

A legacy of lost relationships

THE AWESOME FORCES BEHIND
A 15-YEAR STRUGGLE TO RESTORE
THE TE HĀKARI WETLAND TO
ECOLOGICAL HEALTH.

PHOTOGRAPHY | *Rob Suisted*

“**I** think with this kind of work, wetland restoration, I can safely say we had Māori who were kaitiaki and Māori who weren’t. And that was just part of a legacy of lost relationships. I mean if you don’t go fishing any more than you don’t know what fishing is. We’d be down doing some dune planting and somebody would say: ‘Why are we doing this?’

“And that’s OK because we have become so used to modification. I think that modification has had massive effects on people and caused dysfunction between people because of us having a really wrecked region, when really it used to be amazing.”

Local woman Dr Huhana Smith has been one of the awesome forces behind a 15-year struggle to restore the 14 hectare Te Hākari wetland to ecological health, a process that has thrown into sharp relief the competing claims for Māori economic bases versus nature restoration.

She is a woman of great strength, with considerable charm, wit and wisdom, an ability to get on with many people and with a formidable academic record if anyone gets cheeky!

Te Hākari is one of a raft of dune wetlands on the Horowhenua coast, situated on the foreshore out from Kuku, between Waikawa and Levin. The lower reaches of the Ōhau River (including the “loop”)

Dr Huhana Smith, Richard Anderson and Rangimarkus Heke at the regenerating Te Hākari wetland, one of a raft of dune wetlands on the Horowhenua coast.





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DR HUHANA SMITH

are hydrologically linked to the tidal estuary, to Te Hākari dune wetland and the larger contiguous system stretching towards the Waikawa River. The coastal estuarine region remains predominantly in Māori title, either as shareholdings in large dairy farming incorporations or as part of Ahu Whenua, whānau or other trust arrangements.

In 1972 the Ōhau River was diverted as part of a flood protection scheme to allow coastal farmland to be developed, especially for dairying for the benefit of Māori-owned land.

“This has been a project that probably grew out of attempts by kaitiaki of iwi and hapū of Ngāti Tukorehe, my tribe, to get some health back into the Ōhau loop. What you have got in that area is a big stretch of Māori land and particularly the coastline where Tahamata Incorporation farms the coastline on behalf of the Māori shareholders of the hapū of Ngāti Tukorehe.

“There was a certain kind of theme running through my kōrero with most kaumātua I spoke with and that was the great sense of loss, mixed with resignation about: ‘Oh well, it’s for the sake of the farm and the finances and that kind of stuff.’

“But you could also sense that they were hurting about the loss and what joy and life it gave to them when they were fishing or gathering shellfish. I mean my mum recalled how beautiful it was when you got down to the Kuku beach.

“Customary fishing was a really big thing on this coastline when all the community went down the beach and every family from Kuku, Māori and Pākehā alike, got their fish, divided it up, and off they went. It’s all that kind of thing of feeding and sustaining people simply and well. You didn’t have to have heaps of money to be well fed.

“Te Hākari and all these related dune wetlands were a huge wetland resource. Essentially here you are talking about a

very wet flood plain which had exceptional riches in food. It was full of tōtara (and kahikatea forest behind the dune belt), and now there is only one stand of kahikatea left.

“The biggest concern for locals really came from the healers of Tukorehe, the ones who were into promoting rongoā Māori and Māori spirituality, increasing relationships with whenua and water. They had concerns with the loss of fresh water for healing purposes.

“Agriculture was having an impact and they were concerned they wouldn’t be able to access water for healing purposes. The water wasn’t fresh enough, it wasn’t healthy enough and it wasn’t abundant enough. This whole Kuku area between the mountains and the sea had always been renowned for its healing.

Resolving the process hasn’t been easy or straightforward but Ngā Whenua Rāhui has been crucial in providing support and advice to getting the wetland protected and at least partially restored to ecological health. The Tahamata Board, which oversees the land, agreed to the wetland area being set aside.

“NWR were the catalyst, they got us going. Getting in tow with NWR was what started all this, so we are most appreciative. They do really well and we have received a lot of support, maybe more than they said they were going to give.

“It wasn’t a fight, but it was about finding people who could understand what we were talking about. My uncle Tane Carkeek totally agreed with what we were doing. I mean that paddock near the wetland is always wet anyway so what are we trying to do with that paddock? It is a rainfall recharge area. It is a ground depression wetland so it has an artesian water supply. It never really dried out but the farm did try really hard to dry it out by putting drains in,” says Huhana.

Former project manager Richard Anderson admires the prolific flax group around the rims of the wetlands.





Richard Anderson, former project manager for Te Hākari and a man with a lifetime of commitment to conservation, says: “The rise of the dairy industry out here over the past 40 years has had a huge impact on the resource to the point where refuse and whiteware was dumped in a particular part of the loop of the river. I can remember seeing it sticking out and it was terribly bad.

“That’s all forgotten now and everybody says what a neat thing we are doing but boy, did they have a go at us at the beginning, and they tried everything to drain Te Hākari.”

Huhana says: “I think it is good to know there is a context in which Te Hākari functions and it was the development of the whole environmental arm through the tribe, so you have got a whole operational and governance trust set up, so it shows what an iwi was trying to do. No, it wasn’t hard work bringing the people on board but it did take some time because we just kept taking them out to Te Hākari and saying: ‘Have a

look at this now and you too can have this in the future.’”

So if a government auditor were to come by and ask how the investment has been spent, how would Huhana respond?

“We have a revegetated forest around a wetland, planted in tī kōuka, karamū, kahikatea, harakeke, all the appropriate natives. We are looking at a flourishing wetland and we have turned around the health of Te Hākari stream to the estuary.

“We got an electric fence put around it in 2005 and then a proper seven-wire fence in 2006. We raised the water levels from 2004 to 2006 and we did a hydrology research project. We were allowed by the farm to raise it to 800 millimetres, since then it has gone up and down a bit to around 600–650 mm. The farm was concerned about the wetting of the paddocks around it but it’s OK now; we just had a lot of learning to do.”

Volunteers have always been critical to the success of the project.

“We don’t just need a group of volunteers,

we need an army of them. I think that is where we are starting to push collaboration. We have had a lot of support, for example our Manaaki Taha Moana research project is collaborative, so we have Cawthron Institute, Massey University, our Taiao Raukawa Environmental Trust, we also have Victoria University’s landscape architects come out and play with us now.”

Just as important is that they have grown a new young Māori leader as well in Rangimarkus Heke who has done a lot of the hard yards in making the scheme a success. A graduate of the NWR cadet scheme, he has put the training to good use, being the former project manager.

“It was a good course and gave me some good skills, but I think there was just too much baseline stuff that was looking at producing an army of donkeys. The philosophy that we learned from Trevor Lambert was that you can be a manager while also telling us: ‘Don’t forget to get your hands dirty as well.’

“I have a pretty simple approach... if you want a wetland, just put a fence up and add water.”

RANGIMARKUS HEKE

“What are we asking for, well I have a pretty simple approach that I have done my work by, and that is to just add water. If you want a wetland, just put a fence up and add water. I’ve learnt that some things you can throw money at and you have to ask what the benefit of it is.

“In the time I have been here I’ve been heavily reliant on a bunch of volunteers. In the first 2 years I was doing my training so I was away a lot. I have identified a few key people and a few of my young cousins were showing potential. I know they are passionate about the place and they take pride in what they come out and help to do but I know I could get them there every day if I was able to turn some silver.

“My personal focus is to try and re-engage my generation,” says Rangimarkus.

The problem of hornwort in Te Hākari has also raised its ugly head lately and poses a serious threat to the dune wetland restoration efforts.

“Hornwort is probably the single, biggest most dangerous thing, honestly. It can be so serious that it will kill fish. We put two

hīnaki in and one of the tuna had asphyxiated because the hornwort soaks up all the oxygen. It takes a hell of a lot to kill an eel, especially within 24 hours. I was just astonished but there it was,” says Richard.

“Hornwort is like an underwater forest and it has an absolutely huge impact on freshwater fish and also birds, divers like dabchicks. They vanished because they couldn’t dive down and access the fish through this awful blanket. We spent \$15,000 on chopper spraying it a couple of years ago, got all the information, it looked great, the seasons change and then, hello, there it is back again.”

But Huhana has built up a momentum for restoration that even hornwort won’t stop.

“It’s all about action and we have got to get younger ones like Markus to be part of that force, that resource. You still need dough to do things though. We have got more councils on board now with our projects and it’s really good to get that push at the local government level.

“We are also not a project to point the finger and say: ‘It’s all your fault farmer Joe,’ but we say we have a project that we are all sharing, so let’s just focus on what the solutions are and put our energies into that.”

Of course being Huhana she just can’t contain herself, another kawenata is already underway and there are plans for some of the neighbouring areas if their people can be brought on board.

“Basically we are looking at growing six more Te Hākaris. We want the wetlands to stretch from Te Hākari through to Waikawa and then Lake Waorongomai is now on its way. It’s not a kawenata but a project with kaitiaki from Ngā Hapū o Ōtaki. They are leading the way and one of my Manaaki Taha Moana team, Aroha Spinks, is doing her PhD on it, with hapū support.

“The important thing is that we have no time to waste, we are in deep doo-doo and it won’t just wash away. I’ve got uncles saying to me: ‘Oh the Manawatu River is coming down to pollute our pristine waterways,’ and I’m like: ‘Excuse me, where is pristine; check your water because your waterway is as bad as the Manawatu.’” ■

LEFT The rapidly regenerating wetland is being fully restored to ecological health.

BELOW Young Māori leader Rangimarkus Heke trying out his cricketing skills!

