

# Steve's in love - with dung beetles

Dung beetles are an often overlooked, unappreciated and unloved species. Well to be honest until a fortnight ago I was pretty oblivious to these glorious critters myself.

However, while I was soaking up the euphoria of my stay in Taumarunui I spent a day at the combined Coopworth Genetics New Zealand and Ruapehu Beef + Lamb NZ "Raising the Baa" sheep conference.

There was a great line up of speakers but one in particular grabbed my attention.

Dr Shaun Forgie, a research scientist with Landcare Research, loves dung beetles. I mean he l-o-o-o-oves them and by the end of his presentation so did the rest of us. I've never seen such admiration and enthusiasm for a species and if he is married then his wife is a lucky lady. Unless his passion for the beetles is so overwhelming that she comes second.

His jeans were so worn from kneeling down inspecting his beloved insects that he had holes in them and the organisers kindly not only gave him a bottle of wine but a new pair of pants at the end of his presentation.

Seems we already have some



**From the Ridge**  
Steve Wyn-Harris

native dung beetles and the odd introduced species but they just aren't cutting the mustard or I should say, not dealing with the plentiful supply of crap that is out there.

Shaun reckons that at any one time 700,000ha of our fair land is covered in animal manure. Where these ruminants originated from, dung beetles evolved to process their copious outputs but no one ever thought to bring these little fellows when we started importing ruminants.

So Shaun and his colleagues with support from a group of enlightened farmers and a MAF Sustainable Farming Fund have taken matters into hand and have been scabbling through foreign dung pats and

evaluating the relative merits of the hundreds of species that could do the job.

Other countries have already introduced the beetles and the Aussies have had them as far back as 1965 and have so far established 50 species.

Shaun's team have imported and bred up 11 species but they are planning to release the more promising of these first.

These beetles rapidly remove and process dung, which has a number of benefits. The tunnelling species grab great armfuls of crap and drag it underground to lay their eggs in it for the larvae to feed off.

This gets rid of the dung, aerates the soil, and mixes nutrients which improves grass root growth, biological activity and reduces runoff, which in turn means cleaner streams.

Pasture productivity improves as the stock will now graze closer to where the pat fell and because of the nutrient recycling.

Livestock have less re-infection of parasitic worms as the pats dry out quicker, the beetles eat the eggs and larvae and also bury them too deep for them ever to see the light of day again.

There are less greenhouse gas



Landcare Research scientist Shaun Forgie wowed his audience at Taumarunui – including Steve Wyn-Harris – with his views on the potential for dung beetles in New Zealand.

emissions and all of the above leads to significant economic benefits.

I tell you, once these beetles gain NZ citizenship, I'll be nominating them for New Zealander of the Year.

At the end of his presentation, Shaun asked the audience who would be keen to have a few. We were all waving our hands around like a classroom of six year olds. "Pick me, pick me!"

"Would we buy them if they became available?" he asked us.

Yes most of us would, so enthused were we by this stage. Name your price Shaun thought I.

## Your View

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