Creating an island sanctuary: a case study of a community-led conservation initiative

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Abstract The Pomona Island Charitable Trust is a community-led initiative with the vision of restoring Pomona Island to a pest-free state and maintaining it as an island sanctuary. The Trust aims to provide an accessible location for locals and visitors to see, hear and learn about the flora and fauna native to Fiordland. Since the Trust was formed in 2005, over 190 different volunteers have put in over 4700 hours of work on the island to remove five pest species: stoats, deer, possums, rats and mice. Over $165,000 of direct funding has been raised, largely from within the local Fiordland Community, as well as a further $130,000 of in-kind donations contributing to the work of the Trust. With all animal pests now removed from Pomona Island, volunteers have re-introduced South Island robins as the first of many planned translocations. Department of Conservation staff have described the Trust’s achievements as “a model for community driven conservation”. This paper presents a case study of the Pomona Island Charitable Trust. It focuses on the managerial initiatives undertaken to plan for the restoration of Pomona Island, the ways in which the Trust has worked with key stakeholders including the local community and the Department of Conservation, strategies for successful fund-raising, and maintaining momentum in a long-term community-led conservation project. Based on the experiences of the Trust, a model for successful community-led conservation projects is presented.

Keywords: Community conservation, island eradication, pest eradication, Fiordland

INTRODUCTION

Pomona Island (262 ha), within the Fiordland National Park, (Southwest New Zealand World Heritage Area) is the largest island in Lake Manapouri and is the largest inland island in New Zealand. Rising 340m above the lake, Pomona Island is a round-topped granite hill with steep sides, 500m from the mainland. Vegetation on the island is predominantly mixed beech-kamahi (Weinmannia racemosa) with rata (Metrosideros umbellata) and podocarp forest. Five pest species were present on Pomona Island: stoats (Mustela erminea), possums (Trichosurus vulpecula), red deer (Cervus elaphus), ship rats (Rattus rattus) and mice (Mus musculus). These have had a major impact on the island’s biodiversity and in particular its native birds. This paper outlines how a community-led project eradicated all introduced mammal pest species from the island.

In 1956, plans to raise Lake Manapouri by up to 30 metres for the generation of hydro-electricity were thwarted by environmental protests. Saving Manapouri has been described as New Zealand’s first great conservation success story (Peat 1994). This paper outlines how the Pomona Island Charitable Trust is restoring the largest island in the lake to its natural state for the enjoyment of future generations.

In 2003, two local business people approached the Department of Conservation (DOC) about creating an island sanctuary on Pomona Island in Lake Manapouri and in 2005 the idea was adopted by some residents from the Manapouri township. Rough plans for eradicating stoats, deer and possums from the island were presented to DOC and these indicated the need for more formal eradication plans for each pest species. Following discussions between DOC and a few key local people, a charitable trust was considered to be the most effective means to manage the restoration of the island.

The Pomona Island Charitable Trust was incorporated in 2005 under the Charitable Trusts Act 1957. The Trust initially included seven founding Trustees and a DOC Advisory Trustee. Emeritus Professor Alan Mark, a world-renowned botanist, agreed to be the Trust’s Patron. Since the Trust’s inception, the number of Trustees has increased to nine. Each Trustee brings their own set of skills and experiences to the project and all are passionate about Fiordland. The Trust has three main Office holders: a Chair who is a farmer, with a good knowledge of local flora and fauna, a Treasurer who is a local business man and a Secretary with a marketing background. The other Trustees include an engineer, nature guides, helicopter pilot, tourism operator and local Maori. The Trust meets at least four times a year with regular email communication between meetings.

In 2006, a management agreement for ten years, with a right of renewal for ten years, formalised the relationship between the Trust and DOC. This agreement gives the Trust the autonomy to carry out a wide range of activities including research, pest eradication, species translocations, monitoring, advocacy and education.

The following factors have led to the success of this community-led conservation project (Fig. 1).

LONG-TERM PLANNING

Initial activities for the Trust included developing its vision and objectives, clearly defining its aims and developing plans to implement them. The vision of the Pomona Island Charitable Trust is: to restore Pomona Island to a pest-free state and maintain it as an island sanctuary.
As the project has progressed, the Trust has more clearly defined its local community target market with specific communications strategies developed for boat owners encouraging them to help the Trust keep Pomona Island pest-free.

Promotional messages consistent with the Trust’s objectives have been: promoting the restoration of Pomona as being a project of which the local community can be proud; the creation of an island sanctuary where locals and visitors can see, hear and learn about the flora and fauna native to Fiordland.

**Pest Management Plan:** The management agreement between the Trust and DOC required the preparation of a professional pest management plan with eradication methods, costs and timescales for each species (Brown 2006). The plan was peer reviewed by the Department of Conservation’s Island Eradication Advisory Group. A key component of the pest management plan was the involvement of volunteers at every stage of the restoration project. The work detailed in this plan has been completed (Shaw and Torr 2011)

**Social Impact Assessment:** Prior to eradicating the pests from Pomona Island, the Trust decided that it would be beneficial to conduct a social impact assessment (SIA) (Shaw 2006). Most conservation projects are likely to have potential positive and negative effects (Cosslett et al 2004) and the aim of the SIA for the Pomona Island Charitable Trust was to identify and analyse the effects of the island restoration project on different groups and individuals in the local community. As Cosslett et al (2004) point out “failing to demonstrate the benefits of conservation initiatives to local communities may mean your work is less likely to be supported and may even be actively opposed by local people”.

Benefits of a SIA for the Trust included: 1) promotion of community involvement in, and ownership of the project; 2) maximisation of positive outcomes; 3) the ability of the Trust to build on local knowledge and engage interested parties in the restoration of the island. As Taylor and Buckenham (2003) note, a project that invites participation from interested parties is likely to have a higher level of support and thus success. Consultation and partnership are seen as being important in pest eradication activities. ‘Engaging in consultation, and being seen to engage’ (Fraser 2006), can help local communities feel more involved in a project. The results from the social impact assessment fed directly into the operational plans for the eradication of each pest species from Pomona Island as well as into the Trust’s communications plan.

Table 1 Key stakeholders and communications strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Communications Strategies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local community</td>
<td>Local Media – Fiordland Focus, Fiordland Advocate, Southland Times, Otago Daily Times; Presentations to local groups; website; newsletter; Trust brochure; quarantine brochure; Art in the Park events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Conservation</td>
<td>Meeting minutes; regular reports; face-to-face meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Press releases; newsletter; invitations to key events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Groups</td>
<td>Media – Forest &amp; Bird newsletter, reports; website; newsletter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local iwi</td>
<td>Meeting minutes; reports; face-to-face meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsors</td>
<td>Newsletter; website; reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitors to Fiordland</td>
<td>Fiordland Focus; Trust brochure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism Operators</td>
<td>Trust brochure; website; newsletter; local media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers</td>
<td>Face-to-face meetings; website; reports</td>
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Quarantine Plan: Pomona Island is classified in the Fiordland National Park Management Plan as an “Open Sanctuary” Island which means that it is accessible to the public at all times. The preparation of a quarantine plan, following on from the eradication of all pest species, was essential if the Trust wanted to maintain the island as a pest-free sanctuary. The plan, prepared by a volunteer, aimed to minimise the risk of re-invasion of the five pest species that were originally present on the island and to prevent populations of the pest species from becoming established by catching every invading individual within a short time of their arrival (Willans 2007). Education is a key component of the quarantine plan. The Trust has worked hard with the local community, especially boat clubs, water taxi operators and individual boat owners to encourage them to make the necessary quarantine checks before they visit the island. Prominent signs are in place at key landing sites to remind boat owners of their responsibilities in helping the Trust maintain the island free of pests.

Restoration and Monitoring Plans: the restoration plan provides an overview of the pest eradication and a discussion of the species that the Trust would like to reintroduce to the island over the next five years (Shaw and Whitehead 2008). These include South Island robin (Petroica australis), mohua (Mohouoa australis), saddleback (Philesturnus carunculatus) and kiwi (Apteryx australis).

For each planned species translocation, volunteers prepare a formal translocation proposal and liaise with DOC staff. In order to assess the changes in flora and fauna on the island the Trust has put together a monitoring plan. This includes regular monitoring of vegetation plots and formal five-minute bird counts five times a year.

COMMITMENT AND PASSION

The Pomona Island Charitable Trust’s success is due to the commitment and passion within the local community. Support from key sectors of the community ranged from the Mayor of Southland to the individual volunteers who put in the hard work on the island.

Three highly committed Trustees have shouldered the administration of the Trust and have also completed plans, implemented the eradication of pest species from Pomona Island and begun the re-introduction of bird species native to Fiordland. In addition, these same individuals have built relationships with key individuals, organisations and the wider community. Project management for these activities has been mostly provided by the Secretary of the Trust on a voluntary basis with an estimated cost saving to the Trust of NZ$70,000.

The Trust maintains an email list of potential volunteers who are informed of volunteer work days (working bees). Since the first track was flagged on the island in April 2006, 193 volunteers have devoted nearly 4700 person-hours of work on the island. In the small communities of Manapouri and Te Anau approximately 10% of the local population has attended a working bee on the island. Many more companies and individuals have provided the Trust with financial support.

RELATIONSHIPS

Because Pomona Island is within the Fiordland National Park, the most important partnerships is with the management agency, DOC. The Trust and local community have been encouraged by DOC to take ownership of the project. Staff at DOC have provided technical advice and support, loaned equipment, provided financial assistance and acted as advocates for the Trust’s work within the local community and at local and national levels within DOC. Information is regularly shared between the Trust and DOC. The Trust has also worked with DOC staff to offer educational activities on Pomona Island though DOC’s summer programme. The annual “Art in the Park” event is organised by DOC with the Trust providing evening presentations and a nature guide on the island.

DOC is represented at Trust meetings by an Advisory Trustee and Trust members are able to directly approach DOC staff. This means that advice can be obtained in a timely fashion and quickly implemented.

A second key relationship is with Tangata Whenua (Maori or iwi). Iwi have a representative on the Trust and are kept informed of progress by email, newsletters and informal discussions. Presentations are given to local iwi representatives on the Trust’s restoration plans and they are consulted fully on the translocation of native species to the island.

Through its Patron, the Trust has also developed working relationships with the University of Otago. Students from the university conducted baseline research on the island prior to pest eradication and the Trust has participated in research projects and seeks technical advice from scientific experts at the university.

The Trust has encouraged its financial supporters to involve themselves in work on Pomona Island. For example, Meridian Energy, a power company, has been a major sponsor of the Trust through its Manapouri Te Anau Community Fund. By funding a “Friends of Pomona” scheme, the company has enabled the Trust to develop a fundraising strategy to ensure its on-going viability. Meridian staff have worked alongside volunteers on Pomona Island to check stoat traps and the company has also agreed to fund the transfer of mohua to Pomona Island in 2011.

The Trust has also developed a partnership with the Southland Trailer Yacht Squadron which has “adopted” the mainland trap line adjacent to Pomona. Squadron members, led by one keen individual, check the stoat traps every month, provide all the bait and sail themselves to the trap line thus reducing the Trust’s transport costs. Good on-going relationships with commercial water taxi operators on Lake Manapouri enable the Trust to carry out its work on the island.

The Trust is very aware of the relationships it has with its funders and seeks, where appropriate, to keep all financial supporters fully informed of its activities. This is done through regular newsletters, the Trust’s annual report and personalised emails and reports to individual funders keeping them informed about the parts of the project that they have specifically funded.

The Trust strongly emphasises community involvement. Prior to the eradication of pests from Pomona Island, views were sought from all sectors of the community about the whole project (Shaw 2006). Support came from the local council, community boards, local businesses and conservation groups. Some supporters unable or unwilling to undertake physical work on the island still show their support through the Trust’s “Friends of Pomona” scheme.

COMMUNICATIONS AND FUNDING

The restoration of Pomona Island has received very good publicity with regular articles in local and regional media, extending occasionally to national media. Not all
publicity, however, has been positive with the publication of a negative article relating to the Trust’s planned aerial poison operation to eradicate rodents.

The website is a key means of communication for the Trust, with regular updates provided through the Trust’s regular newsletter, Pomona Post. The website which receives a good level of visits is maintained and updated on a voluntary basis.

Funding for the work of the Trust has come from NZ Lottery, Transpower, Community Trust of Southland, Meridian Energy, DOC, several family trusts, two anonymous benefactors and the many Friends of Pomona. Members of the Trust are convinced that funding applications have been successful because of the charitable status of the Trust, the effort that has gone into planning the Trust’s activities, the Trust’s clear vision and goals, good communications and the commitment of Trustees and the local community to the restoration project.

CONCLUSIONS

The success of the Pomona Island restoration project reinforces the importance of organisation, planning, commitment, partnerships and communications. Initially, without these factors in place there was frustration at the perceived lack of progress. Once individuals were identified who had the commitment to plan and push the restoration of the island forward, progress was made. Without detailed plans at every stage, it would have taken much longer to eradicate the pests and start the re-introduction of native species. These began in 2009 with the release of 51 South Island robins (*Petroica australis*).

The partnership between the Trust and DOC has contributed significantly to the restoration of Pomona Island. DOC staff have described the Trust’s achievements as “a model for community driven conservation”. Such an accolade acts as a major motivator for the Trust to continue with its work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Pomona Island Charitable Trust would like to acknowledge the efforts of all volunteers who have worked so hard on Pomona Island. We are grateful to the Department of Conservation for their trust and support. We would also like to thank the following organisations and individuals for their financial contributions and in-kind donations: two anonymous benefactors, Meridian Energy, Community Trust of Southland, NZ Lottery, Transpower, Leslie Hutchins Conservation Foundation, Gary Chisholm Family Trust, Adventure Kayak and Cruise, Topajka Shaw Consulting, our many ‘Friends of Pomona’ and local family trusts.

REFERENCES


