

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the tricky problem faced by New Zealand when it comes to the harm caused by non-native hedgehogs.

While we are fighting to save our rapidly dwindling hedgehog population in Britain (down from 30 million in the 1950s to fewer than 1 million today), conservationists in New Zealand are trying to get rid of them.

The difference, of course, is that hedgehogs are native to Britain, but they are 'accidental tourists' in New Zealand, shipped out to remind homesick settlers of their gardens back home (it's an irony that they are now two-a-penny in New Zealand, while most of those gardens back home haven't seen a hedgehog in years).

In the good old days, New Zealand's native birds, reptiles and insects lived the life of Riley, safe in the knowledge that there were no predatory mammals to eat them. But then settlers arrived and unleashed a menagerie of hungry ferrets, stoats, weasels, rats, cats, dogs, possums – and hedgehogs – into this innocent land. Kakapo, kiwi and all the other home-grown inhabitants – completely unprepared for the onslaught – were sitting ducks. Their populations plummeted, and many species disappeared altogether.

Centuries later, New Zealand's Department of Conservation (DOC) is still cleaning up the mess. In its bid to make New Zealand predator-free by 2050, returning the country to a near-pristine state, it has become the world-renowned expert at trapping, shooting and poisoning.

But it hit the headlines when it set its sights on hedgehogs (following recent research that revealed the significant harm these prickly predators are doing

to native wildlife). The reason it caused a furore? Hedgehogs are cute.

The prospect of hedgehog eradication has highlighted a tricky dilemma. Should DOC play God and kill all the introduced hedgehogs to protect native wildlife? Is it okay to cull one species to save another? Is the survival of endangered species more important than the lives of individual animals?

It's a conundrum faced by conservationists around the world. Alien species – plants or animals intentionally or accidentally introduced into a place that was never part of their natural range – are the second biggest threat to biodiversity (after habitat loss). They can plunge entire ecosystems into spirals of extinction. Worldwide, alien species cost a minimum of US\$26.8 billion per year (in terms of direct economic losses and costs associated

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with dealing with these invasions) and that figure is trebling every ten years.

Some animal welfare groups argue that no animals should be culled under any circumstances. After all, it's not the fault of the hapless hedgehogs – we are the ones who shipped them to a new country on the other side of the world.

If only we could ship them all back to Britain. That's what we're doing in the Outer Hebrides. Seven hedgehogs were introduced to the Uists in 1974 to control garden pests, but they bred like rabbits and preferred to gobble up the eggs of ground-nesting waders – with devastating results. Unfortunately, it took 13 years to move just over a third of them (2,441 hedgehogs) at a cost of £1,097 each. Just imagine how much it would cost to relocate untold thousands from New Zealand to Britain (not to mention all the logistical and biosecurity challenges).

But what is the alternative? Leaving introduced predators to run amok is clearly not a viable option. Neither are non-lethal measures, because they inevitably result in a far-from-pristine mosaic of fenced enclosures. Culling isn't good because it requires killing each generation over and over again – the killing never stops. So the most humane solution is eradication.

It's a sad reality. No-one goes into conservation to kill things, of course. But environmentalists can't always be sentimentalists. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk

