

Regular walkers in the forest above Eastbourne will have noticed that some of the largest trees had metal bands fastened around their trunks. You may wonder why they were put there and why have they suddenly disappeared?

It all began back in 1992. At that time there was a government-subsidised youth development programme called Conservation Corps (it ran from 1988 until 2012), which used conservation, education and recreation activities to assist young people to find employment and obtain further education and training. The conservation activities involved small teams of young people, with two supervisors, taking on projects that lasted for about six months.

Chris Ferkins was involved in searching out conservation project opportunities in the Wellington Region and was invited to look at the big Rata trees in our park, where there were many dead treetops (called 'stags heads') and some completely dead trees, due to heavy browsing by possums. Since the Conservation Corps projects were only partly funded by government, a sponsor was needed. Fortunately, Greater Wellington was already involved with the Corps to pursue environmental goals, so a project plan was developed.

Thanks to the efforts of Chris and others in putting forward a robust proposal, as well as the Greater Wellington support, the Rata tree banding project got the go-ahead (only about half of proposed projects got funded). It kicked off in February 1992 with a team of 15 young people (plus Chris and one other as supervisors) gathering in Days Bay armed with hammers, nails, tape measures, lengths of rubber and strips of aluminium. They proceeded to climb up the hills above Days Bay and York Bay, locating large Rata trees and placing possum-proof bands of aluminium around the trees. The bands were held off each tree by rubber stoppers threaded on the nails, designed to create space to allow lizards and insects to climb the tree and give the tree space to grow. This proved to be effective—after 26 years, very few of the bands were tight on the trunks and no trunks were significantly deformed.

The project was completed in June, with the Corps members giving presentations to an audience comprising the Ministers of Youth Affairs and Conservation and the Chairman of Greater Wellington, but more daunting still, the Corps members' friends and family. In their presentations, the Corps members explained their project and what they learnt along the way—of which they could rightly feel very proud (having become involved with the Corps to pursue environmental goals, Greater Wellington reportedly stayed on because of the amazing effect they saw on the young participants).

So why is it that, 26 years later, the bands on the Rata trees are coming down? Well at that time, reducing the possum population to a consistently low level was regarded as unrealistic, given that there were (literally) thousands of possums living in the Northern Forest, so bands were the best immediate solution. However, through the use of aerial 1080 drops to achieve the initial knock-down, followed by the establishment of an extensive trap network in 2004 by Greater Wellington, serviced regularly by MIRO and other volunteers, possum numbers are now kept at a very low level. In addition, removing the possums has seen a rapid recovery of the tree canopy, so the bands are no longer effective, as possums could climb a neighbouring tree to get at the tasty Rata. For these reasons, as well as the fact that the bands detract from the natural beauty of the forest, it was decided to remove them.

Removing the bands turned out to be surprisingly easy compared to putting them up. Three volunteers, working under the guidance of Alan Bagnall (who could still remember roughly where most bands were), were able to remove over 60 bands in five days. Only one tree required the use

of a small ladder and, all up, 63kg of aluminium was taken to the recyclers, with the resulting cash deposited in the MIRO bank account to be used for further conservation work.

It is really heartening to see how much the forest has improved over the years, especially the health of the large trees and the increase in birdlife. So many thanks are due to the Conservation Corps team members who scrambled up the steep hill slopes on that February day in 1992 to protect the big Rata trees of Eastbourne.

One last request: if you spot a band that we have missed (there are sure to be some) please email info@miro.org.nz with a clear description of the location or, better still, the GPS coordinates.

Terry Webb and Chris Firkins



Figure Caption: Adrian Macnee removes a metal band in the forest above Days Bay