

Speech delivered 23rd May 2007 to the ERMA 1080 Reassessment Committee.

My name is Bryan Bassett-Smith.

I own a company called Wildenz and am General Manager and shareholder of a Company called Addiction Foods New Zealand Ltd. The other shareholders are from Singapore.

I am grateful that I can share with you some of the situations, successes and failures I have encountered over the past 6 years, as I've become involved in the possum recovery industry.

In another life I have been a farmer. Not a very conventional one, but specialising in exotic animals.

It all began in the early 70's when I became involved in aerial deer capture.

As one of the pioneers in this industry, the expertise we gained in keeping these wild animals alive has taken me to China, to work with Giant Panda, and to Australia, Japan and Chile to work with a wide variety of animals.

It has also given me a great understanding into how wild animals, in some cases, can be used commercially.

Sir Tim Wallis, an old friend and colleague of mine, recently visited our factory in Te Puke and wrote in his book the following insert:

'Bryan, we shared some great adventures with the deer, why not possum'

Sir Tim can see the potential there is in harvesting possums, using people, not poisons. With helicopters, every corner of New Zealand can be reached to control these pests.

In 2001 I could see the waste of possum carcasses for myself, and decided to fully explore the possibility of recovering carcasses for pet food and human consumption. At that stage I wrote myself a Mission Statement;

'To remove possums, stoats, weasels and ferrets from the New Zealand countryside without the use of pesticides.

To this end, we are motivated by the environmental concerns. i.e. to reduce the numbers of introduced pests, save our native birds and to eliminate the threat of bovine Tb.

We are also wanting to provide employment for as many people as possible and so our efforts are to add commercial value to these animals and so reward financially the hunters involved in this industry'.

As with all new ventures one has to have a philosophical approach and it is this approach and philosophy I wish to share with you, in a spirit of cooperation.

We as New Zealanders have some unique challenges. How we react to these will be important for generations to come. To be specific, let us look at the problem of introduced agricultural pests, we face as a country.

Our bush and bird life has been dramatically influenced by these creatures and so we must intervene. How, and by what methods is the challenge.

I am fully aware of the problems associated with bovine tuberculosis (T.B), being a recipient through my deer herd of the disease.

An unscrupulous farmer introduced wild caught deer from Westland into the McKenzie Basin in the South Island. Many of these deer carried T.B.

The T.B. Spread to possums, ferrets and I believe even hedgehogs, and so the containment of the disease became complex.

In my case I had agreed to graze for a friend, animals purchased from the previously mentioned area.

Some were full of T.B. it transpired and so they infected some of my deer.

False Positives were the tragedy with wapiti hinds worth \$5,000 being shot to show they were clear of the disease.

An emotionally devastating sad situation. Financially devastating too as no animals could be sold due to Movement Control.

In that area the wild vectors were accessible and gradually the situation was controlled.

It does reinforce though the fact that T.B. Must come from somewhere, and the scaremongering about all possums carrying T.B. is just that. They had to contract the disease from somewhere.

After initial investigation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery (MAF), I decided to try and realise the commercial value of possums, to see if commercial activities could make a contribution to possum control.

The aerial spread of 1080 at this time caused me great concern, as I had observed it spread is very accessible areas at Eastern Lake Taupo and just could not philosophically identify either with mass indiscriminate poisoning, and also the waste of what could be regarded as an asset. Albeit a temporary one.

So the project began.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence about how good possum meat is for dogs, but to make credible claims, and to understand fully the real positive attributes of these, scientific research was necessary.

A load of possums was taken to Ag research and \$2,800 later the results were that possums are

uniquely and abnormally high in the unsaturated fatty acids. Omega 3 and 6.

There is still much work to be done in understanding how the levels of omega 3 and 6 could change seasonally or related to food.

So we can now make substantiated claims. The meat from possums has anti inflammatory and hypoallergenic properties, and it has been used to cure disorders of the skin and bowel.

With any commercial product it is only as good as its sales. Markets are vital.

In Japan possum is translated to be 'a kind of rat'.

In China possum of Guo zi li, has been sold as the civet cat.

With the outbreak of the SARS virus, the civet cat was implicated and so the Chinese shot themselves in the foot.

In the USA the opossum is a rodent and loosely associated with hillbillies.

So as a marketing exercise its not all easy. The good news is that the nutrient profile and the omegas, plus the fact that there is no artificial flavours, colourings or preservatives in our product gives us a market edge.

Sometimes as we look forward we must also look back to learn from our mistakes, the mistakes of others, as well as the successes around us.

Mass poisoning is philosophically, environmentally and socially wrong.

There are alternatives:

As I move around and talk to a very cross section of New Zealanders, I see significant poverty in New Zealand, and I predict that this will become worse.

More and more Maori are returning to their tribal lands and naturally they look for a means of economic survival. I have spoken to and received delegate's from somewhat desperate people who are looking for help and guidance, and I see wild animal control assisting to give these rural communities an income source as well as a valid way of life.

I have seen dignity and hope return to people, who have in some cases been involved in crime and some who have been long term unemployed, as they trap possums and recover the products from them.

The challenge for me is to continue with my team to expand our markets, to be diligent about quality and product development, and then to convince people by tangible demonstration, that alternatives to mass poisoning exists.

If we look at established industries involving the utilization of wild animals, and then contemplate their expansion, the prospects are exciting.

In Southland a large company tans and exports possum skins. Last year they were short of 300,000 possum skins on orders they had.

On Monday in Whakatane we purchased 200 kgs of fur at \$90 per kilo and last week on a quiet week, purchased 2 tonnes of possum carcasses. To date my little operation has processed over 285 tonnes of possum.

This meat has been turned mainly into finished product for export and all the money that has been generated by the collection of these animals, both fur and carcasses, has been returned to the New Zealand economy.

A colleague of mine spends \$250,000 a month – every month buying possum fur. Again all this money is returned through the trappers to the New Zealand economy.

Another colleague spends \$100,000 a month buying fur, and another I suggest spends over \$200,000. Snowy Peak – are purchasing fur, blending this with merino wool and producing high quality, beautiful products. Duvets incorporating possum fur are made. Tanneries are tanning skins. All the money returned to the New Zealand economy.

So to confirm;

We have our own factory in Te Puke where we manufacture a very high quality dehydrated Pet Food for export.

We have a Risk Management Program (RMP) registered with the New Zealand Food Safety Authority which covers all aspects of our collection and manufacturing businesses.

Our first export from the new facility is on the market and evaluation is proceeding.

Our second export is being packed as I speak. This is for the USA.

Last year the States spent \$4 billion on health care for their animals. If we can prevent illness through good nutrition, the quality pet food market for our product is enormous.

Japan spent \$10 billion USD on pet food last year.

We have canned product made under contract for us and containers are leaving regularly for overseas markets.

Potential for expansion is real. It can and is being done.

On a rather sad note...4 years ago, after months of negotiation and product development for a Japanese company an order for over 100 tonnes of processed product annually was cancelled.

No discussion – no revisiting.

The Japanese had seen a television program about the spread of 1080 on Mt. Ruapehu. End of story.

Just imagine the potential for human consumption in China of 1080 was eliminated. To summarise... I have chosen to create an industry utilizing, not wasting, our agricultural pests.

The repercussions are regeneration of bush, survival of native birds, control of the pests, particularly

possums, employment for hundreds of people, many of whom would find employment difficult in the town or city. The return of dignity and hope for many people in rural communities, and the redistribution of money that the trapping generates.

The production of a high quality pet food which is quietly gaining international acceptance. The creation of numerous jobs as the many products associated with possums are developed. All at no cost to the New Zealand tax payer.

Let us imagine for a moment New Zealand without 1080 – completely.

The wild harvested venison industry would kick start again.

Helicopter pilots, engineers, and processing plants would all gear up for production. Overseas funds would be generated and money would flow back to communities.

Our clean green image as a tourist destination would be enhanced and our conservation and social message would spread worldwide.

Our possum export industry would flourish to the demise of the possums.

Animals would be wild harvested for human consumption and exports to China would be a reality.

So let us not accept the status quo, with bureaucracies becoming larger, and more and more public money being spent, I believe unwisely, for doubtful results. Let us rather return to a philosophy that encourages a revolution in pest control.

Our children can become the conservationists of the future. They'll need to kill animals and that sounds harsh, but it is the reality.

We, as New Zealanders face the challenge of pest control collectively, and so must all be part of a collective solution.

No one person will be right, but some can be seriously wrong as we approach the challenge.

Philosophically we must continuously scrutinise what we need to achieve, and what sort of legacy we wish to leave our children, and all people who live in this wonderful country.

Please let us not continue as we are. Just because we've done it like this before and I refer specifically to 1080 poisoning does not make it right.

I have tried to demonstrate that people and not persons can be the solution to controlling our agricultural pests.

There is still much to be done, and much can be achieved, as we, together, philosophically embrace the revolution in pest control.