

# Story: Acclimatisation

Page 2 – Early acclimatisation societies

(Walrond, C., 2008)

1867

## Establishment

New Zealand's first acclimatisation society was probably in Auckland, around 1861. Many others soon followed, including in Whanganui and Nelson in 1863, and Otago and Canterbury in 1864. Their rules were very similar to the British Acclimatisation Society, and focused on introducing all manner of new species as long as they were 'innocuous'.<sup>1</sup>

By 1866, the British society had merged with the Ornithological Society. But New Zealand was to be the setting for a network of regional acclimatisation societies that lasted almost 130 years – although their role later changed. Their activities received government sanction and some financial support.

## Importing creatures

In 1867, the first of a series of Animal Protection Acts protected many introduced animals and formally recognised the acclimatisation societies. The importation of trout was enabled by the Salmon and Trout Act, passed in the same year.

Committees formed to guide the societies. Many committee members had links with shipping agents, so transport of new plants and animals was often cheap or free. Animals were kept in cages on deck, so survival of more than 25% on the long voyage from England was considered a success.

Species exchange agreements were made between New Zealand societies and those overseas. At first many societies had gardens for propagating new plant species, but these were soon shed in favour of focusing on animals – for example the Auckland society handed over its gardens to the Auckland Domain Board in 1882. Hatcheries were built for breeding trout, and aviaries for raising game birds, for release into the wild.

### For the birds

In addition to game birds, in 1867 the Auckland Societies imported emus, starlings, yellow hammers, skylarks, chaffinches, blackbirds and thrushes, Rockhampton sparrows, magpies, Java sparrows, doves, pigeons and seagulls.

## Variable success

Not all introductions were successful. Trout, deer and Canada geese all quickly established viable wild populations. But for some other species, such as Atlantic salmon, partridge and pheasants, considerable efforts were made at great expense for many decades even when it seemed clear that they were not suited to local conditions. Societies gave up on some species only after decades of failed attempts.

Early societies did not place much emphasis on research or science – if at first they failed to introduce a species they wanted, they just released more into the wild, again and again. Sometimes this was eventually successful; European mallard ducks did not acclimatise when they were first introduced in the 1860s, but American birds released in the Auckland

region in the 1930s proved more suitable. Since then, they have colonised most of the country, although not the Chatham Islands.

## Funds from licence sales

Licences were sold for deer and game-bird hunting and trout fishing, and the funds raised were ploughed back into the societies. Poaching was common, and in 1891 the Auckland society employed its first full-time rangers to check licences – resulting in a spectacular increase in sales.

## Marine species

Many northern-hemisphere marine fish and other species such as lobsters were considered for introduction. A fish hatchery – which later became a marine research station – was set up at Portobello in Otago Harbour in 1904. It reared exotic marine fish (Atlantic herring and turbot) and crustaceans (lobster, Australian prawn and European crab) and released them into the sea in the hope that they would establish themselves – but none did.

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