

ANNUAL REPORT: 2015

Overview

2015 has been a year of consolidation for the trust, with two new trustees, a new co-ordinator, two new projects, and new avenues opening up to engage the community and conservation stakeholders with interests in Aotea / Great Barrier Island.

Progress on the strategic priorities has been slow due to Department of Conservation delays

Our strategic plan has, for four years now, identified the following priorities – Rakitu, Hirakimata, the reintroduction of kokako to Te Paparahi (the northern section of Great Barrier) and community pest control projects. The role of the Trust varies in each case, from advocacy through to project delivery, but here we provide an update on each for 2015:

- *Eradication of rats from Rakitu and reintroduction of lost species*, including whiteheads, kakariki, bellbirds, saddleback, lizards, skinks, land snails and seabirds. (Rakitu sits in a seabird highway with islands to the north and south sustaining up to nine species of seabirds). This project has stalled, with debates within DOC about what to do with the weka population (see Environmental News 2012) and unspent budget diverted by the Department to other projects in the Auckland and Northland regions. Delays in the treaty settlement process and negotiation with the Rope/Foster families have also contributed. The Trust, through new trustee June Brookes, continues to lobby both the Whangarei and Auckland offices for the retention of that budget to ensure Rakitu can become New Zealand's next island sanctuary.
- *Pest control on Hirakimata/Mt Hobson*: in December 2015 the Trust was successful in securing funding of \$10,000 from RENH/Auckland Council to set up and monitor a network of cat and rat traps on tracks leading up to and around Hirakimata/Mt Hobson. Hirakimata is a unique remnant of high altitude rain forest which supports the last remaining significant colony of black petrels (taiko), a few tenacious tomtits, kakariki and robins, as well as kaka and kereru and a range of unusual plants, Great Barrier tree daisy, mountain toatoa and creeping kanuka to name a few. Due to funding decisions made in Auckland and Whangarei (see below), the local DOC office has no budget to allocate for cat or rat control in this unique ecosystem in the 2015/16 taiko breeding season. The funding the Trust received will provide a contractor to set and monitor live cat traps on the tracks leading to the summit for 2-3 days each month, with a second monitoring run leading up to Taiko fledging time.
- *Black Petrel advocacy and research*. A grant application to Auckland Council EIF was successful in securing \$16K towards Elizabeth Bell's black petrel research on Hirakimata for the 2014/15 season. The EIF money enabled a more extensive survey including monitoring of sites additional to Hirakimata to investigate historical and public sightings. A series of visits to the colony were made, including by Jacinda Ardern, Labour list MP based in Central Auckland, and Volker Kuntzsch new CEO of Sanfords, the media and the local community, to raise awareness and support for Taiko. A full report of the outcomes of the seasonal study is available at <http://www.doc.govt.nz/our-work/conservation-services-programme/csp-reports/2014-15/black-petrels-on-great-and-little-barrier-islands-2014-15/>

- *Reintroduction of kokako to Te Paparahi.* A co-ordinator position funded by DOC enabled a CCPF grant application by Ngāti Rehua Ngātiwai ki Aotea to be submitted, which was successful. This grant will be used to initiate a feasibility study for this proposed project. The time frame is unknown.
- *Community pest control projects in settlements across the island.* The Trust received \$8400 funding from the GB Local Board towards installation and monitoring of remote sensing devices on the existing Mulberry Grove Community Rodent control project. The remote sensors allow immediate recording and reporting of trap activity, enabling more timely responses to triggered traps and better design of trap networks. This type of remote sensing has the potential to change the way pest control is achieved in NZ, as it will enable devices (traps, tracking tunnels etc.) to be monitored from afar, reducing the need for tedious on-ground monitoring, and focussing this effort on actual responses to pests. The trial is being established on an existing community network to facilitate easy access and enable the feasibility of the system for more remote locations to be tested. The application of this system will be trialled for one year and potentially expanded to other more remote locations or more communities in the future. Already residents from Medlands have expressed their interest in having a community project initiated to combat rats in a coordinated manner.
- Finally on the project front, John Ogden again oversaw the Cockle count at Okiwi estuary, which is showing a decline in cockle numbers and especially in larger cockles.

Conservation Park progress – and declining DOC funding and reputation

In April the Minister of Conservation, Maggie Barry, formally opened the Aotea Conservation Park following sustained pressure to improve the protection status of the island's ecosystems. This gives marginally more protection to public conservation lands on the island and creates the basis for future increase in year round tourism. The park comprises 46% of the island's land area. Trustee Kate Waterhouse, along with former trustee Judy Gilbert, of Little Windy Hill Sanctuary and a current Great Barrier Local Board member, have both been appointed to the new park's Advisory Committee.

In April the National Party's "Blue Greens" (a pro-conservation group within the party) hosted their annual conference at the Barrier Social Club in Tryphena, attended by trustee Kate Waterhouse. No fewer than five cabinet ministers turned out, including Trade and Climate Change Minister Tim Grocer, Environment Minister Nick Smith, local MP Nikki Kaye and Minister of Conservation Maggie Barry. Saturday was taken up with a range of speakers including the knowledgeable and dedicated Stephen Rainbow of the Waipoua Forest Trust. On 12 April the Minister of Conservation and others visited Glenfern Sanctuary, amidst attempts to try to close a deal with the Bouzaid family and Auckland Council to get Glenfern into public ownership. That deal has proved elusive throughout 2015, but Glenfern continues to operate, thanks to Scott Sambell and GBIET trustee Emma Cronin, hosting seabird breeding for four species, piloting remote monitoring technology and providing a major tourism drawcard and environmental educational facility.

Meanwhile the impact of policy and budgeting decisions in the Department of Conservation continued to be felt. The Trust understands that all of the biodiversity budget for Great Barrier for 2015 was diverted for the 'Battle for the Birds' beech mast 1080 campaign in the South Island and for other mainland campaigns including the Hunua 1080 drop. Unfortunately DOC's public image and community relations dropped to an all-time low in 2015. Staff were frustrated at the lack of budget to support protection of black petrel and of kakariki (which remain breeding in the old trees at Okiwi, despite continued rat and cat predation).

This has affected the Trust's work in a number of ways, most directly in having to step in to try to protect the main black petrel breeding colony on Hirakimata from cats and rats using Auckland Council RENH funding. The Trust will continue to advocate to DOC and Auckland Council for budget decisions to support biodiversity protection and the reduction of rat and feral cat numbers on Aotea Great Barrier.

Auckland Council and the Local Board

Following sustained influence from the Trust over a period of years, the Local Board began community engagement on the future of the island's ecology in 2015. Trustees contributed extensively to this process as private individuals. Trustees also attended or spoke at most meetings of the Environmental Strategic Planning Committee of the Local Board and made a number of submissions, including to the Unitary Plan as it related to marine protected areas and water quality.

Succession of trustees and officers

Dr Emma Cronin acted as chair through 2015, with a focus on progressing projects and advocacy. New trustee June Brookes, who is also active in Forest & Bird, was a welcome addition to the trustee group, having restored a bushed valley in the Awana catchment with her husband and daughter and worked in conservation advocacy for many years. Alison Walker also joined as a trustee. Alison is a trained primary teacher and has worked in tourism on Waiheke Island. With her family she has established a network of tracks and predator control on 33ha of steep bush near Windy Canyon with resulting increases in birdlife. Kay Stowell has taken up the reins as the trust's on island administrator in 2015 for which we are deeply grateful. Finally, David Speir completed his last Environmental News as editor in December 2015 and we thank him for his long support of the Trust in this role.

Our supporters and members

We completed the process of consolidating our member and friends database and updated our member communications and database. At the end of 2015 there were 106 members of which 54 were life members and 16 were family members. Our Facebook page was re-launched in 2014 and had almost 500 likes at the close of the year. Facebook is an important channel to communicate with supporters and share updates on campaigns such as for back petrels. A givealittle page has been established as another channel for supporters to provide donations to the Trust on an issues basis.

Our funders and financial position

Beyond the project funds received from Auckland Council RENH, EIF and GB Local Board funding outlined above, our financial position remained stable in 2015. We received funding from Foundation North (formerly the ASB Foundation) in 2015 for operational costs, which has provided valuable continuity and allowed us to complete the transition to a lower cost operation.

We continue to receive generous monthly support from a number of private donors and this enables us to continue regular community communications and to cover one-off costs. We are again very grateful to these individuals for the confidence they have shown in our work as we rebuild the trustee and volunteer group and expand the activity of the Trust to include more project work and education-based community engagement.

The Tony Bouzaid Port Fitzroy Protection Society proceeds remain earmarked for a cat research project and one other project (tbc). Unfortunately this did not progress in 2015 due to lack of trustee capacity and other priorities.

Communications and Community Engagement

For the first time we produced a video to support community and stakeholder engagement. Production Company 90 Seconds were contracted to produce a series of six short UTube videos about private conservation projects on Great Barrier Island. The videos showcased passionate locals and briefly described their restoration and/or pest control projects. A long and short compilation video was also produced. These videos have been used at events to demonstrate the dedication and support that the community has for its local environment. DOC and Destination GBI have committed to screening these videos via social media and gateway TV screens respectively. The videos can be viewed via our website and UTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKYJCCo5MBA>

The Trust participated in the New Year's Picnic event at Claris and Family Fun Day at Port FitzRoy, providing information about our projects and general environmental and restoration information (provided principally via Auckland Council). The NY picnic event generated a lot of interest especially in the Econode trial being installed at Mulberry Grove. Residents, ratepayers and visitors all visited and appreciated the display and extent of information available. The Great Easter Rat Hunt was well advertised, but participation in the event was lower and 2016's event has been changed to attract more involvement. Trustees again participated in the Walking Festival (March; Local Board/Auckland City) and in the walks and presentation organized by DOC during Conservation Week (November). For Auckland Council's 'Love Birds' tour trustees gave talks and we re-issued the GBI Bird Checklist for the Love Birds launch, leading to subsequent tours for which trustee John Ogden was a guide.

Bush Telegraph continued with 3 issues in 2015 as an easy read for locals and members alike, with short updates on island conservation efforts, and putting a spotlight on the local plants, birds and animals that share the island with us.

Environmental News is the Trust's biannual in-depth magazine with articles on conservation issues of interest and relevance to the island. Two were produced in 2015, including reports on key research and advocacy projects. We noted DOC's failure to achieve promised progress over rat eradication on Rakitu and estimates of rat and cat numbers on Aotea, and an assessment of the 86,000 birds killed by rats every year on GBI has now been 'confirmed' by independent data from Windy Hill (estimated more than 83,000). In 2016 Environmental News will have a new editor and may revert to a web based or annual publication, as Bush Telegraph and other organisations including Auckland Council and the Hauraki Gulf Forum provide paper and online publications summarising the key scientific and conservation projects and research.

Looking ahead – more collaboration and making the Conservation Park work

2015 saw increasing focus nationally on the use of private funds for conservation and further evidence that without volunteers conservation in New Zealand is not possible. On Great Barrier this is problematic – there are few permanent residents to draw on and many people live on low incomes so require payment for their time. On the other hand, Great Barrier's conservation assets are significant to a pest-free New Zealand agenda currently being promoted by many in the conservation sector, including the current Director General of Conservations, Lou Sanson.

Clearly the mainland is under siege and Stewart Island is struggling with how to manage the competing interests of conservation and population. As our patron Dame Anne Salmond commented on her visit here in 2014, humans are part of the ecology. We therefore expect to continue our current focus on grass roots conservation and education projects, working alongside others in the community. We await the outcomes of the social research underway on the island, funded by the Local Board of Auckland Council, to further develop Great Barrier's economy based on the environment.

The Trust will continue to identify and seek funding for on-island projects which progress use of new pest control technologies and engage the Great Barrier community in restoring and protecting habitats in which birds and other species can flourish. In doing this, we will increasingly seek to partner with Ngāti Rehua Ngātiwai ki Aotea and others who are committed to restoring the island's biodiversity.

We will continue to work with Scott Sambell, Manager of Glenfern Sanctuary, on network monitoring systems that reduce the labour hours required to manage trap networks. Pilots are currently underway in Tryphena and at Glenfern. Combined with non-toxin trapping, this system has the potential to be a solution for a pest free "island within an island" in the key North Barrier ecosystems (Hirakimata, Okiwi, Te Paparahi, Rakitu). Creating a North Barrier network could bring together a number of existing private networks at Glenfern, Okiwi and on Aotea Rd, Hirakimata and DOC's Okiwi cat control to protect our national stronghold for pateke.

We will also seek funding to repeat or update the 2010 State of the Environment Report in a summary form. This will attempt to assess whether there has been a gradual but significant decline in key bird and other species due to the high densities of rats and feral cats that inhabit Great Barrier's forests.

The Aotea Conservation Park Advisory Committee is likely to meet first in April 2016. The terms of reference are ambitious, including *"growing conservations outcomes and engaging tangata whenua and the island community in that work... the management of threatened species, pest control, restoration... and implementation of the Auckland Conservation Management Strategy"*. The latter is a 10 year strategy which includes reintroduction of kokako and a pest free Aotea/Great Barrier. Let us hope that this rhetoric is backed up with action by the Minister of Conservation and the Auckland Conservancy as they allocate resources and budget in 2016/17 for the Auckland region. More investment is needed in DOC staffing, ecological restoration and technology to ensure the protection of our treasured local species, so that those using this park's new infrastructure and facilities in future are not walking and biking through empty forests.

Dr Emma Cronin & Kate Waterhouse

Trustees

Great Barrier Island, February 2015