

Restoring the mana

REDISCOVERING THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE OLD PEOPLE ON MATAKANA AND HARNESSING IT FOR REGENERATION OF THE WETLANDS AND SWAMPS, TO RESTORE THE MAURI OF THE WATERWAYS.

PHOTOGRAPHY | *Herb Christophers*

“**T**he way I look at it is that Matakana Island is like the body of a person and if you don’t look after it in one area there are consequences to the health of that body in another. You can live in this world and have all the commercial ventures you want as long as you look after the body.”

Jason Murray and his partner Aroha Armstrong have been at the heart of an inspiring effort to regenerate significant areas of Matakana Island, but there is more to it than this. It is also about rediscovering the knowledge of the old people on the island and harnessing it for regeneration, as well as restoring the mauri of the waterways to enhance the health of the fish species. And in a quiet way it has provided some valuable employment opportunities.

Matakana Island has a rich history and stands guard on the western flanks of Tauranga Harbour. It’s a long flat shape about 20 kilometres from end to end and never more than 3 kilometres wide. The

sawmill closed in the early 1990s but the pine forests are still being harvested. It has a grand population of 255, down from the 600 that lived here when the sawmill was in operation.

Jason had largely grown up on the island and then went off to Waikato University to study marine biology and earth sciences, which is where he met Aroha who was doing Māori and Pacific development studies. How did they get together?

“I cooked her smoked fish first which had been caught from around here and that might have been the telling factor to tip the scales. It’s like trying to attract the tūi to the tree, if you’ve got the goods you can get the girl!” he laughs.

“We had finished university and were just having a break really and we came back here, wondering what we were going to do. With everybody leaving it was a bit depressing. It was trying to find more work for people and trying to find work for ourselves too.

“I have been brought up in the belief that when you go away and do a degree, you have got to return and give back to the people. Ngāi Te Rangi is my iwi and I whakapapa to all the five hapū here. We hardly ever say we are just from the one (hapū), we are from Matakana and that’s it,” he says.

The couple’s vision of redemption for the island has evolved over time from humble beginnings.

“Initially we just wanted to do something about the wharf and get something started down there to tidy it up and make it look good. So we started growing 50 or so plants in our backyard. We hooked up with Landcare Research and at the time my mother was working for DOC with the

BELOW The nursery on Matakana is now growing around 30 species, all sourced as close as possible to the replanting sites.

OPPOSITE Jason Murray and his partner Aroha Armstrong on Matakana Island.



of Matakana





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JASON MURRAY

banded dotterels just here and so it was a sort of a two-pronged approach. One was the tidying up but then we started looking at the bigger picture, particularly around fishing.

“That was our main focus, protecting breeding grounds of fish with all the swamps. Around here the swamps were used as dumping grounds and in my lifetime the fish numbers were dropping rapidly. All of them – especially mullet, snapper and flounder. Some of them lay eggs in the swamp and others will spend a part of their life cycle in these catchment areas, whether it be for feeding or breeding.

“All our focus on the island is around wetlands and swamps. A lot of them were dumps for old machinery so we just get a big digger in, get the steelworks fellas to come over and to pull the old stuff out and we get a little bit of money from the scrap to pay for the diggers. Then if we have got weeds you get another digger in and clear all the weeds away and it gives you a clean slate to go in and plant. Grey willow is probably the most dominant weed in wetlands here on the island.”

They have achieved an enormous amount already and it’s been done with understated humour, modesty and the building of productive relationships with Māori and Pākehā stakeholders, so they all feel they

have a place on the island.

Most of the knowledge about restoration has come from a judicious blend of Western scientific knowledge and from the mātauranga that was already here.

“I was lucky to learn a lot from some of the old ones who were still here. The whole holistic world of the island, of setting nets, digging gardens and so on, because it is so expensive bringing things in on the barge, so we used to be a quite self-sustaining people.

“We had to do something, because if we carried on down the road we were going it was only a matter of time before we destroyed all our nice areas. That’s how we got started really and the nursery grew from there. We picked up some funding from the Mātauranga Kura Taio to interview our older generation about certain wetlands,” says Jason.

Nurseries can be notorious sinkholes for money that disappears and never resurfaces so how have they got around that or at least factored it in?

“We didn’t; looking after the health of the land was the first and foremost thing to do. We have just been so lucky getting some good funding through Ngā Whenua Rāhui to help us reach those goals and keep our heads above water. So we got the

evidence from mātauranga as to what was there before, how many fish we caught and so on and we could then make funding applications to replant these areas.

“I was lucky I had the science background so I could argue the other side of that talk with councils. A lot of them found it hard to understand where we were coming from, but I could straddle both those worlds. Now we feel there is really good support here, we have really good relationships with key people in the council. We have been around long enough and everybody understands what it is we are trying to do,” says Jason.

They have initially focused on wetland plants in the nursery: mānuka, flaxes and carex grasses.

“We grow around 30 species in all. Most of them were here but all the bigger trees, the podocarps, had been cleaned off years ago so we were starting from scratch. Matakana used to be the southernmost end of the kauri and there used to be a lot of kauri gum digging on the island.

“We try and get the seeds from as close to the sites as we can or if we can’t get them, we go off the island, especially for podocarps from the Kaimai Ecological District.

“What we didn’t want was to plant all these plants and have our kids growing up in another world and not understanding



THIS PAGE
TOP LEFT
 Coprosma berries (karamū) look ripe for the picking by birds.
TOP RIGHT
 Māori kamokamo vegetables (which are similar to courgettes)

are in abundance and prove that nurseries are great for growing vegetables as well as trees.
BOTTOM
 Smoked fish right out of the harbour makes a splendid lunch.

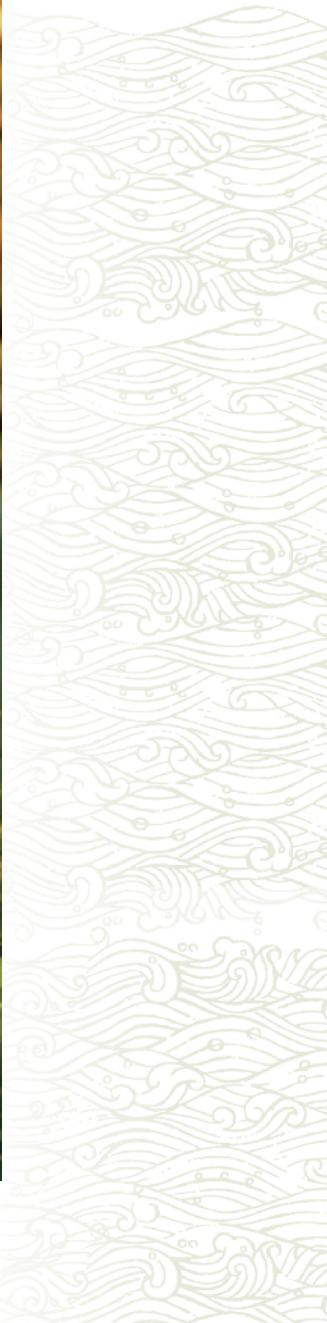
what we are doing. So we had to find some way to take that mātauranga and transition it to the kids. So we developed like a unique school curriculum particularly for here, all the things I've grown up with, the wisdom of the older people, the tikanga of it all, and it's running now.

"Yes, we have lots and lots of projects on the island. A lot of them are focused on swamp regeneration as well as our planting areas around the island, the maraes etc to raise the awareness. That was our contribution back to the community.

"We are completing pretty much our 5-year plan which is really a 20-year plan to restore all the farm swamps and wetlands. There are probably over 300 freshwater springs here - the water comes over from the Kaimais under the harbour. There would be about 240 ha to regenerate. There are heaps of Māori trusts over here who own the farmland and they have multiple owners.

"If I can't get them on the economics, then I will get them on the science around protecting those breeding grounds for fish, because that is the key to it all. One of those two will be favourable to them.

"We have tried to find a way that's a win-win right across the board. Because the farmers are only using the swamps for summer grazing, we got them to buy



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into mānuka, in the hope there will be an economic venture for honey or carbon credits. It's trying to give them an economic avenue on Matakana.

"The (exotic) forestry is in private ownership and we are slowly working towards some sort of partnership to restore the coastline around their properties with natives to form a good buffer zone.

"And you have got the other ones, the shrewd developers who want to develop the bush sites pretty much for retirement houses for rich overseas people. Everyone is against it, there are a lot of cultural and environmental aspects we don't want destroyed and we won our case in the Environment Court."

Perhaps the key to the nursery's success is that not only have they been growing plants for their own purposes but for other blocks of Māori land as well, through the Ngā Whenua Rāhui Kawenata connection funding.

"Mike Mohi will ring and say 'I've got this block' so we will go over and have a look at it, and work out a plan of what kind of plants are needed. We have to work out what will best suit the particular area we are restoring. At the start we relied heavily on Pa McGowan (the Ngā Whenua Rāhui botanist) who was really helpful in assessing suitable plant species, but we've got more comfortable doing it ourselves.

"We do the whole package, and we've got my old man, who was in the forestry doing silviculture, to do the planting out. We took him on so that his boys have got work and we know the plants will be put in properly. We do make a profit but it's not a large amount, it's just enough to run our nursery on.

"We provide some employment on the island, which is just great. We've got five kaimahi working part-time in our nursery. I go out a year ahead and get the forward orders to give us the ability to plan properly and then the kaimahi go and do the seed collection and bring it back and start the growing process. We have only got 20 hours allocated per person but it works out well



because the kaimahi come in while the kids are at school.

"We just tell them what needs to be done, and everybody knows what they need to do to fulfil the orders. It's been a really good work environment, there have been no issues, and they have always fulfilled the orders.

"The key thing is to look after our whenua and moana and look for innovative ways of being more sustainable and to put the environment at the top of the list, because of our reliance on the kaimoana here.

"Aroha is probably more the funding guru and she looks after all the nursery side with the kaimahi. My role is to go out and find the covenants and liaise with all the thousands of landowners in multiply-owned land blocks. I do the behind the scenes stuff, arrange all the plantings and talk to the councils before it actually gets on the ground. It's good to see it all come together in the end when you finish the block.

"You are getting paid to work the land but you are leaving something behind for the grandkids that is beneficial, with the trees and all, and leaving behind something of beauty," says Jason. ■

OPPOSITE Ngā Whenua Rāhui supports a number of other nurseries and, often, the whole family gets involved! Buchanan Cullen and daughter Aniwaniwa Cullen at Waimarie Nursery, Poroti, Northland. *Photo: Rob Suisted*

ABOVE A regenerating wetland set in the heart of farmland provides a colourful contrast to the dry paddocks.