

This is the second update from the field team delivering the Palmerston Island Rat Eradication in the Cook Islands. The project is funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the MISCCAP programme. The planning and operational delivery of the eradication project is led by the New Zealand Department of Conservation, in collaboration with the Cook Island's National Environment Service, Ministry of Agriculture, the NGO – Te Ipukarea Society, and the Palmerston Island community. The project has been in planning stages for 18 months and the operational delivery is being carried out by the field team and community over August/September period.

Kia Orana from Pamati – I hope this update finds everyone well.

It has been a busy and productive first week on the Atoll. By the end of today the team will have completed all of the 20 by 20 meter grid on Cooks motu (833 points), and be very close to finishing the grid on Home Island (currently just over 600 points complete).

The past week we have prioritised completing the grid layout on Cooks motu. Cooks motu is approximately 2.5km south-east of Home Island and is uninhabited, and is home for a number of species including green turtles, red tailed tropic birds, several species of boobies, bristle-thighed curlew, and coconut crabs. Kiore (Polynesian rats) are present on Cooks, and are the target of the operation.

Our days have consisted of 7.40am briefings with the team in the morning, before loading gear into the tractor to take down to the beach – where 9 to 11 of us and gear are ferried by small boats across the lagoon from Home Island to Cooks motu. We work in teams of 3 to 4, with the person with the RTK surveying gear in front to locate the next grid point and three others behind them cutting and marking. We break around 12 for lunch, and work through until our evening boat pick-up where we get back to Home Island between 5 and 5.30 for a quick soak in the lagoon to rinse the battle wounds (and sweat!), and a game of volleyball or touch rugby. We are spoilt with a big kaikai each night prepared by one of the mamas. Rinse and repeat Monday to Saturday.

It has been a physically challenging week - cutting through thick bush in 30 degree heat – with all of the team sporting battle scars of bruises and cuts on the arms and legs. Our expedition first-aid kit is pretty busy in the morning, with high demands for savlon, plasters, and strapping tape. It will be a great milestone to finish the grid layout from which we are only a day or so away from.

Building bait trays (unbaited) have been established in about 60% of buildings in the Island (300 and counting), and it is likely we will complete this milestone by the end of the week.

All things tracking well, and weather permitting – we will begin the first bait application mid to late next week. The weather has been relatively dry, with only scattered squalls of rain totalling around 5mm for the week. There does look like some rain forecast for next week, but it seems the forecast are generally unreliable for high resolution forecasting and are forever changing. We require a few nights of little-to-no rain after the initial bait application to maintain the longevity of attractiveness of the bait for rats.

As per tradition on the Island, Sunday is a day of rest. So the team are afforded a sleep-in before attendance at church at 1000hrs. It is expected by the community that activity is limited and quiet on Sunday, so we have used Sunday's to recuperate both for planning and reviewing the workplan, and resting the body.

The community is tracking well with it's management of alternative food sources, with all household food being contained in sealed units (plastic bins or fridge/freezers); and sealed buckets for food scraps which are either disposed of outside the reef, or used to feed penned livestock temporarily held on other motu. Wild chickens have been significantly reduced in numbers in order to prevent bait being consumed by chickens - which would in turn decrease the bait available for rats.

I'll finish on a favourite anecdote of the week – which demonstrates the commitment of the community.

Earlier in the week I walked past one of the houses and saw Pati (3 years old).

Pati: “Hi Em!”

Me: “Hey Pati – what are you doing?”

Pati (*holding string in his hand which leads off to a piece of wood propping a cage up*): “I’m catching the last chicken!”

Me: “Good work Pati!”

An hour or so later I walk past again and Pati is still there standing, waiting patiently by the cage.

Me: “Hey Pati – caught anything?”

Pati: “Not yet, im gonna catch it!”

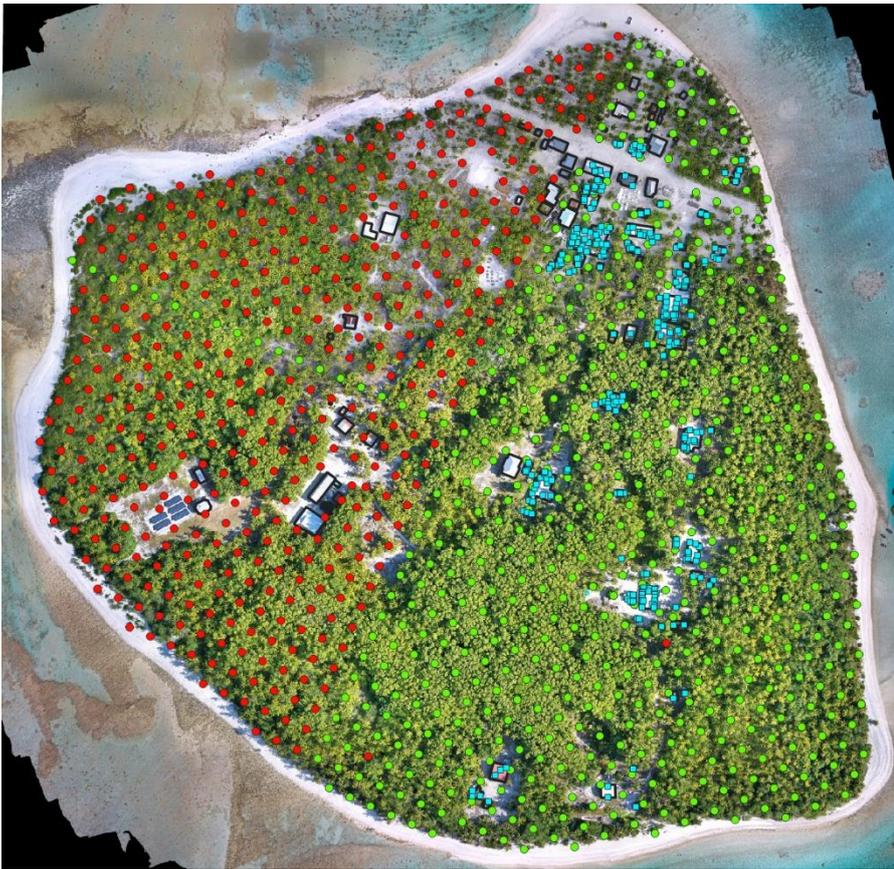
I see Pati once or twice more that day, still patiently waiting – with similar exchanges between us. Later on that evening when we got back from track cutting, Pati is proudly waiting at our base to show me the chicken he has caught. Commitment!



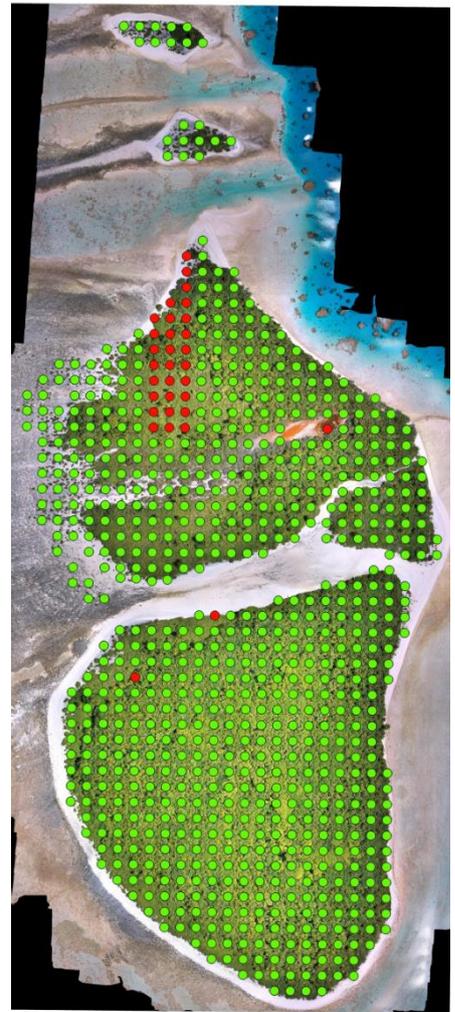
Aloysius (left) and Pati (right) - the chicken trappers

Best regards,

Em and the RAT team.



Above: Home grid progress (green dots) and bait trays placed (blue squares)



Right: Cooks motu grid progress (green dots)

Below: Sunday team yoga

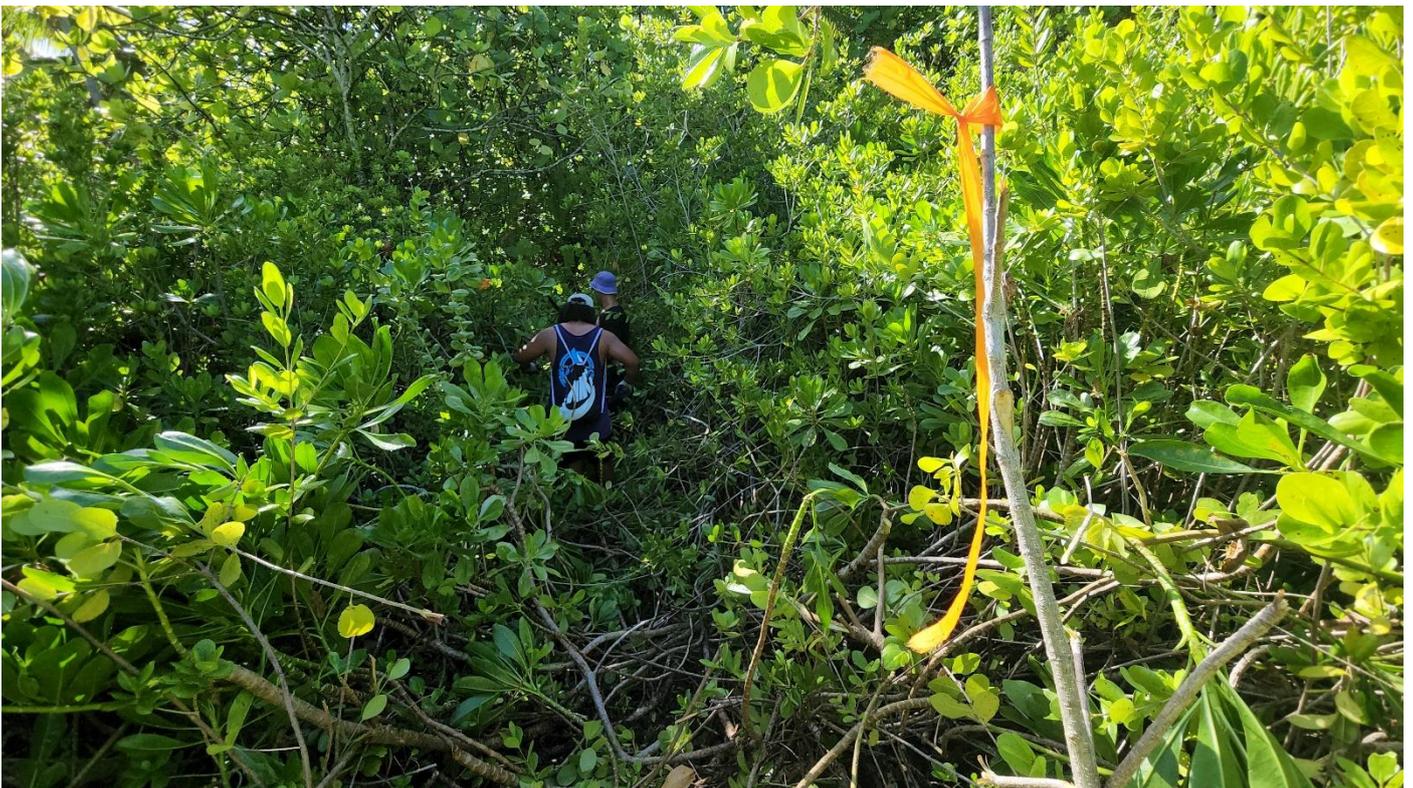




Left: Sunday lunch - kaikai



Above: Setting up the RTK base unit to broadcast on Cooks Motu



Top: Thick coastal scrub to cut the grid layout tracks on Cooks motu (survey poles thrown to the side in order to clamber over!)

Bottom: Making lines through Cooks motu, a grid point marked with stake and flagging tape in the foreground



Above: Tough work but Mia still in good spirits

Below: Some of the more open country on Cooks motu, James and Mia lining up the bearing for the line with sighting compasses





Above: End of the day getting ferried back to Home Island, all in good spirits



Left: Typical leg shot of the team after a few days on Cooks motu