



# Waikato Biodiversity Forum

Ngā Kaihāpai Rerenga Rauropi o Waikato

## Report from the Waikato Biodiversity Forum. Held on the Waikato River Trail, South Waikato, Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2019

### Purpose of the day;

- See biodiversity enhancement and protection projects taking place on the Waikato River Trail.
- Hear from leading organisations combining tourism and biodiversity enhancement work.
- Learn about the QEII Trust's covenanting processes, history and legacy.
- Find out about about Raukawa Charitable Trust's innovative marae based kaitiaki programs.

**A**fter gathering on the shores of Lake Karapiro, on a drizzly November morning, our group of 30 huddled under a small shelter at Little Waipa reserve to commence our day and journey with a Karakia from Anaru Begbie of Raukawa Charitable Trust. This was important, as it set our intentions clearly for our Haerenga on the Waikato River Trail and to give thanks to the Awa and Whenua which has provided so much for Raukawa Tupuna, and for all of us to this day. With the sun now coming out and the formalities of introductions and health and safety complete, we were ready to hit the River Trail and head over the board walk through Huihuitaha wetland, the first stop on our tour. The day would also feature guest speakers from two other organisations involved in tourism and biodiversity restoration, plus Raukawa Charitable Trust who shared their exciting new Marae-based kaitiaki program. We would also be lucky enough to explore some stunning bush remnants on the river trail and to learn about how the QEII National Trust was formed and continues to protect thousands of forest blocks on private land nation wide.

### Waikato River Trails Huihuitaha Wetland

The Waikato River Trail follows alongside Te Awa o Waikato from Lake Karapiro in the North, all the way to Lake Atiamuri in the South. The 103km long trail is used for both walking and biking. Some trail users take shorter journeys (Little Waipa to Arapuni is very popular) while others take on the whole trail, even linking up to trails in other regions of Aotearoa, to tour the whole country. Over 40,000 people used the Waikato trail last year, and numbers are constantly on the rise.



Glyn Wooler providing a brief overview of the trail before we get to experience it first hand.



Above and below, the scenic Huihuitaha boardwalk heading south toward Arapuni



Managing director of River Trails, Glyn Wooller, explained that the key driver for the trail at its 2006 outset, was about economic development for the South Waikato Region, but

environmental enhancement has now become an integral part of the trails, with the realisation that healthy economies need a healthy environment to sustain them. The trail has also opened up access to the river in areas where restoration may not have been possible – such as at Huihuitaha Wetland where we could see a significant amount of planting and weed removal had taken place in order to rehabilitate this stunning site. Last year marked the planting of 100,000 native trees on the trail, all of which were all planted by volunteers. Volunteers have also been heavily involved in invasive plant species removal, especially at Huihuitaha where a huge amount of Willow and Privet have been drilled and injected and blackberry cleared to make space for plantings.

In addition to the wetland enhancement work, we were also able to see further restoration works completed on a property adjacent to the trail, which contains a pond feeding into the river. In agreement with the landowner, this area has been planted out in natives and permanently retired under a memorandum of encumbrance from Waikato Regional Council.

Aside from the direct effect of the physical restoration work on the trail which is making a difference to biodiversity in the Waikato, the trail also helps reconnect people to nature and strengthens their sense of kaitiakitanga, for our country's longest river.

### Jim Barnett Reserve

Our next stop was Jim Barnett reserve in Waotu, a spectacular original and restored indigenous forest block, which the River Trail runs directly through. Gaye Lamb, a local landowner and QEII covenanter explained that Jim Barnett Reserve was originally part of a 1000ha bush block, spared from the destruction of the 186AD Taupo volcanic eruption by a low hill which interrupted the path of the resulting ash





Above and below and right. Gaye Lamb taking our guided on the River Trail, through Jim Barnett Reserve.



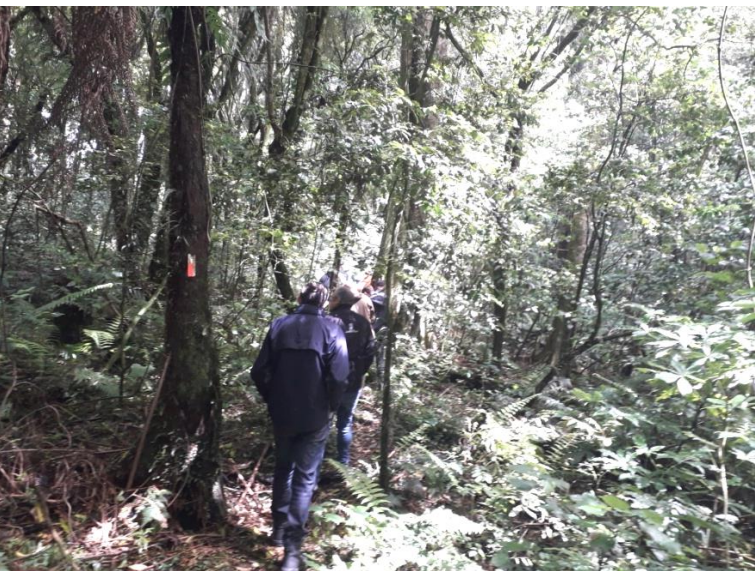
cloud. The area was then eventually occupied by Ngati Kahupungapunga and Ngati Raukawa for over 400 years, after which time Europeans began to farm and mill the area in the mid to late 1800's. Once all the large trees (Totara, Rimu, Matai, kahikatea and pukatea) had been milled, what was left of the forest was then used to shelter stock, which decimated forest undergrowth. With less than 100 hectares remaining by the 1920's, a further

50 hectare block was cleared for timber and farming in the 1970s. This prompted neighbouring couple, Gordon and Celia Stephenson, to co-found the [Queen Elizabeth II National Trust](#) in 1977. In 1979 they became the first landowners in New Zealand to covenant private land, opting to protect 4 hectares of remaining Waotu native bush fragment on their farm. They then encouraged the South Waikato District Council to buy the remaining 16 hectare block from the Barnett Family, containing the remnant but damaged forest fragment in Waotu. A further 7 hectares of covenanted land purchased by Forest and Bird now also adjoins this, which has been almost fully planted in indigenous species by Forest and Bird and local volunteers. Since this time the forest has been fenced off and pest management has taken place since 1992. The area is now also a popular spot on the River Trail to camp overnight and enjoy the reserve, with the recently built toilet and shelter facilities, provided through the South Waikato Investment Funds Trust.





After Gaye had taken us on a tour through the reserve we were lucky to also visit the 4 Hectare Stephenson Family QEII block, which was the first ever covenant back in 1979. Gordon and Celia Stephenson's daughter, Lynn spoke of how her parents had fallen in love with Aotearoa's native bush and how through the creation of the QEII Trust had fought successfully to protect these Waotu bush fragments, as well as countless others all over the country. She also spoke of how the health of the block increased dramatically when they began predator control. This was well evident on our walk through the block as from the forest floor to the canopy, foliage was dense and lush.



The density of Stephenson's bush was quite impressive - largely thanks to their vigilant and on-going predator control.

### Maungatautari Mountain Sanctuary

After lunch at Jim Barnett reserve, Jessica Meade from Sanctuary Mountain Maungatautari, started of as our first of three guest speakers. Maungatautari is of course Aotearoa's largest predator free sanctuary, with 3400 hectares of reserve contained within a 47 Km long state-of-the-art, predator-proof fence. The cost alone of maintaining such a fence is huge, not to mention those from running the many conservation programmes and activities

at the Sanctuary. Like the majority of conservation projects, the Sanctuary is financially kept afloat by having a large number of regular volunteers (over 200 at Maungatautari) who generously contribute their time and skills, as well as from a range of governmental and non-governmental funding streams. Attracting paying visitors to the Sanctuary is a key strategy for Maungatautari to raise additional revenue, so they are not completely reliant on external funders and the goodwill of volunteers.

The Sanctuary is currently attracting about 17,000 visitors per year, with a range of tours based within the southern enclosure and Tautari wetland. Jessica Meade from Maungatautari explained that the Sanctuary is trying to create an attractive tourist product by sharing the story of the Maunga with visitors, from its mythological and geological beginnings, all the way to today. Also, by having enigmatic and popular species such as Tuatara, Kiwi, Kokako, Kaka and, possibly soon, Kakapo, they can not only help the survival and proliferation of endangered species, but also provide a huge attraction for



Jessica Meade from Maungatautari Mountain Sanctuary speaking at Jim Barnett Reserve



conservation minded tourists. A further revenue stream is also now beginning to come from the sanctuary being hired as a venue for yoga and meditation retreats. In fact they are constantly on the look out for opportunities to create revenue that feeds directly into the amazing conservation work taking place on the Maunga.

### Raukawa Charitable Trust

April Haika from Raukawa Charitable trust explained how the Pūtake Taiao group from Raukawa Charitable Trust has established a rōpū of Raukawa uri who share a passion for and commitment to the Raukawa environment as kaitiaki. The rōpū is a way of building capability of Raukawa tribal members by developing environmental skills, knowledge and experience. This will enable the rōpū members to be involved in and lead initiatives which seek to restore, protect and enhance the Raukawa environment. It is intended that, in time the rōpū will be the heart of environmental matters within the takiwā.

Rōpū members are provided with the opportunity to participate in workshops, education programmes, seminars, development and implementation of projects, and work experience. Some of the mahi the rōpū has been involved in to date includes learning how to use the Stream Health Monitoring Assessment Kits and dwarf galaxias monitoring

at Te Waihou, Blue Spring.

### Canopy Tours Rotorua

Rotorua Canopy Tours is very much a leading example of tourism and biodiversity enhancement working in unison. Every customer who goes on a Canopy Tour helps to restore the native forest by automatically donating a portion of the fee for each tour purchased into conservation efforts. In fact over half a million of tourism funded dollars have gone into a 250 hectare pest management operation in the Dansey Road Scenic Reserve where Rotorua Canopy Tours operates. As well as tourists automatically donating a portion of each tour fee, many local booking agencies have also generously donated their booking fees to Canopy Tours to help further fund pest eradication-work.



2012 above to 2018 below - a massive visible difference in forest health



Raukawa Charitable Trust kaimahi and members from the Raukawa Kaitiaki Rōpū joined with Rangers from the DOC in Novemebr 2019 to monitor the population of dwarf galaxias in the Waihou awa.

With their tourism funded conservation model, the team at Canopy Tours have been able to restore much of this large section of native forest in a short space of time and have seen amazing results. These can be viewed in the attached photos showing the extensive growth of the forest canopy from 2012 to 2018. Since then native bird numbers have been soaring. So much so that the North Island Robin can even now be seen eating out of visitor's hands – much to their delight.

Paul Button of Canopy Tours spoke of how in the beginning stages of their predator control work, they immediately realised that the problem was far bigger than initially anticipated while laying out their first trap line, when some of the traps could audibly be heard snapping shut just minutes after being laid out. This not only made the team aware of the scale of the issue, but also made them more determined to get on top of it. Paul also described how, in the beginning stages of the business, the amount of effort going into the predator management was cutting heavily into their profit margin, as they had not yet calculated for the seasonal nature of tourism. Through some tough times, the situation was eventually remedied with improved planning, as well as a partnership

with DoC, who have contributed financially to Canopy Tours' pest eradication efforts, after seeing how committed they were to the task. The business and forest are both now very much thriving and we will watch with great interest to see how this and other tourism and conservation success stories develop in Aotearoa.



There was a lot of love shown to this huge old Rimu at our final stop of the day in another Waotu bush remnant protected under QEII covenant. A great way to end the day!