Report on Warrenheip translocations

The first translocation to Warrenheip (a privately owned 16 ha predator fenced regenerating forest habitat with a stream flowing through it) was that of Mahoenui Giant Weta in 2000 and was extremely easy to organise. Firstly at that stage the Mahoenui Giant weta was not yet in the category of protected wildlife and in spite of several earlier attempts to establish this species in apparently suitable habitat, no liberations had yet been confirmed as successful. So, it didn't take much convincing the local DOC office in Te Kuiti that establishing a population in a pest free predator fenced habitat would be a good idea. Three collecting expeditions were organised using mainly volunteers and over 200 weta were released at various sites around Warrenheip. Ecology students monitored several individuals using miniature transmitters and this work confirmed that most of the weta didn't travel far from their release sites. Within three years the weta's offspring were being found on native plants rather than the gorse habitat that their parents had inhabited.
The capture release was done largely by word of mouth without even the issuing of permits.
Of course this translocation preceded the development of the S.O.P. (standard operating procedure) for translocations.

The second translocation was of captive bread grown teal and again was a pleasant hassle-free experience for the owners of Warrenheip. This translocation I understand also had the distinction of being the first translocation that tested the new S.O.P. However, because it was a test of the new system and because DOC needed to gain information from having someone closely follow a release of Brown Teal into a "pest free area" as a test for later releases at Moehau and elsewhere, Shaun O'Connor (DOC) was good enough to prepare and have the proposal processed. The task of the owners of Warrenheip was simply to provide the pest free habitat and to undertake regular monitoring.
As with the Giant weta, a breeding population of teal established and a small (due to habitat size) population still survives after four years.

Next came the kiwi. In this case we made it known to the Kiwi recovery group that we had a potentially suitable habitat for raising operation nest egg kiwi. It wasn't long before the Kiwi recovery group was beating a path to Wallace's door, organising for the transfer of 1-3 week old chicks (hatched at Rainbow springs) into Warrenheip for later release back into Tongariro forest. 60 Chicks (survival rate 90%) have now been processed through Warrenheip to be released as healthy stoat proof sub adults. Once again because it was in DOC's interest to have the operation get underway before the next crop of kiwi eggs hatched, the translocation proposal was prepared and processed by DOC in double quick time.

We then submitted three further translocation applications for saddleback, robin, tuatara and takahe, but (we suspect) because the first three species didn't urgently need to have their conservation status improved and Warrenheip didn't meet the habitat size criteria (Warrenheip was not large enough to hold more than a couple of pairs), the reaction from DOC was less than enthusiastic.

The new DOC person (now no longer present) responsible for permit processing appeared overly officious and suddenly (after three endangered species had already

been released with no word of a need for protection status over the land) DOC was suggesting that we would need to establish a covenant to protect the habitat in the medium-long term, prior to any further releases.
So for the last two years, the owners of Warrenheip and myself have been going through the process of establishing a management plan and conservation covenant.

Our question is: is there any practical extra short-medium benefit afforded to populations of vulnerable native species by putting protective status over the land, when it is the good will and preparedness of the land owners to spend money to establish and maintain the pest free status of the habitat that is vital to the welfare of the translocated species.

Legal protection of the land will not ensure that the fence is adequately maintained and that pests won't kill the birds inside the fence.

While the owners of the restored habitat will almost certainly want to organise their affairs in order to ensure that their beloved property will be managed in a similar fashion once they pass on and the organisation of their affairs may well include a management plan (as a recipe for those taking over) and the establishment of some sort of protective status over the land, but this shouldn't have to be done prior to starting any translocations. The important thing is that the habitat has been restored to a suitable standard (either fenced and predators eradicated, or not fenced but effective predator control established and maintained).

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