

Conservation on Defence Force Land

Report from the S C Forest and Bird Branch meeting 19 June 2014, held in Timaru

The caretaker of the Lake Tekapo Military Camp land, Sam Staley presented a very interesting talk on managing the land of the Military Training Area. Sam started by giving us his background credentials in the army where he started as a regular and with the territorials. Sam came from a farming background in the U.K, so managing a fragile alpine New Zealand environment was a big challenge. In 1996 he moved to Tekapo training camp with his family for a 6 months stint, managing the camp and surrounding army land. His contract was extended for 3 years and he is still there. When he started there was no management plan for the land the army owned and the land was infected with plant and animal pests as well as rubbish. The army personnel used the land as they needed, driving through ephemeral tarns and using explosive in ecologically significant areas. The local community was concerned about the way the land was being managed by the army and felt the land was being degraded. This perception was fair as the land is used for shooting, explosives, driving tanks and other heavy vehicles and land works, such as digging of trenches. Sam and his family felt an animosity from the community and were keen to change the perception of the base. In the first 2 years over 80, 000 rabbits were shot, and an extensive rabbit poisoning programme was implemented. Pest plant species, such as wilding pines were also cut down and/or poisoned. It took 4 years to establish a comprehensive 'land management' plan that provided guidance in how to actively and sustainably manage the 9500 ha area, while allowing the training to occur.

The work started by identifying all the impacts and threats to the environment of the land to be managed. This included identifying areas on the property that were ecologically significant. Hazards that conventional farmers and landowner don't need to consider, were identified, such as gun and masking smoke in the air. Potential threats to water systems were impacts of silting, lakebed damage from vehicles and the introduction of new organisms from foot and vehicle traffic. The alpine soils are very fragile and with the introduction of pest plants such as *Hieracium* spp, gorse and broom the native flora has been unable to compete. Overgrazing has also meant that the soils are susceptible to blowing away. The aim was to prevent further damage to the environment and protect significant areas on the property. Regeneration of the native grasses and other species was key to this. The last 14 years have been dedicated to protect and allow natural regeneration of the land.

Other organisations have assisted with fish, vertebrate and invertebrate studies and identifying locally endemic and at risk plant communities.

The presentation was informative and was appreciated by the audience. The dedication to both protecting the native fragile areas and balancing the military use of the land provides a challenge to land management. The branch appreciated Sam Staley's presentation, and is supportive of the approach to protect and enhance the fragile environment of the land in a sustainable way.