

### Marine Reserve

"Not long after I arrived to live on the Island I discovered how depleted the fish stocks were compared with how it had been when I was diving and fishing around the island during my early and late teens".

"Life went on and the next and one of the most exciting events that occurred on a positive note while I was on the Island was the discovery of Dr Bill Ballantine's paper on the Leigh Marine Reserve out of Warkworth North of Auckland. I was just fossicking through some old papers in the office that I hadn't read when I came across Bill's one. I think I felt like Archimedes when he leapt out of the bath. I raced upstairs and said to Linda "This is it, this is the answer we have been waiting for!" I phoned Bill straightaway.

In a very short space of time I organised for him to come down to the Kapiti Coast and talk at various venues. Bill had come from Ireland on sabbatical and was here to assist Auckland University establish New Zealand's first marine Reserve where no species could be interfered with at all.

It was a big battle with many locals fighting for their individual rights to keep fishing in a near dead environment that they were used to".

"When the Kapiti Marine Reserve was finally gazetted there was a celebration organised by the Department of Conservation and held at the Waikanae Boating Club, Waikanae Beach. Naturally the Minister of Conservation was there and naturally the work that Mid Beckett and I had done in the beginning and in Mid's case all the way through, never got a mention. It was all local Iwi and DOC. They were the ones that had done it all by themselves!"

## **NELSON / MARLBOROUGH LAND DISTRICT**

*(Geoff Rennison talks about managing Farewell Spit Nature Reserve):*

Since it was the job of the Chief Ranger, Abel Tasman National Park, to manage this important sanctuary, and since he lived in Takaka with the rest of the staff at Totaranui or Marahau, guess who used to do all the patrolling between 1974 and 1980, when more staff came to Takaka? Yes, me, in my old landrover.

On the surface, it seemed that the Spit didn't need much managing – it looked after itself perfectly well; the various birds came and went, nobody seemed to trespass (easy to say when you were out there only once a week), the small tourist operation that had grown up around Collingwood Motors' contract to supply the lighthouse keepers with mail, food etc. caused no strife, so why not leave it to the birds? Oh no, it was far too interesting to ignore and all sorts of management issues were lurking just beneath the surface.

Take the Caspian tern colony beyond the lighthouse, on what is called The Shell Banks. The Ornithological Society Of New Zealand had had a longstanding agreement with Lands & Survey to study this important breeding colony. I took two of their members out to the Banks not long after I arrived and I was bemused to watch them laying a string grid-pattern through the agitated colony in order to count eggs and chicks. Black-backed gulls from an adjacent breeding area hovered overhead, waiting to pick off the odd egg or chick.

"Why do all this?" I asked.

"For our records, this is an important colony, we must monitor its performance."

"It's not advantageous to the birds to be counted and disturbed. How does this improve their chances?"

"Well..."

It wasn't long before that practice ceased.

Were the black-backs a problem? They predated Caspian and white-fronted tern chicks, but all three species were indigenous. Wasn't this just nature red in tooth and claw, and perfectly acceptable? We debated this. O.S.N.Z. wanted to pierce (kill) eggs and thus reduce the gull population. But, I reasoned, in a Nature Reserve, isn't it ethically better to let natural systems prevail, even if it meant that one species might be disadvantaged? Our main aim was to allow the Spit to return to a pre-European condition, which may well mean a different species mix to now. My argument was eventually accepted but the whole discussion was rendered null and void by the arrival, a few years later, of 650 gannets, an "investigating committee" which led the next season to the establishment of a breeding colony, which disadvantaged the gulls but didn't bother the gannets one jot! An ecological triumph!

Then there was the Mains Power controversy. The lighthouse people wanted to replace the diesel generator at the tower with underground mains power. A good idea, except that the proposed line went straight across the sandflats from Puponga, through the centre of wader-bird habitat. No you may not, we told them.

Much argument and discussion. They were saving dollars by the straight (shortest) route. Eventually we compromised with a route that went less than 500 metres across a portion of flat. I still wasn't happy but all was beautifully resolved when we took a D6 bulldozer with a ripper on the back along the route to check for logs. Driven a few metres onto the sandflat and parked, idling, while we discussed things, the machine began sinking into the soft sand. End of THAT ecologically-bad idea.

The one gate onto the Spit from Puponga Farm park was never locked, because no-one except local eel-grass gatherers and Collingwood Motors ever drove through it. However, after the Frenchman incident, things changed.

One day Bruce Robertson, the Farm manager, found a Frenchman driving his car through the gate. "You can't go through there," said Bruce, and supplied reasons. A few minutes later he saw the bloke's car, a speck out on the sand-flats. Soon the bloke was back – he'd got stuck. Bruce took his landrover out to extricate the car, got stuck too, the tide came in and went through both vehicles. I've never seen Bruce so angry. So we locked the gate from then on and, typically Golden Bay in those days, had a hiding-place for the key.

It was obvious that the Spit was crying out for research in various fields – what were the dynamics of, and the threats to, the sandflat ecology that supported the huge flocks of waders? What was happening to the terrestrial vegetation now that the cattle were gone? What were the dynamics of the shellbanks where all the gull, tern and gannet nesting took place? What created/destroyed the hundreds of dune lakes and swamps? What roles would gorse and blackberry play in the regenerating dunes? How fast did the big barchan dunes travel?

By dint of a lot of trying, I got researchers out onto the Spit eventually and by the time DOC came along we had a good picture of what really made that place tick. One of our most

versatile workers was Ruth Bartlett, who mapped the vegetation, lakes and swamps, measured dune movements, mapped the intertidal areas and then extended this work to the dunes of Wharariki, just along the coast.

Odd things happened on the Spit. Like the gannets arriving all at once and setting up house. Like the Shell Banks; after a massive flood in the Takaka and Aorere Rivers the banks were covered in logs and driftwood; then wind-blown sand was trapped, vegetation began to colonise and within one season the banks' area had about quadrupled.

Dopey things happened. Over my strenuous protest, Suntory beer was granted a permit to film a beer advert (!) beyond the lighthouse. I accompanied the crew and was amazed to watch them strewing the sand with fish-heads and the like.

"What's all this for?"

"To attract wading birds. We want to film our product against a background of waders."

"Well, (a) the waders are miles away across the sandflats now, and (b) they don't eat fish-heads, just tiny invertebrates." (Aside: Bloody idiots!)

Drawing up a management plan for the Spit and Farm Park was a big but satisfying task, giving us for the first time some guidelines, based on the Spit's dynamics and ecology, for its correct governance. And life and work out there was becoming more complex. In 1983 the lighthouse was automated, two of the three houses coming to L&S, and we now had a base for our first summer worker on the Spit, trapping predators, keeping an eye on the tourist trade, carrying out a maintenance programme and (and this always amused us), doing daily a Visual Weather report for Met. Service, who'd previously advised us that there was nothing our man out there could do for them. Within a few weeks of automation they were yelling for data!

Life's even busier out there today – that part of Golden Bay is a tourist mecca, far different from the isolated, little-visited place I once knew. I'll always be grateful for the opportunity to work out there, to stick my oar in as necessary, and to have an enormous amount of fun. And I never once got stuck!

*(Geoff Rennison talks about Farm Parks):*

*TIME TO PLAY – MANAGING PUPONGA FARM PARK, 1974-87.*

Managing national parks is a very high and noble calling, and heaven knows, I've done enough of it in my time; but every now and again one gets the feeling that these places are a bit...not prissy, exactly, but puffed up with their own importance, somehow. After all, one is dealing with outstanding natural areas, forever battling enemies which are exotic (including, at times, people), foes which would pull down the park from its lofty estate; debating compromises known as skifields that have pure folk wailing and rending their garments.... So once in a while one needs to work at the opposite end of the spectrum, for relief – and that relief for me was in managing that outrageous cultural/natural hybrid the Farm Park.

Upon being promoted to Chief Ranger, Abel Tasman National Park in 1974, I was delighted to find that this included management of Farewell Spit Nature Reserve, since there were no such animals in Westland. (Nature Reserves, that is). Now this land category is even prissier

# NZ NATIONAL PARKS AND RESERVES RANGERS' ARCHIVE

*an unedited collection of written and taped memoirs  
from rangers between 1952 and 1987*

