

RISING — to the — CHALLENGE

Stories from the Covid-19 crisis



Lockdown has meant these ZIP field rangers have gone from social isolation to socialisation. Left from top to bottom: Michael Tunnicliff, Pepper the possum detection dog, Chad Cottle, Piper Douglas, Alex Edwards and Lorena Cárdenas.

ZERO INVASIVE PREDATORS: SOCIAL ISOLATORS ADAPTING TO SOCIALISATION IN LOCKDOWN

Some of New Zealand's most experienced social isolators have ironically had their lives turned upside down by the Covid-19 crisis – switching from a life alone to living in communal bubbles on the West Coast of the South Island.

Field rangers from the NEXT supported environmental initiative Zero Invasive Predators are used to spending up to ten days at a time alone in huts in remote country in the Perth Valley where the team is conducting New Zealand's first unfenced mainland predator eradication programme. Social distancing has been a big part of their life for the last few years as they spend their time alone checking traps and monitoring for reinvasion of possums, rats and stoats.

But the level four lockdown effectively stopped all biosecurity and conservation work on the mainland – and the team of eight are now holed up in two separate bubbles of five and three in Hokitika.

“For these field rangers a lot of socialisation is not the norm, so lockdown is a unique novel experience for them. Some are loving it and some can't wait to get back to the hills,” says ZIP Chief Executive Al Bramley.

“They are all incredibly fit but it is a special type of fitness. They are used to training in remote, rough terrain, on very hard ground. They have been very active and suddenly they can't be. It's the sort of fitness that develops smaller muscles, and that can't be maintained with a run around the neighbourhood. Right now, they are learning how to sit on a couch!”

Al Bramley says ZIP is supportive of the lockdown measures and its focus is on the health and safety of its team and the people of New Zealand. It does however, present challenges because the Perth Valley eradication project relies on vigilance, which cannot currently be achieved remotely.

“Our site is a lot more vulnerable to reinvasion than an offshore island, or a fenced sanctuary, so this is something we constantly need to manage,” he says.

“We are currently developing a thermal camera with on-board artificial intelligence (A.I.) and remote reporting capability that will tell us in real time, if a predator has invaded a back-country site under protection so that we can respond quickly.

“For now, though, we are reliant on a network of lured trail cameras to alert us to any invading possums, rats or stoats. These cameras are highly sensitive, but they need to be manually checked and serviced by our field team, who then need to review the footage to determine which species are present.”

One of the pluses of the lockdown is that it has given ZIP the opportunity to form a small task force of its innovators to focus on one of the bigger challenges for mainland eradication – how to get rid of the last remaining rats.

“We have pulled together a task force of five people to focus solely on this problem, which is difficult to crack. They meet daily and when innovators have time like we do in lockdown to focus on just one issue the creative thinking that comes out is gold. It's a real bonus and we are looking forward to putting some of the ideas into practice.”

ZIP Board chair and NEXT environmental advisor Devon McLean says all of NEXT's predator free projects have had to press pause on their trapping programmes in the Covid-19 Level 4 lockdown but through crisis comes resilience and innovation.

“To achieve the goal of a Predator Free New Zealand by 2050 is an enormous challenge in itself. Whilst we were not expecting a pandemic to disrupt progress, it's encouraging to see how projects are adapting to make the most of the circumstances.”

In the meantime the ZIP team is working with the Department of Conservation about how it can best protect its people and manage any public health risk associated with returning to the Perth Valley.

“We are obviously keen to get back into the field and are mindful of losing the biodiversity gains we have worked so hard to achieve. But we are also optimistic,” says Al.

“We know there is at least one rat still remaining in the Perth Valley field area and that is one rat too many. If we are able to develop a plan to locate and remove that rat – with a strategy that can be applied to future eradication projects, then that would be a lockdown success!”

Zero Invasive Predators is funded by NEXT, the Department of Conservation, Jasmine Social Investments and Predator Free 2050.



The Covid-19 lockdown has given the ZIP team time to work on new innovative predator control - and some other creativity [like this 10 second video](#) produced by Chief Executive Al Bramley to wish his team a happy Easter.