

Kāpiti-Mana Forest and Bird

Newsletter June 2022

Chair's opinion. Just start something 2

Last month I talked about "Just starting something". You never know where it will end. I received very favourable comment on that newsletter and I want to continue that theme for this one.

During my time as chair, I have lamented the fate of Queen Elizabeth Park and the shameful behaviour of some GW councillors and GW Park's staff. This was a hard fought attempt to win back the park for the people, for recreation and for conservation and the environment. It was led by the Friends of QEP but supported by F&B. Well, it is now my opinion that we have passed beyond that situation.

A significant change was the new GW councillors voted onto council in October 2019. That made a very great difference. I walked with Councillor Thomas Nash to Mataihuka so we could look down on the park and discuss my vision for its environmental and recreational future. He got it. I was so pleased when he was subsequently elected. There were still some fights (such as a new attempted farming contract over some of the park) but the fights have lost their intensity.

Our recent meetings with GW Parks staff have been harmonious. We are at last all on the same page. We (GW and us) can share information and discuss difficulties.

GW is now keen to rewet all the peat. That is a significant local solution to climate change and will result in QEP having substantial wetlands. GW has allocated funds and is working towards that outcome, but has to go through the various checks and permissions before work can proceed.

Planting the park with pioneers started in earnest last winter, will increase this winter and continue maybe for years to come. Much of the non-wetland parts of the park will be eventually forested in natives. Wetland and peatland areas are revealing themselves by growing reeds and will develop over time.

The drier sand dune areas are more difficult to reforest because of the rank exotic farm grasses.

The northern area of the park has been opened up for public use since Christmas. You can now walk on the park roads and tracks. The southern areas will be fully opened soon.

I remember six or so years ago looking at the flat areas in QEP alongside the expressway and thinking how they were made, not recognising they had been swamps (and peat swamps at that) that had been drained and farmed. Once that realization dawned, there was no going back. The six year fight for the peat wetlands had started. It will take time but the fight is over.

The Escarpment track from Paekākāriki to Pukerua Bay is part of the Te Araroa Trail. Advertising says "*You'll climb 220 metres above sea level and navigate steep narrow pathways on what is one of the highlights of the Te Araroa Trail... taking in sweeping views of the spectacular Kāpiti Coastline and the region's famous Kāpiti Island*". The idea for the track came from Ken Fraser of Raumati South. He volunteers for the organisation Ngā Uruora which took on the daunting task of restoring the escarpment.

Getting the idea accepted, finding a route which could be built, progressing the track when the rest of the route was undecided, and finding large amounts of money were some of the challenges that Ken faced.

Ken thought up, started and continued this project and now thousands of people per year walk this part of the Te Araroa Trail. Ken's story appears next in this newsletter. It is a remarkable achievement for him, a benefit for Kāpiti, and another example of "Just start something you care about".

Russell

The escarpment trail – Part of Te Araroa

The land, from Paekākāriki overbridge to Pukerua Bay, is owned by KiwiRail and is covenanted under QE2 National Trust. Ngā Uruora has a management agreement with QE2 to keep the escarpment free of pests animals and weeds, and to attempt to bring back native forest by planting trees and eventually bring back native critters.

Access had been established from the north end under the Paekākāriki road and rail overbridge for starters. We had to squeeze between the railway and the bridge, slide down the concrete and sidle across a concrete slope. One false step could land you in the pool of water under the bridge. Reaching the quarry required clearing of vegetation and making a narrow bench track on steep scree slope for about a kilometre.

Another access point was about halfway to Pukerua Bay from Centennial highway up to the terraces, over land where the rail went through a tunnel. That way, we did not have to cross the railway line. Ngā Uruora had planted the terraces with native trees and had constructed an extensive irrigation system for them.

A track was needed to access the steep parts of the escarpment. We were hacking a path through 2-metre tall cape ivy. We kept muttering "This is crazy!" under our breath as we took another swipe at the stems which were thick like bamboo. It took about an hour to slash 5 metres. Past the quarry required hacking boxthorns and gorse until we eventually reached the old Māori village, Paripari, inhabited in early colonial times.

Then I had an idea. My crazy dream was to link the quarry track to our tracks at the terraces further towards Pukerua Bay and then to create a track all the way to Pukerua Bay. But deep down we knew it was impossible. 'We' were volunteers from Ngā Uruora, a conservation group based in Paekākāriki.

The first major obstacle to my crazy dream was a deep and fierce erosion gully, impassable except at the bottom next to the railway, and at the top where it changes into a gentle grassy gully. We shelved the idea when we realized it was going to be too

difficult and we were not prepared to do all the maintenance required. A line of senecio bushes marking the end of our track about 10 metres above the display board at Paripari. But I was keen to explore further along the escarpment, so I went over the top of Barton's erosion gully and climbed the spur which leads up to the present Lookout. From the Lookout, a spur led south down to the terraces. At the south end of the terraces I climbed up through the Ecosite forest to the edge of a major gully and found sheep tracks that took me down to the stream. After more bush bashing using sheep tracks, I climbed the next ridge and several other gullies eventually reaching the Woolshed and a road leading to Muri Station. Now I had a route from Paekākāriki to Pukerua Bay.

Trialling the route as a tramping expedition seemed an obvious thing to do next, so I offered it to the Parawai Tramping Club. It was advertised as a new route from Paekākāriki to Pukerua Bay via the escarpment with return by train from Muri station.

Fortunately, the day was a stunner. We walked up the stream from the overbridge and along Ngā Uruora's track to Paripari. From here, we took the high route over the top of the erosion gully and climbed the long ridge to the Lookout. With no track it was hard on the feet, constantly balancing on the edges of our boots. At the Lookout we could see Tapaeunuku in Marlborough, Mount Taranaki and Mt Ruapehu, the highest peaks in the North and South Islands (apart from peaks in Mt Cook NP). Past the terraces we climbed through the Ecosite Forest and came face to face with a huge gully forcing us to climb down on sheep tracks through gorse and manuka forest, then a climb up the other side. It was quickly followed by another very similar gully. That used up any energy the party had in reserve. The party was very glad to reach Muri Station but full of enthusiasm about the route despite sore twisted feet.

While Ngā Uruora had an agreement to do conservation work, the public was strictly prohibited so trampers had to become volunteers pulling a weed or two on the trip.

I also led several escarpment trips for the Tararua Tramping Club, following the same route but sometimes dropped down the escarpment using a steep slope above a railway tunnel, coming out on the main road. It avoided passing through local farm land.

About this time, Te Araroa - New Zealand's 3,000 km continuous walking track from Cape Reinga to Bluff - in Wellington were looking for a route through the Tararuas to Wellington. They were exploring the idea of a route going down the eastern part of the Tararuas via Holdsworth and Totara Flats, but no definite route had yet been found. I thought the committee might be interested in the escarpment route and arranged to meet them.

The project could have failed at the Te Araroa meeting held at the Wellington Club because I turned up in my tramping clothes. The lady at the desk glared at me. Proper dress was required. It looked as though I might not get in. Denis McLean, chair of the committee, luckily smoothed things over. While the committee was sceptical about a track, vertical drops and KiwiRail land, and alternative routes were discussed, I volunteered, and Bill Wakelin and John Farrell agreed, to walk the route.

There were several exploratory trips. They needed to see Tapaeunuku, Ruapehu and even Taranaki at the highest point, now called the Lookout, while not being blown to the ground by the wind; to see the Terraces and the Ecosite Forest of the central parts, the bushy part of the escarpment to the south, and the southern steep gullies which were full of native plants.

On one trip we should have spotted the forecast north-westerly with heavy rain. It caught us on the steepest parts and soon there were waterfalls coming down the gullies. Soaked to the skin and shivering, we reached the Woolshed and stood at the door dripping pools of water. But at this stage, the committee were more or less hooked.

Getting under the Paekākāriki road and rail overbridge was a problem from the start. We could not expect people to traverse the concrete risking a slip into a pool of water.

The committee decided to build some proper steps. A design and cost were done. It came out at about \$33K. It was difficult to raise the funds. The only solution was for all interested parties to chip in. We had a special meeting of Ngā Uruora and decided to contribute \$5K which was nearly all we had in the bank. It was a significant moment in the project because it changed the psychology - we were all going to go for it, we were committed. It was one of the best investments that Ngā Uruora has made.

The route south of the Lookout had not been determined though I had pointed out a possible route sidling across without losing much height, keeping above the big gullies. That would include great views and much less climbing. But there are private landowners whose land boundaries come down close to the railway, in one case within about 7 metres. We put a lot of effort into talking them round, even suggesting they could make money by opening a cafe at the Lookout! But it was not to be.

When I invited Jonathan Kennett to come along to advise us about building a track, we organised a trip to walk the full length of the escarpment along the boundary. We rather rapidly gave up after a few metres travel through gorse and boxthorn bushes. The committee, however, was still keen on the idea of sidling across from the Lookout. We kept negotiating with landowners for permission to put the track on their land, but when this proved impossible, we knew we had to stick to KiwiRail land. This explains some of the big climbs and descents.

Trevor Butler, a Te Araroa director and managing director of Frame, and I were involved in surveying the final route. It was no easy task. Two swing bridges were needed to traverse the big gullies. One day Trevor needed to confirm concrete placements for the bridges. We were both offered a "lift" on a quad bike. There were no seats so Trevor and I sat on the wheel arches and held on for dear life. I was nearly thrown off going down the steep spur to the first bridge. There was no easy way to visit the opposite concrete placement so we bush bashed on a straight line dropping down to the stream and up the other side.

Surveying the route for the track took us across some of the steepest parts of the escarpment. We used bamboo stakes and pink flags to mark the route. Trevor used a clinometer to check the gradients and I went ahead to place the flags. The stake had to be within 100mm of the right spot.

The last section to be surveyed was the track down to Muri Station where the track needed to squeeze between the Woolshed and the railway. The final solution involved some encroachments onto the Woolshed Owner's land, and included new fences and some tree planting to preserve privacy.

We soon had a complete set of plans which we could show to potential funders. We now 'only' had to build the track.

Initially I believed that the track should be hacked out using voluntary labour in the same way that mountain bikers make their tracks. A meeting was arranged with KiwiRail who made it clear that more control was needed to reassure railway management.

They were sympathetic to the idea of a walking track, were understandably concerned about safety and it soon became apparent that we had to get the design and construction done by professional engineers.

During all these recesses, the committee was hard at work trying to raise funds from charities such as the Lotteries Commission. There was a lot of interest and some sympathy but very few promises.

The plans helped to bring some funders to the project but we were still short by \$400K. Bill and John and the TA National Committee lobbied government departments for the extra cash. John Key had handed out large amounts of cash to the mountain bikers which was a good precedent, so that probably helped the government to give us the last \$400K needed.

Te Araroa National Committee proposed that Frame Group be commissioned to prepare a design and take control of the building work.

Tenders were put out by Frame Group for digging the track. Valley Landscape, run by Paul O'Hagan, won the contract. Paul used two young fit guys to hack the track out of

the hillside. There were just a few gentle slopes where a mini-digger was used. It was tough work not only hacking away at the hillside but also cutting the timber for the steps. On hot afternoons, the guys would crawl through a culvert underneath the rail and the road to the sea for a swim to get rid of the dirt and sweat.

Andrew Simm from the Te Araroa committee visited the workers frequently. He kept the committee informed about the latest progress and any problems. It was important to get everything right the first time. The treads and rises of the steps and the rest areas had to be well designed. At one point the track had to avoid Barton's private land by crossing a cliff face just above the railway. He had a good look at the anchors holding up the bridge across the cliff face and took photos. Andrew relayed all that information back to the committee, helping to ensure a high quality result.

I accompanied him sometimes but we did not have to walk out to the track end every time. We took a shortcut by crawling through a culvert under the road and rail. We climbed a four metre ladder half way through the culvert and rappelled down into the sea.

The track was opened in April 2016 with a celebration at St Peters in Paekākāriki. On the opening day, photos taken from the Lookout showed long lines of people coming up from the swing bridges. It was good to see so many people enthusiastic about the new track. A bit later there was a celebration in the Banquet Hall in Parliament organised by Walking Access New Zealand.

High usage has continued to date with 31,000 people walking the track in 2019.

My thanks are due to Bill Wakelin and John Farrell who accepted my mad idea for a track, and worked very hard to overcome all the obstacles. Thanks also to all the other Te Araroa people and many others that made it possible, including members of Ngā Ururora.

That was one of my mad ideas but there must be plenty of other steep places needing connecting tracks around the Wellington coast.

Ken Fraser



Opening day of the Paekākāriki Escarpment Track - above the swing bridges - April 2016

You can see the work of Ngā Uruora, watch a video of the escarpment walk, join or support Ngā Uruora [here](#). Ngā Uruora is still working on the escarpment. It meets on Tuesday mornings planting and releasing native plants. More helpers are needed to continue this work.

*** Ngā mihi o Matariki te tau hou Māori ***

Sending you Matariki Greetings....

- * A time to reflect on the past,
- * A time to celebrate the present, and
- * A time to plan for the year ahead...

Perhaps starting something new?

A morning with the volunteers at Kaitawa Reserve - Paraparaumu

It's 8am on Thursday, a cold winters morning is forecast but good weather follows for the rest of the day.

Our team of volunteers arrive one by one at the Kaitawa Crescent entrance to the reserve. Brent has opened the bollards so we can drive in and park by the Scout Den. Everyone wears a warm beanie to keep head and ears warm as the sun won't be here for another hour or so. The day starts with a catch up on news and gossip of the week. Of course in no time at all we have solved all significant political, legal, and economic issues facing the world today and are ready to do some work to keep warm.

Brent and Tony brief the team on the plan for the morning which will involve clearing pest plants from a wetland area at the Panorama Drive entrance. By 8:30am armed with grubbers and weed spray bottles we're away heading for the worksite. We will leave the vehicles at Kaitawa Crescent entrance car

park and return there for morning tea/coffee at 10:15am.

On our way to the worksite (approx. 0.5 km) we will deal with weeds and pest plants we spot and check on the progress of new plantings of trees, and ferns. Particular interest will be paid to progress of some host trees recently planted in the reserve which carry young NZ mistletoe plants.

Pest plants we're looking for include; climbing dock, climbing asparagus, gorse, blackberry, banana passion fruit, cathedral bells, ivy, tradescantia, jasmine, cotoneaster, and many others.

Brent is our paid contractor who does all the heavy stuff that KCDC doesn't want volunteers to attempt such as tree felling and chainsaw work, using a line trimmer and other machines posing a risk of injury. Volunteers are Graham, Pete, Helen, Irene and Tony.

By morning tea time we will have cleared pest weeds from a small part of the reserve and struck another blow for restoration and maintenance of our local native bush.

Our aim is to '*Restore and maintain the native forest in the reserve to ensure its survival into the future and provide a place where people can learn about native flora and fauna*'. We are particularly interested in providing opportunities for school students to connect with nature at the reserve and to this end have setup 'Outdoor Classroom' panels and posters displaying information about native trees, ferns, insects, and fish found in the reserve.

When planting out new areas we often use seedlings that have occurred naturally in Kaitawa and have been collected and potted up by Brent. At this time of year we arrange

Maara Roa AGM

Maara Roa (the group featured in our last newsletter) is having its AGM on 11 July 2022 (7:30pm at Mana Electorate Rooms - 12 Hagley Street, Porirua) with their guest speaker Andrew Jinks of Porirua City Council about the Rediscovering of Swamp Maire in the district - its importance and plans for the future. Why not pop along to find out more and support this great organisation?

Stewardship Land

DOC Stewardship Land, and what happens to it, is under review. F&B is asking members to tell the government you'd like it to have more protection. There's a [short submission form](#) to complete, or you can register for [the webinar](#) on 5 July at 7pm, or put in a [fuller submission](#) yourself. I think this is the most important Forest and Bird issue this year. Read [F&B's Explainer sheet](#) to find out more.

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for primary school students to help us with tree planting to give the kids an opportunity to connect with nature and learn a bit about the trees and plants that make up our New Zealand bush.

KCDC has a plan to plant native trees along the Wharemauku stream out to the expressway. We hope to be involved in that exercise and to be able to provide seedlings from the reserve and help with the planting.

Molly Neil, a retired school teacher, started the process in 1995 by stopping the council developing the land for housing. A memorial to Molly is at Kaitawa Cres entrance to the reserve. John McLachlan and others setup the Kapiti Ecological Restoration and Maintenance trust Inc (KERMT), which continues the work, in May 2008.

Tony Ward

New Zealand Garden Bird Survey

This survey runs until the end of this Sunday – it is a great excuse to set aside an hour in your garden to 'be with nature', and count birds as a citizen scientist to help us understand how they're getting on. Their website has great resources for all ages too: <https://gardenbirdsurvey.nz/>

Kāpiti Weekend Wetland Restoration Group

This is a new group and is meeting for the first time on 16 July 9:30-12:30 at Queen Elizabeth Park. It's aimed at those with 'day jobs' opportunity to get involved restoring wetlands in Queen Elizabeth Park. Their first meeting is on 16 July 9:30-12:30. Email Jill Visser (jillvissercox@gmail.com) for details and to RSVP.

Your feedback on this newsletter would be most welcome as would contributions to future newsletters.