Kea Conservation Trust Policy Statement on feeding of wild kea

Kea are a taonga species with special significance to Māori. They are a wide ranging, ground nesting parrot that is thinly distributed across its approximately 3.5-million-hectare range in Te Waipounamu. Kea predominantly forage on the fruit and leaves of plants. They also hunt and consume a range of invertebrate and vertebrate prey (Young et al 2012, Greer et al. 2015). Finding food is a time-consuming process for kea, keeping them busy in their natural habitat.
However, kea will readily exploit novel foods made available through direct or indirect interactions with people. This may cause local concentrations of birds in areas visited by tourists or around areas of human habitation, resulting in further unwanted human feeding interactions.

Why humans feeding wild kea is bad for them

Feeding wild kea interferes with their normal foraging activities and encourages them to hang around human areas for longer periods of time as they increasingly identify people with food. There are several negative consequences to this change in behaviour, including an increased risk of the following:

- Conflict with local communities. Kea that don't need to spend time foraging, spend more time investigating and damaging human property. In every case where a conflict situation has been reported to the Kea Conservation Trust, human feeding of wild kea has been involved (A. Goodman pers comm, 2022). Such conflict has, on occasion, resulted in kea being killed.
- Lead poisoning. Kea that are encouraged to hang around human settlements (such as Arthur's Pass) are also ingesting and dying from lead, a heavy metal toxin, which is readily accessible in the form of flashings and nail heads on old buildings. Research shows that lead toxicity in kea is widespread throughout the species range, wherever kea and humans overlap (Reid et al, 2012).
- Ingestion of 1080 laced pellets in predator control operations (Kemp et al. 2019). Kea that are attracted to and focussed on novel food items in areas where humans visit, are less likely to be cautious around baits and more likely to ingest a lethal amount of toxin.
- Ingestion of other toxic items mistaken for food such as chocolate (Gartrell & Reid 2007), lead (Reid et al 2012) and household rubbish.
- Car strike and accidents as a result of kea scrounging for food around carparks and roadways.

Is it okay to feed kea healthy/natural foods?

No. Any feeding of wild kea teaches them to seek out people for a food reward AND discourages them from foraging for food in the wild. Feeding wild kea does not help them but instead poses a serious threat to their survival.

A taonga species

Māori and Ngāi Tahu (according to the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998) are the kaitiaki (guardians) of kea found within the Ngāi Tahu claim area, and while recognising it is not illegal by law, Ngāi Tahu believes the practice of feeding wild kea by people goes against their tikanga (custom). Kaitiakitanga (guardianship) is the practice of conservation and protection of threatened or endangered species.

Accordingly, while recognising it is not illegal, the Kea Conservation Trust believes the practice of feeding wild kea by people should be strongly discouraged. The Kea Conservation Trust also supports urgent review of the Wildlife Act, to better protect kea from the negative impacts of people feeding wild kea.

References

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