a national, regional and local level. Call count monitoring of northland brown kiwi 2016 by DOC states: “The 2016 results from the Eastern Area were excellent, with an all-time high mean kiwi call rate.”

Contradicting the claims that kiwi are in decline and there is a need for more stringent dog control, the only reliable data set of kiwi call counts shows no decline anywhere in Northland for the past decade and increasing numbers for the past two decades in the Bay of Islands and Eastern area³:

On the Russell Peninsula:

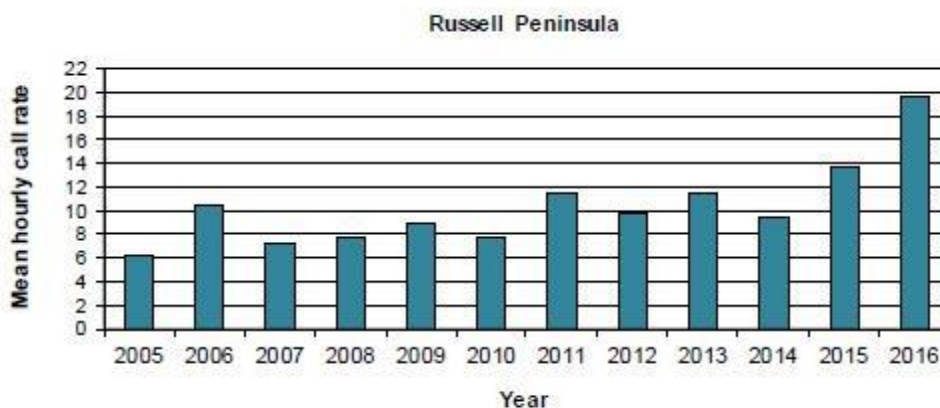


Figure 6. Trends in mean kiwi call rates at Russell Peninsula management site.

And in the whole of Northland, including the Eastern area which covers the Bay of Islands/Whangaroa area:

Northland monitoring trends since 1995

Trends in call count data collected since 1995 at the 24 original listening stations (see Table 1) in the Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western survey areas are graphed for comparison in Fig. 2 and the summary data are presented in Appendix 1.

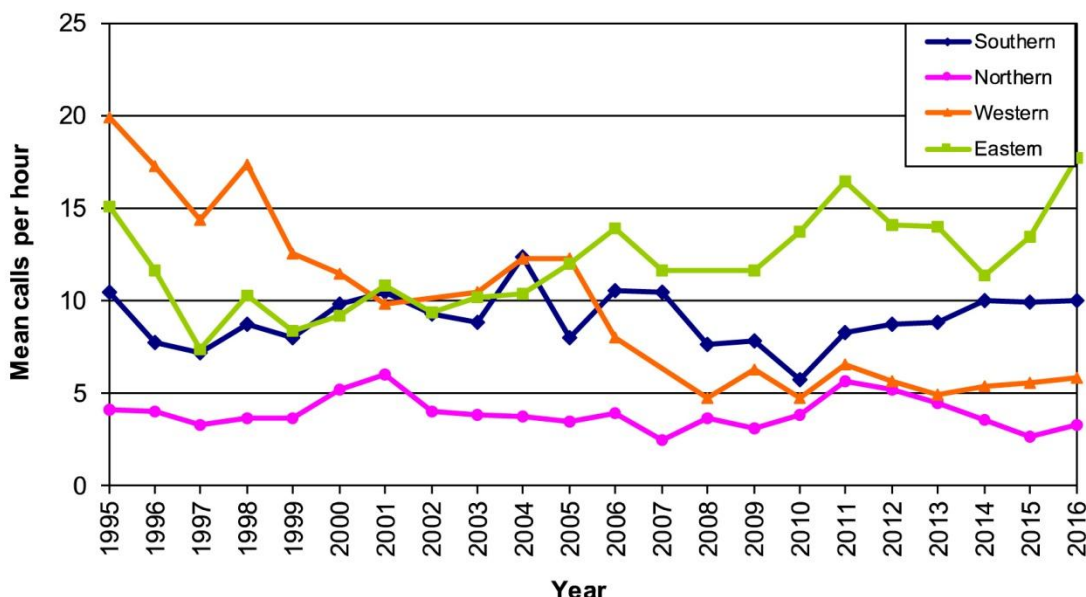


Figure 2. Mean hourly kiwi call rates for each of the original four Northland monitoring areas 1995–2016. The means for the Northern and Eastern clusters were estimated with one station each using 2015 data (Kaiaka and Puketotara), the Western cluster used 2014 data for Kaitui and Paerata, and the Southern cluster had one station missing (Glenbervie 7A, which had not been listened from since 2013), used 2015 data for one station (Glenbervie 9A), and had one hour of data missing for one station (Rarewarewa South).

The issue arises that as kiwis expand in numbers they will be more prevalent in areas currently frequented by dogs. A particular effort has been made by volunteers in Russell resulting in an encouraging trend as per the table below: Note that kiwi avoidance training is at best only partially effective and depends upon all dog owners in an area being responsible, which operational experience suggests is not the case at present. It is a method best applied for hunting or working dogs (see Kiwis for Kiwis for more information).

Kiwi are territorial and have a maximum density of about 1 pair per 2 hectares. There is no evidence that there is a dog predation problem in the Russell area, nor that one is likely to arise.

Brown kiwi are an indicator species.

That implies other vulnerable species are also doing very well in Russell and the Bay of Islands.

Other protected wildlife predated upon by dogs in the Community Board area include the following:

- *Brown teal - pateke (Anas chlorotis, conservation status: recovering) are the rarest of the mainland water fowl, and are found at Indico Bay, northwest Urupukapuka Island, and in many estuarine wetland areas around the eastern Bay of Islands. Dogs are known predators of brown teal.*

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Dogs are not permitted on Urupukapuka Island/Indico Bay. There are no reported studies of dog predation levels of brown teal and dogs appear to be a minor factor both in predation and population decline. With better control of other predators and habitat brown teal status is now rated as recovering.⁵

Unfortunately most of our estuarine wetlands have been converted to the mangrove mudflats that DoC has championed despite their obvious status as an invasive weed destructive of both productive wildlife habitat and biodiversity. Tackling that problem would be helpful.

- *Dotterel (Charadrius obscurus, conservation status: nationally vulnerable) nest just above high tide mark around many beaches. Nests are easily trampled by dogs. Both adults and chicks cannot feed on the water's edge when disturbed and chicks are left unattended when their parents are forced away by dogs. Eggs may not be at a life-sustaining temperature if left unattended due to disturbance.*

Bay of Island beaches have long been trampled by residents and visitors far more than by dogs. Dotterel breed for only a month or so and the sensible approach is to restrict both human and dog access to those areas in use for the period required on a case by case basis. If the Council wants to be effective it will enlist the help of dog owners to identify and protect those times and places on their beaches rather than take an adversarial approach.

Dotterels often cluster with Variable Oystercatchers (Haematopus unicolor: conservation status recovering) which are also vulnerable to dogs. • *Little blue penguin (Eudyptes minor, conservation status: declining) may breed as isolated pairs or in colonies, close to the sea in natural burrows and in/under a variety of man-made structures. Penguins are under threat of predation when dogs that are not under control wander away from beaches into the coastal landscape where penguins are resting in dens or nesting.*

There are numerous inaccessible spots on our shoreline for oystercatchers and penguins to frequent. Again, those popular beaches where people congregate are unlikely to be preferred habitat. They do not nest in the sand like dotterel. Unless nesting, blue penguin are normally at sea during the day when people and their dogs are using the beaches. Again sensible time and place protections are much more sensible and effective than blanket bans.

- *North Island weka (Gallirallus australis grey, conservation status: endangered) are ground dwelling, flightless birds which are known to be charismatic and attracted to human activity. Since 2000, weka have been released near Russell, in the Whirinaki Forest. Document number A1888474*

Page 8 of 10

Weka are essentially feathered rats and the population has exploded in Russell township and self-evidently is not at risk from dogs, though it may be from irate gardeners. Anyone under the misapprehension they are endangered and need protection doesn't live here.

Science was Twisted into Advocacy in the FNDC Dog Control Policy Advice

• *Banded rail (Gallirallus phillippensis assimilis conservation status: at risk, naturally uncommon) is a largely terrestrial bird. They have been recorded in a wide variety of inland and coastal wetland areas, particularly in mangrove stands.*

Irrelevant to dog control. No evidence dogs are a significant predation threat to them other than when duck shooting⁴.

The national situation is summarised in a May 2017 report by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Taonga of an island nation: Saving New Zealand's birds: "This report looks at the desperate state of New Zealand's native birds, the challenges they face, and what it might take to restore them in large numbers back on to the mainland. New Zealand is home to 168 species of native bird, and many of these are found in no other country – they are endemic to New Zealand. Four out of every five are in trouble – and some sit on the brink of extinction. This investigation is focused on a vision – a vision of restoring abundant, resilient, and diverse native birdlife on the mainland. Realising this vision will require using the knowledge, ingenuity, and passion of many New Zealanders."

Emotive posturing irrelevant to actual risk and dog control issues. Other factors than dogs are causing these problems. Dog control must be directed at real issues, not irrelevant ones.

On the Russell peninsula, there is a high presence of reintroduced and protected wildlife at significant risk from dogs and no suitable beaches for dogs to exercise due to the proximity and presence of kiwi, little blue penguins and other birds.

Dogs have been exercising on Russell beaches for generations with no indication of any significant impact on wildlife as the high levels of survival of that wildlife relative to other areas demonstrates.

Russell dog owners and their family pets should not be punished for their excellent record of preserving the wildlife they love so well. Rather than be destroyed by oppressive regulation their goodwill should be harnessed in a cooperative way. The proposed bylaw would be destructive for community relations and the conservation cause it purports to promote. The justification presented for it fails to present the scientific facts fairly and objectively.

29th August 2017

Alan Wilkinson, PhD, BSc(Hons)

References:

- 1 Taxon plan for Northland brown kiwi; Strategic plan for Northland brown kiwi, 2010–2019 and beyond, Emma Craig, Clea Gardiner, Nicky Renwick and Wendy Sporle. Department of Conservation, Whangarei, 2011
- 2 Personal communication. See also: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/local-news/northland/bay-chronicle/9891298/Pioneering-effort-for-kiwi>

- 3 Call count monitoring of Northland brown kiwi 2016, Emma Craig and Megan Topia. April 2017 New Zealand Department of Conservation
- 4 Impacts of introduced mammalian predators on indigenous birds of freshwater wetlands in New Zealand, Colin F. J. O'Donnell, B. Kay Clapperton and Joanne M. Monks. New Zealand Journal of Ecology (2015) 39(1): 19-33
- 5 Pateke Survival Guide, Department of Conservation, Whangarei, 2011