

A Mischief of Rats

Cleaning up with Island Conservation

By Matt Skenazy

It's 4:00 a.m. and the wind is trying to rip Rory Stansbury's tent off the earth. The rain is coming down in icy sheets, and though it's summer on Rat Island, when you're this far north in the Bering Sea, it's plenty cold. Stansbury and the rest of the Restoration Team flew from Anchorage, Alaska to Adak, a former military base in the Aleutian Islands, and then hopped on a boat for two days to get here.

Stansbury has spent time on islands all over the world, from stints as a boatman on Tavarua, to months alone in a tree house on G-Land surfing for days on end with no one in sight, to extensive stints on Robinson Crusoe Island off the coast of Chile. This, he says, feels the most remote.

There is no infrastructure on Rat Island so the team packed everything in that they would need. The boat will be back in a month to pick them up.

Stansbury gets out of his sleeping bag and sprints in his long johns to the community tent that the team set up yesterday. He puts his rain gear on, swallows a cup of coffee and inhales some oatmeal before loading up his pack. He'll be carrying a heavy load: food for the day, snap traps, wax blocks, plastic rat bait stations, steel rebar, a GPS unit, waterproof field log notebooks, water bottles, peanut butter jars, extra clothing layers, photo gear, and a small med kit; over 50 pounds in all. He hikes 1100 feet up the steep green ridges, away from the camp the team made just above the high tide line, and into Rat Island's interior. The surf peels away in the distance with no one there to greet it. There's no time to surf now, there are traps to check.





Rat Island is—or was, rather—accidentally populated and over-run by the Norway rat after a 1780 Japanese shipwreck. A rat can swim up to half a mile in the open ocean and one pair of rats can produce 5,000 pups within a year. Needless to say, shortly after the wreck, the rats had wreaked havoc on an ecosystem that had evolved without predators. Hardest hit were the seabirds.

“There’s a ton of birds that nest on the island,” says Stansbury, back on the mainland for a spell before heading on to some islands off the coast of California for another assignment. “Winter wrens, peregrine falcons, ptarmigan, oystercatchers, shearwaters, glaucouswinged gulls. The rats were eating all the eggs as fast as the birds could lay them.”

That is, until Island Conservation stepped in. Don Croll and Bernie Tershy, both professor’s of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California Santa Cruz, have been studying sea birds for over 30 years. They started in Mexico, working and surfing on the islands off the coast of Baja. In the midst of their research they again and again confronted the negative effects that non-native invasive species were having on local species. And so, in

1994, they founded Island Conservation (IC). Since then IC has protected 263 species from extinction on 35 islands across the globe.

IC prevents these extinctions by removing damaging species from islands—things like rats, mice and goats. Stansbury is a hunter, of sorts, and circles the globe—two months on working, two weeks off which he uses to explore islands on his own and surf.

These non-native predators have been introduced—either intentionally or not—by us, by humans in our never-ending exploration of the planet, forever looking for new territory, new resources, new un-fished waters, new waves. Surfers alone have visited nearly every island in every ocean and sea on this planet; add in the centuries of fisherman and explorers criss-crossing the landscape and you have an ecological disaster to mitigate.

In 2008 IC carried out an eradication on Rat Island—using all appropriate measures to ensure complete removal of all the rats. When Stansbury arrived a year later with six biologists their job was to confirm the eradication. They didn’t see a single rat, and many of the sea birds were already returning to the island to nest.

Islands are notorious hotbeds of biodiversity. They cover 5% of the earth’s surface but house 20% of the world’s known bird, plant, and reptile species.

“If you look at causes of endangerment and extinction, 90% of all the extinctions in the last couple hundred years have been island based species,” says Brad Keitt, the Director of Conservation at Island Conservation. “Ninety percent of mammals, plants, reptiles, birds—it’s pretty astounding. Islands are the epicenter of the current extinction crisis.”

To put this all in perspective, in a 2008 article Vernon Byrd, a supervisory wildlife biologist for the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, which administers Rat Island, said, “Ecologically, rat spills are a lot worse than oil spills. Oil spills can be really bad, but the effects of rat spills last much longer.”

Biodiversity is crucial for humans for myriad reasons. E.O. Wilson, an American Biologist at Harvard University and a member of the Scientific Advisory board at IC, writes in his 1993 book *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, about the instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems—maybe that’s why we feel happier in, say, the ocean than we do when we’re surrounded by concrete or sitting at our desks. Perhaps more crucial to humans though is biodiversity’s effect on simple ecosystem services: the web of life is incredibly intricate, and as species fall by the wayside of human indifference, that web begins to come undone.

“Wealth of species are what maintain and stabilize the life support system for humans on the planet,” says Keitt. “As we lose these species, we lose aspects of the system that maintains our health and happiness.”



Caption for both photos.

It’s sunny. Stansbury is on another assignment

somewhere off the coast of California. The waves are pulsing through. The team has been here before—often, actually—and Stansbury and a few of the team members came prepared with surfboards. They’re out there, alone in the water, with the sparsely beautiful island for a backdrop. Aside from housing endangered species, islands, as all surfers know, pick up any and all swells that are thrown their way. Enjoying these swells in solitude is one of the perks of an island job.

Surfing has always been a selfish endeavor. Enjoyed alone, with little benefit to anyone else, we surfers go in and out of the ocean largely oblivious to the systems that surround us. Maybe there’s nothing wrong with the selfish side of surfing, maybe that’s why we love it so much. But we don’t need to be unwitting accomplices to the destruction of native species. It doesn’t take much to remember who else inhabits these island spaces and watery playgrounds we frequent.

Stansbury never really considered himself a conservationist; it was something he stumbled on

accidentally while fishing in a Santa Cruz, CA pond and seeing the effects that the non-endemic bullfrogs were having on the animals there.

Thinking back to waves left untouched Stansbury told me: “there are times at work when we sit and stare at unridden surf because the only way to get to some of these waves is by walking through a pelican colony or a seal rookery.”

Some studies have shown that walking just once through a colony of breeding seabirds can cause failure of 90% of the nests, and male seals will, when startled on land, trample and kill newborn seal pups in their haste to get to the safety of the water.

“So is it really worth two hours of fun when you can have that kind of impact on an entire ecosystem?” Stansbury continues. “To a lot of people it is because they just don’t really care.”

For more information visit islandconservation.org