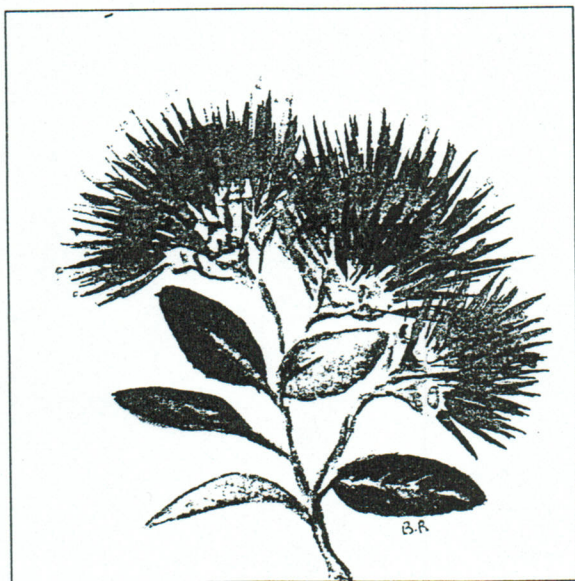


TREES

# The plight of the pohutukawa

*Jacqueline Sparrow reports that one of our most famous native trees needs help if it is to survive in the wild.*



NEW ZEALAND has a wealth of splendid native trees and it is difficult to pick a favourite, but the pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) is held in affectionate regard by most of us.

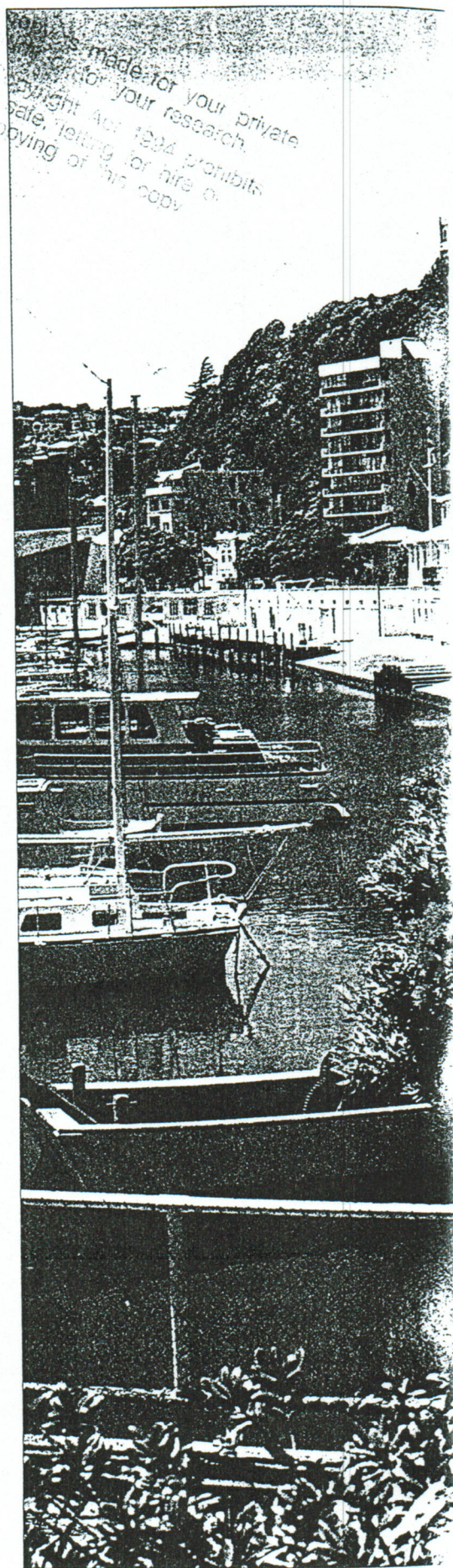
Project Crimson, an evocative title, is the scheme devised and funded by Department of Conservation and NZFP Forests Ltd to help save the pohutukawa from destruction.

It seems amazing that this tough survivor needs help, but it does. At one time we believed pohutukawa rarely died, and indeed many trees are over five hundred years old. But

pohutukawa are dying in the north. On Kawau Island many of the large old pohutukawa are dying or dead. The possum menace is so great that trees are completely decimated in many bays.

In the far north Dr Lindo Ferguson and his wife Laetitia are battling to save venerable trees on their historic Mangonui property. Not only pohutukawa are at risk here: old exotic trees, including an olive thought to be New Zealand's oldest, are being attacked and ravaged by possums.

Members of the Royal Forest and Bird Society are doing sterling service



ABOVE: At Christmas time pohutukawa trees are covered in striking crimson flowers.





on Tiritiri Matangi in the Hauraki Gulf. They have regular trips there on planting expeditions. Tiri, renowned for its lighthouse, was once dominated by pohutukawa, kohekohe, puriri, karaka and tareire. One ancient pohutukawa is considered to be 1,000 years old; when a branch broke off the growth rings were exposed. Man has done most of the damage on Tiri.

Maybe soon we will have to travel out to the Poor Knights Islands to see a pohutukawa, in a place where no predators lurk (we hope) and the land is as all the coastline once was, with bellbirds calling and tuis swooping amongst the huge trees. Reptiles fearlessly go about their business in the lush ground growth, baby trees flourish and all birds sing.

What can we do to help? One thing, apart from killing possums and we must do that, is to grow pohutukawa as quickly as possible. One bright spot is the ease with which the seeds germinate and cuttings grow. However the seedlings suffer the same fate as their elders in the wild, and so we must propagate them ourselves. They transplant easily.

Pohutukawa grow naturally from the far north down to Poverty Bay and Taranaki. They prefer a warm climate and can be grown in other parts of the country too. The best trees grow on or near the coast, but some are to be seen around Lakes Rotoiti and Rotoroa. Some authorities believe pohutukawa were taken there by the early Maori.

Pohutukawa are oblivious to gales and salt spray and grow into large spreading trees. Quick growing, they make great shelter belts at the coast. Their appearance is enhanced by age, developing great character over the years as the branches bend and twist and the trunk and roots take on convoluted shapes.

At Christmas time the whole tree blazes with crimson flowers tipped with gold. Three weeks and it is all over, but not all trees flower at the same time and northern beaches are aflame

in the golden days of December and January. All year long pohutukawa are hosts to birds, insects, ferns, astelias, kiekie, but at flowering time the tuis appropriate the trees and live high on nectar. After the flowers have faded and the seedheads form, smaller birds arrive and feed on seed, and obligingly spread it around.

Yellow pohutukawa, *M. excelsa* 'Aurea', has creamy soft yellow flowers and grows on Great Barrier Island and round Orewa but it is not as prolific or as beautiful as the crimson blooming pohutukawa. On Great Barrier I have seen 'Aurea' flowering in early November.

*M. kermadecensis*, the pohutukawa from the Kermadec Islands, is a good variety for the home garden being neater and not so tall as its relative. The smaller flowers have more of a scarlet hue and tend to be produced spasmodically through the year. A variegated foliage form is available which is most attractive.

At Cape Reinga, where spirits leave the land in Maori mythology, a giant pohutukawa (which can mean ceremonial crimson cloak of the departing spirit) used to grow overhanging the jagged rocks and dipping into the ocean. Today only a small tree remains at Cape Reinga but one still feels an aura in this place, a reverence and great respect.

Pohutukawa are part of our heritage and must be preserved for ever. Arbor Day celebrates its 100th birthday this year, and in July is Conservation Week, so there is no better time to start helping them to regenerate.

Cabbage trees have all but disappeared in Kawau Bay where I live, and very little is being done about it. Dutch elm disease is a worry, but all the publicity appears to be directing attention to the elms while cabbage trees die unheeded. That will be the fate of the pohutukawa unless we are vigilant. How ironic it was to use the crimson flowers of the pohutukawa as a Commonwealth Games symbol.

I believe possum traps, humane types naturally, should be subsidised by Department of Conservation, and that all northern coastal dwellers should be made aware of the plight of the pohutukawa.

LEFT: The pohutukawa is one of the best trees to grow near the sea.