



# Mokomoko Newsletter

**Number 10**  
**8<sup>th</sup> March 2012**

Hello everyone

The Mokomoko Dryland Sanctuary project is moving along well and much has happened in the 12 months since our last newsletter.

## **New skink release**

In December last year we released another 16 Otago skinks into the predator-proof fenced area. Three were progeny of wild skinks, marking the beginning of our out-breeding programme to improve the genetic quality of the population. TV One news covered the occasion (see <http://tvnz.co.nz/national-news/locals-fight-save-endangered-skinks-video-4673752>).



*One of the new skinks released last December*

This makes a total of 28 skinks released since November 2009. Three new baby skinks were spotted in February 2011 and another baby was found in February this year. Given natural losses and breeding, we believe we have about 20 skinks in the sanctuary. Annual survival rate is about 80%, which is enough to hold the population steady. Given the small size of the sanctuary, the small founder population, and the fact that most of the skinks are captive-bred and highly inbred, this is an acceptable survival rate that we believe will improve as we move to the next phase of expanding the fence and introducing more wild-born animals.



*DOC Biodiversity Manager, Gavin Udy, releasing one of the skinks*



*Volunteers Jan and Dave Fearnley, Trustee Garry Nixon, and Gavin Udy preparing to release a skink*



### **New fence design**

Now that we have some confidence that translocation of captive-bred Otago skinks works, we are now ready to consider expanding the project to a larger area, and ultimately to other lizard species.

DOC's work at Macraes suggests that for Grand and Otago skinks it may not be necessary to go the extra mile to exclude mice because skink numbers at Macraes have recovered in the presence of mice. Every predator-proof fence in New Zealand struggles to exclude mice. Indeed, we recently discovered mice inside our Mokomoko fence for the first time in 2 years. Tim Whittaker (DOC, Alexandra) has been researching cheaper fence designs that will allow entry by mice. We are currently seeking quotes for this new design. Our plan is to fence a 14-ha area where we have been restoring the native vegetation for skinks.

### **Plan for the next 4 years**

Once the new fence is built this year, we will monitor the extent to which the fence limits entry by predators. If after 12 months we are satisfied that predators are at sufficiently low levels (based on DOC's work at Macraes) we will introduce captive and wild-born Otago skinks. If the population increases after 2 years, we will consider introducing Grand skinks. This will be another major milestone for the Trust.

### **Weed control**

Volunteers continue their amazing work removing weeds from the 14-ha restoration area. One of the worst jobs is cutting briar. Not only is it painful but painting the stumps with weedicide does not always kill the

plant. We have recently tested a new method of spraying the basal stems with an oil-based solution of Grazon™. This is far less work and appears to be killing the bushes outright. Hooray!

### **Formal agreement with DOC**

COET trustees met with Department of Conservation staff to discuss a more formalised collaboration that will involve greater input from DOC. They agreed to take the lead on some tasks such as consents and fence contract management. Other tasks will be the responsibility of COET such as funding applications and weed control, and other tasks such as pest and skink monitoring will be shared. DOC's support for this project has been tremendous.

### **New trustees**

We welcomed two new COET trustees last year: Jan Kelly from Wanaka, and Selwyn Tomkins from Alexandra.

Jan has been the secretary of the Central Otago Recreational Users Forum for 7 years, an organisation initiated by DOC to bring together public recreationists with the statutory land managers, DOC, CODC and LINZ. This involves working with outdoor access, land tenure, landowners, and Council policies for Central Otago. Jan is also a member of the Lindis Pass Conservation Group, removing briar and rubbish from the Reserve. Jan has thriving lizard populations in her garden and is invited by schools throughout Otago to speak about lizard conservation.

Selwyn became a stock and station agent in 1960, then a farm manager at Omakau, Waikato and Upper Clutha. He moved permanently to Alexandra



in 1973. He joined the accounting firm of Ibbotson Cooney and worked as a farm accountant until retirement in 2006. Selwyn has been involved with many community organisations over the years and was a member and treasurer of The Friends of Dunstan Hospital for 13 years. Selwyn has recently been accredited with use of weedicides and has improved our Trust's health and safety issues around their use.

We will let you know about our next field day in autumn. The focus will be on planting native species inside the 14-ha reserve.

Thanks again for your support.

*Trustees of the Central Otago Ecological Trust.*