

Possum hunting on the West Coast

Joanne Carroll 17:07, Jun 24 2016

The West Coast possum industry is still active despite the challenges of declining possum numbers and fur markets.

West Coast possum hunter Ian Sutherland says he feels like a "kid at Christmas" when he checks his possum traps.

"The job itself can be wet, cold and bloody miserable some days in winter and yet somewhat rewarding: the not knowing whether the traps or poison have worked I guess really keeps you going every day. Kind of like a kid at Christmas."

Sutherland is getting back into full time trapping, it's in the blood. He was taught how to trap by his grandfather and uncle as a young boy growing up in Maruia.



SUPPLIED

Possum hunter Ian Sutherland

"I have trapped possums for fun most of my life. When I was 21 I tried doing it for a living but could only ever break even, couldn't get ahead," he says.

After spending some years contract milking in the dairy industry, now at 35 he is having another go at professional possum hunting.

"I am heading back to the bush for the winter as our main income, I have a wife and two young girls, so by end of winter I'll know if it was a good idea. But it has always been what I have wanted to do so I have to try it," he says.



JOANNE CARROLL

West Coast possum hunter Merv Allen

He knows it's a risk, as he's seen possum numbers decline in the years he's been a recreational hunter.

The decline can be linked to the push to eradicate bovine TB by 2055 through Ospri's TB-free programme jointly funded by the Government and the farming industry.

Last year, ground possum control covered about 1.5 million hectares and cost about \$46 million.



JOANNE CARROLL

West Coast possum hunter Merv Allen with a leg trap.

Ospri senior advisor Nick Hancox said it employs about 65 contractors to do possum hunting, making up between 80 and 90 per cent of the nationwide programme. The remaining 10-20 per cent is aurally distributed 1080.

However, on the West Coast this year, possum hunting will make up 77 per cent and aerial drops of 1080 poison 23 per cent.

"Controlling possums helps to minimise the risk of the disease spreading within the possum population and to livestock. We know if we can keep the numbers low enough for long enough over large areas, we can eventually eradicate TB," he said.



JOANNE CARROLL

West Coast possum hunter Merv Allen

TB is still on the Coast with 17 herds testing positive this year, down from 250 at its peak.

Possum hunter Peter Salter came fourth on the West Coast under the Ban 1080 party in the last election, and intends to run again.

Salter has seen many changes in the possum industry since taking up full-time hunting in the 1970s.



SUPPLIED

Greymouth possum hunter Merv Allen

He had been trapping and poisoning possums for almost 40 years before he applied for a permit from DOC and he'd been using cyanide for 36 years until he was told he'd need to pay \$600 do a course and become licensed.

After applying for a permit he was charged \$500 landing fees, and \$220 administration fees because he wanted to fly his helicopter into the remote backcountry – an area he had been working in for almost 40 years.

"It's getting ridiculous. It's all bureaucratic nonsense. We are helping control possums on public land for free. The hoops private operators have to go through is preventing people from getting out there and doing it."



JOANNE CARROLL

Peter Gray, of Hokitika's The Possum People, has been in the possum fur industry for almost 50 years.

"They pay contractors \$250 a day not to catch possums and they pay monitors \$1000 to make sure the contractors are not catching possums. Something is not quite right. They spend millions on dropping 1080. It's a waste of money," he says.

Ospri would not confirm Salter's figures citing commercial sensitivity.

With his grey bushy beard and dressed in head to toe oil skin and his passion and knowledge of the backcountry, Salter is the quintessential West Coast bushman.



JOANNE CARROLL

Peter and Carol Gray, of Hokitika's The Possum People, have been in the possum fur industry for almost 50 years

He, along with his wife Justine, run [The Bushman's Centre](#), a cafe, accommodation and a possum museum at Pukekura in South Westland.

A few years ago, they were charged by the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) with two counts of breaching the Animal Products Act, for selling possum pies made from unregulated meat. The charges were later withdrawn after mediation, but the couple no longer serve possum pie.

They do have live possums in the centre and teach tourists all about the possum hunting industry.



JOANNE CARROLL

Peter and Carol Gray, of Hokitika's The Possum People, have been in the possum fur industry for almost 50 years.

There's little Salter doesn't know.

"You spend enough time in the bush you start thinking like a possum. I see hunters nowadays using GPS. It tells you nothing about the bush. Finding possums is easy if you know what to look for. You can see runs through the grass and scratch marks on the trees. You learn all these things not out of books, you learn them from experience," he says.

He can skin a possum quicker than plucking it, but that's what the fur trade is after at the moment.



Peter and Justine Salter at their tourist centre in South Westland's Pukekura.

He describes the method of skinning as slicing a gash across the possum's chest and across the back legs. He puts his thumb under the skin and works it away from the body, and with one quick movement he can deglove the whole animal in about 90 seconds.

Salter grew up a "city boy" in Wellington, and joined the airforce but a holiday to the West Coast in the 70s had him hooked.

"I always loved getting out into the bush and hunting then I met people on the Coast who were making a living from it and I thought that that is the life for me."



SUPPLIED

West Coast possum hunter and bushman Peter Salter.

He bought the property in Pukekura and the couple fell in love when Justine walked into his shop in 1997.

They married on top of a mountain in 2007 – Justine wearing a dress made out of possum, of course.

He is waiting on a hip replacement, which he says is the result of many years of carrying heavy deer and packs in the bush and wading through rivers.

"I love being out there. As long as the old legs will haul me up mountains I'll still get out there and trap," he says.

Justine goes with Peter into the bush, usually in winter when they close the centre.

"I sit and pluck while Peter checks the traps. We do keep skins and I go through them all and get them tanned and make items for our shop. In the summer I make small items like hats but in the winter I have the time to make bigger items," she says.

The couple are fiercely against 1080 and suggest the Government introduce a bounty for each possum instead.

DOC's Herb Christophers disagrees.

"People think they can make a buck if DOC gave bounties, but bounties don't work. There is a benefit to hunters in leaving some possums in place. They have a vested interest. So in that sense we are working in opposites," he says.

DOC's aim is to reduce possum numbers to a density of less than five possums per 100 traps but it would not be economically viable for hunters to work down to that level.

"At the lowest economic level there's not enough ecological benefit to the forest. They will go somewhere where the possum population is denser but that doesn't help us in our aim to keep possum numbers down," he says.

Possums were introduced in 1837 and were encouraged to expand to establish a fur industry.

"The adverse effects on our forests was known but ignored in favour of the economic benefits. And here we are in 2016 still looking for the economic benefits."

Hunters need landowner permission and can use non-toothed leg hold traps or cyanide. They have to be certified to use the traps and licensed to use cyanide. With cyanide the possums drop dead but with traps their foot is caught and the trapper goes back and gives them a blow to the head.

According to the New Zealand Fur Council the possum fur industry sells between \$100 and \$150 million per year of possum-related garments, with international tourists accounting for 85 percent of total retail sales. The industry employs about 1500 workers and kills about two million possums per year.

Peter Gray, of [The Possum People](#), says he has been in the possum industry longer than anyone else in New Zealand.

He grew up in Blacks Point, near Reefton, and trapped his first possum aged 10.

"They used to pay two shillings and sixpence a skin. That's really good money, probably about up to \$20 in today's money."

After marrying Carol in 1965, they settled in Harihari and Peter continued possum trapping until they decided to go into processing fur in about 1968.

"We knew a farrier in Timaru who was selling a fur sewing machine so we bought that and started making purses and pouch bags," he says.

Gray gave up hunting and at the peak of the fur trade between the 1960s and 80s, was employing 26 people processing fur in factories in Ross and Greymouth and selling fur products in shops in Queenstown, Hokitika and Christchurch.

"In 1989 the international fur industry collapsed. Fur fashions went out and we only survived because we were doing sheep skin. We got back into possum in the 90s starting from scratch and have been building back up since then."

Now he has agents from Whangarei to Gore buying fur from trappers at \$120/kg but their tanning plant in Hokitika has been mothballed.

Gray says it is now cost prohibitive to process the fur themselves so they ship it to China for processing. However, with proposed new Chinese regulations, they are now trialling some partly processed shipments.

He pays as low as \$8 and up to \$24 for a top quality skin. Quality is measured in size, damage and by the season – possums molt in summer.

But he mostly buys plucked fur to blend with merino wool for yarn.

He says it takes between 14 and 18 skins to make up a kilogram of fur, but in the North Island it could be up to 30, as the possums are smaller but more plentiful.

"They started blending fur with merino in the 90s. I didn't think it would take off but I was wrong. For some reason people are anti-fur but are not anti-fur in yarn," he says. Between 40 and 60 tonnes of fur a year is turned into yarn in New Zealand and about the same exported to China.

It is spun and knitted into products like vests, jumpers, socks and hats which they sell in their shop in Hokitika. About 95 per cent of their customers are tourists.

"There is nothing warmer than possum merino. It's 30 per cent warmer than wool and 30 per cent lighter. It doesn't pill and it washes well," he said.

At 74, he says he'll never retire, "It's been a good life".

Greymouth hunter Merv Allen, 75, hasn't let two hip replacements stop him from possum hunting.

He has just been granted permission from a private landowner with a dairy farm and the Department of Conservation to hunt a large block in the Grey district.

"I don't poison, I just trap. I'm by myself mostly, with my dogs. I stay in the bush for up to a month, particularly if I'm in a hut."

Sometimes, he brings his caravan complete with fire place into the bush.

He uses bait stations made of pipe and steel nailed to a tree. The bait is a combination of flour and curry powder, sometimes pieces of apple.

The traps are pegged to the tree and some bait smeared on the bark to guide them towards the traps, which are approved by DOC as the most humane.

"They hurt. Anyone that says they don't get hurt is lying. But when I go back in the morning they are curled up asleep in the trap. I use a 22. to shoot them in the head. It is the most humane way. I used to knock them on the head but after two hip replacements it's getting harder to bend down so for the sake of some bullets I prefer to use a gun. When you get older you have to do things easier," he says.

Gone are the days of nailing skins on boards to dry. He either sells the skins frozen or plucks the fur into rubbish bags.

He has been possum hunting on and off since he was 19.

"I always came back to possums. It's something you can do if there's no work. You can always fall back on it. I love it. You get out with the dogs and into the bush."

"It's a bloody good life. You get a wet arse every now and then but what's that? It's a good healthy life. I don't think I would have reached 75 without it."