

# Where have they all gone?

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By Richard Hilson, father of three and frustrated possum shooter, of Takapau

To the Hawke's Bay Regional Council and those responsible for possum control near the Makaretu River. I have just read my regional council publication and I must say it is full of good positive stuff as usual.

I do, however, wish to lodge a 'complaint'.

I reckon you've robbed my kids of a part of their childhood. Part of what it is - or what it was - to grow up in the Hawke's Bay countryside.

Where have all the possums gone? My family and I live and farm in the south-eastern corner of the Pukenui Possum Control Area, where our corner boundary is bordered by State Highway 50 and the Makaretu River. Our property has been well covered in bait stations for several years now, with about 70 stations on Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) coordinates and bait and contract labour costing us about \$400 per annum. But we don't do a thing.

The problem is the programme has been way too successful. No longer can we find even one possum for the kids or a visitor. We still see plenty of rabbits and hares and we chase them day and night - but what about the possums? There now seems no point in looking up any of the trees around here with a spotlight. Places where we shot dozens of possums a night as kids are now just empty trees not worth an upward glance. It's virtually impossible even to find a dead one by the bait stations after they've been re-baited. Not that they really need re-baiting - most seem to hold their bait forever. Maybe the rats have had enough anticoagulant, too?

There's none left for us to line up on the road at night either. That was fun, wasn't it? It was part of learning to drive a country road when we were kids - how to do what Dad did and line up a startled possum on a gravel road, hit it while accelerating and stay on the road in your follow through. Now it is a novelty to see a dead possum on the road, let alone a live one.

One of our local schools ran a hunting competition late last year and possums were on the target list, but there weren't many at the weigh-in. There were bunnies and hares, a pile of turkeys and the odd eel, but hardly a possum to be seen.

So you have elevated the humble possum, furry destructive beast that he was, to some mythical status. We now watch as the older generation tries to explain to the next how the country was once over run with these pests and how hard we tried to annihilate them. We listen to all those tall tales of tallies in the hundreds and of long nights on the back of a ute, firing off hundreds of rounds.

In all seriousness though, what a great job you've done.

In the past, we walked the home farm under the Ruahines for entire days as kids. We weren't old enough to use firearms but we took our two terriers, a spade or an axe. We went

out all day, often returning on dark when we were really hungry. The tallies weren't too high but we'd get up to a dozen each day.

Then, as teenagers, we spent night after night shooting on a 400 acre block of my parents that bounded the top end of the Manawatu River. It wasn't uncommon to shoot 150 possums in a couple of hours by driving onto the better paddocks with the lights off then having Dad drive flat out along the fence line while we shot off the back under spotlight. One run along that fence line then straight back again got everything sitting on a post or near it. The third speed run got the early risers that were further out in the paddock when we arrived but now had to run back towards the cover of the bush and cliffs.

So my apologies to those lefties who cringe at the thought of kids roaming the hills without parental supervision or firing off live ammunition from the back of a wildly revving ute in a hazard-filled paddock. And my apologies as well to those of you who get sweaty palms thinking of how we drove the back roads at night. Maybe it gives you an idea of just how much we hated possums. Back then there was a wall of fur out there and we only ever knocked the edge off their numbers. Possums were literally everywhere and the more we killed, the more that moved in immediately. But it was fun!

Now, as a law-abiding and far-too-serious adult, I spend a lot of time on farms all over central Hawke's Bay during the course of my job. I know that there is much happiness with the extraordinary scale of the demise of the possum hereabouts. So thank you!