

Honey production on Rangitoto

Severe possum damage to the pohutukawa forests on Rangitoto Island led to a dramatic decline in honey production.

Honey harvests, although subject to weather variations, had been reasonably steady for many years and a bumper crop of 20 tons was recorded in the summer of 1972-1973. However, possum damage began to adversely affect production and, by 1990, production had dwindled to a barely economic 5-6 tons.

Possums and wallabies were eradicated in the early 1990s, starting with a 1080 drop in 1990.

New shoots on the previously bare pohutukawa tree trunks began appearing within weeks of the drop, but honey production didn't increase immediately, according to Mike Stuckey of Waitemata Honey.

"You could see huge amounts of growth – in the canopy and underneath as well – but it was mainly foliage with no immediate increase in flowering. They just put all their energy into recovery. Then, flowering gradually started to increase and improved pretty steadily."

An exceptional flowering season in the 2007-2008 summer saw a total honey harvest of 18 tons from fewer hives than the bumper crop of 1972-1973.

"I reckon it took about ten years for the trees to recover fully," says Mike. "The island is a totally different place now and it's not just the pohutukawas – the other trees like rewarewa are all flourishing too, and the bird life."

The Department of Conservation is now planning to eradicate the remaining seven species of mammalian pests on the island.