

DEER ON BANKS PENINSULA

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Banks Peninsula's vegetation has had to cope with a lot since *Homo sapiens* arrived on the scene less than a thousand years ago: a hugely increased frequency of fire, competition from numerous alien plant species, appropriation of most of the available real estate for farming and exotic forestry, being eaten by introduced herbivorous mammals, and more! The wonder is that much of the original native flora has survived at all.

In fact it has proved to be remarkably resilient. By 1900 less than 1 percent of the old-growth forest cover remained. By 2000, against all odds, regenerating native forest, scrub and treeland had reclaimed nearly 15 percent of the Peninsula's 100,000 hectares.

The odds are high. To a greater or lesser extent rodents, possums, cattle, sheep, goats, hares, rabbits and pigs have all contributed negatively to the survival and recovery of native vegetation.

Farming of deer behind fences became legal in New Zealand in 1969. By the 1980s deer farms were already an established part of the Banks Peninsula farming scene. Escapes into the wild were probably inevitable. In the last two decades red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) have established small but expanding feral populations. The presence of wild fallow deer (*Dama dama*) suggests illegal releases; as far as I know fallow deer are not farmed on the Peninsula.

Already there are quite severe impacts locally on forest interiors of long-fenced and ungrazed bush reserves. Vulnerable plant species include five-finger, seven-finger, māhoe, fuchsia, *Astelia* and a wide range of ferns.

It is a particularly galling development, just as significant reductions have been achieved in goat and possum numbers after focussed control efforts by local and regional councils, the Department of Conservation, and the Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust. In addition, feral deer populations represent a serious risk to farming through their potential harbouring of bovine TB.

Moves are afoot to tackle the rising deer threat in similar ways to the possum and goat campaigns. Such initiatives deserve strong support. Unfortunately, human attitudes to deer are a wee bit more ambivalent than those towards possums and goats. Convincing all landowners that action is necessary will be a challenge.