



Rimutaka Forest Park Charitable Trust Inc

Historical Notes – 25th Anniversary Dinner, 12 October 2013

by Ian Armitage, President

Good evening, Kia ora.

Ms. Nicky Wagner (Parliamentary Private Secretary for Conservation), Hepetama and Mate Taitua, Kaumatua at Wainuiomata Marae, former and present members and other volunteers of the Rimutaka Forest Park Charitable Trust, Mr. Ruud Kleinpaste – our guest speaker, ladies and gentlemen.

May I extend a very warm welcome to you all as we meet to celebrate our achievements over the past 25 years. 2013 is a significant year to our Trust and as we celebrate this evening it is interesting to recall and reflect upon some highlights of our history that have led us to where we are today.

Trampers and hunters have enjoyed the forests and rivers of the southern Rimutaka Range for many decades and Maori have known these forests for much longer. The Rimutakas – as the locality is known to many – became better known, more popular and more accessible from the 1970s when a road was built into the Catchpool Valley and the track network was improved following the establishment of the Rimutaka Forest Park in 1972. At the time, the former New Zealand Forest Service who managed the land recognised that it could not on its own set out a balanced programme that would accommodate the diverse interests of the general public so a basis of consultation was introduced in the mid-1970s through the Rimutaka Forest Park Advisory Committee that had a role of providing guidance on forest park management, and for forest recreation in particular. Improvements to tracks and roads followed during the 1980s, especially in the Catchpool Valley. Various land acquisitions helped to make the forest park more accessible, particularly at the entrance where the Catchpool Valley joins the Wainuiomata Valley and also the stretch of forest land linking the Catchpool and Orongorongo Valleys – including where the 'Five-Mile' track lies today. Three members of the Rimutaka Forest Park Advisory Committee who were closely associated with these achievements and were later instrumental in leading the Rimutaka Forest Park Trust were Sabina Owen, Vivian Pohl and the late Bill McCabe. I am very pleased indeed to welcome Vivian to our celebration this evening. All had strong convictions on the need for effective forest conservation and all shared a determination that local communities should be engaged in and contribute towards the management of public forests, rivers and coastlines. In 1984, Sabina was fortunate in being awarded a Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship to study

community participation and family recreation in public forests in the United States of America, including in Yosemite National Park. Needless to say she thoroughly enjoyed this opportunity and enthusiastically brought her new knowledge and experience back home.

Departmental restructuring in March 1987 led to the disestablishment of the Forest Service, and with it the forest park advisory committee, and it also led to the establishment of the Department of Conservation on 1 April 1987. With the demise of the forest park advisory committee and the formation of the Wellington Conservation Board there was an awareness and even concern amongst several people in the Hutt Valley and Wainuiomata, including Sabina and Vivian, that interest in and local community-based advice for the management of the Rimutaka Forest Park might not be considered with the same understanding or in as much detail, as it had been earlier. Driven by this concern Sabina and Vivian arranged a public meeting in Lower Hutt on 10 October 1988 to encourage local community engagement in working with the Department of Conservation in forest park management. The meeting was attended by about 50 people who endorsed the formation of a Rimutaka Forest Park Society. Vivian was elected Chairperson, David Capper as the Vice-Chair and Sabina was elected Secretary. The following day the *Evening Post* newspaper reported:

...“that the society wanted to organise fund-raising events and encourage sponsorship from commercial organisations, families and other interested parties”. It continued, “... the society hopes to build up a strong park and conservation fellowship and enable people to become involved in both the park’s management and its activities”.

And so the Rimutaka Forest Park Society was formed, a set of Rules were drafted and in December 1988 it was registered as an incorporated society.

Membership steadily increased and the society’s early activities included public relations so that it and its objectives became better known. Members also tackled some operational work, including track clearing. From an early stage the society circulated short newsletters to members that were later renamed and have been known for many years now as “*The Rag*”. “*The Rag*” has been an effective and essential linkage that has aimed to keep members, volunteers and other readers well informed of our activities and it has also recorded important steps in our history that we are celebrating this evening.

In 1993 the society paused and refocused its efforts, several new people were elected to the committee and Don Millward was elected President. Don is also with us this evening and I am very pleased to welcome you to our celebration.

This evolution in 1992 and 1993 is also a credit to Ivan Morrison, both a member of the society and a staff member of DoC, who could see the long-term benefits of encouraging lively community

participation in forest park management, especially in the Catchpool Valley. Ivan too is with us this evening and a warm welcome Ivan from us all.

In July 1993 the society was renamed The Rimutaka Forest Park Charitable Trust Incorporated, the Rules were amended to enable donations to become tax deductible, and it is from that time, just over 20 years ago, that we have called ourselves a Trust.

The first significant activity and achievement came in 1994 with the compilation, in consultation with the Department of Conservation, of an educational resource kit entitled *Visiting Catchpool – a resource kit*. It was circulated to secondary schools in the Wellington Region and became the basis of numerous natural history school visits to the Catchpool Valley during the 1990s. Other activities were working bees that included pest control trapping, weed clearing and the design and construction, in consultation with DoC, of a nature trail.

Leadership changes occurred again in 1995 when Don retired as President to be succeeded by Bill McCabe who had been a committee member for several years. Don later became Treasurer for two years retiring from this role in 2003 and from the committee in 2011.

Other notable achievements through the 1990s and again in partnership with DoC were fundraising for the construction of an Information Kiosk in the Catchpool carpark, toilet and cooking facilities, interactive panels on the Five Mile, Loop and Orongorongo tracks, along the Nga Taonga trail and also signage at the Turakirae Scientific Reserve on the Palliser Bay coastline.

Through the 1990s there was a growing awareness that the forests in most of the Rimutakas were quiet – much too quiet in fact – and this view was based on observations by trampers, hunters and members of the Trust who had concluded that this unnatural silence was in large part caused by introduced pests that were now extensive in the forests, particularly possums, rats and stoats. They preyed on birds, they had severely reduced bird populations and indeed these pests might have contributed to the extinction of some species locally. A big step forward was made in 2000 when the Trust decided on a more extensive predator control programme by trapping pests in and near the Catchpool Valley. This led to the ‘Restoring the Dawn Chorus’ programme that commenced in earnest in mid-2000 over about 200 hectares of forests. John Rush, a member of the Trust and a contractor to DoC, led the Dawn Chorus programme and it is a tribute to John’s energy, determination and enthusiasm that he inspired others to follow, including the late Bill Milne. Although ecological recovery takes time it is now evident that native plants are gradually recovering and bird populations are slowly increasing based on the five-minute bird counts we have been making since 2009.

In recognition of our early successes the society was delighted to receive a Conservation Week Award made jointly by the Department of Conservation and the Wellington Conservation Board in 2000, followed in 2001 by a Certificate of Appreciation from DoC.

Building on the practical experience being gained in the Dawn Chorus programme a vision of something much more ambitious than had been contemplated so far was emerging in the minds of several members. The bold question was asked, why not design and orchestrate a more extensive pest trapping programme, particularly to control stoats, in an isolated part of forest park with the aim of creating a secure environment that might allow the North Island brown kiwi to be introduced. Susan Ellis, Bill McCabe, Bill Milne and John Rush researched the issues and planned the extensive trapping effort needed to achieve this vision. What would be involved, would volunteer-based trapping really be effective and where would trapping best be located, what would be the costs and what logistical efforts would be needed to achieve the introduction of a brown kiwi population that would prosper and increase in a large unfenced area of forest? It was a daunting challenge and it had not been contemplated previously in the Wellington Region. A *Kiwi Project Plan* was assembled in August 2004, largely by Bill McCabe and Susan Ellis, and was approved by the Dept of Conservation shortly afterwards. The locations chosen were the Turere and Whakanui catchments, both tributaries of the Orongorongo River and it is here that a more extensive trapping programme was introduced.

Enthusiastic support from members and an increasing band of volunteers enabled good progress to be made with fund raising and with the trap construction. A major effort commenced in January 2004 when several hundred traps were deployed by helicopter to various release sites, organised by the combined efforts of John Rush, Bill McCabe, Alan Thompson and Susan Ellis. Kirby McLeod and Mike White have coordinated, managed and maintained the trapping network for much of the last eight years and have ensured that it has worked successfully. Looking back, it is fair to say that the pest control trapping efforts since 2004 have been very effective and indeed have exceeded the expectations of the members and others who have contributed to this ambitious programme.

A small population of North Island brown kiwi comprising mixed provenance birds were released in May 2006. It quickly became evident that the Rimutaka forest environment was ecologically suitable for kiwi; there was plenty of cover and food and it was clear that stoat numbers had been reduced to low levels and the adult kiwi were coping with the small numbers that were present. There were smiles all round when breeding commenced and the first eggs were laid – the first time in about 100 years that this remarkable event had occurred in Rimutaka forests. Much of the credit for this effort must go to the commitment and dedication of Melody McLaughlin who since 2003 has contributed hugely to the leadership and management of the kiwi programme. The knowledge and experience gained by Melody, Susan and others provided the confidence to take another big step forward – the introduction of a larger kiwi population. A big well planned logistical and volunteer effort translocated 20 brown kiwi from Little Barrier Island in 2009 and since then the population has flourished and now numbers nearly 100 birds. This flagship programme is outstandingly successful, it is clearly a highlight of our activities and we expect that it will continue for quite some time. It reflects a determination by many dedicated volunteers and their attention to detail to introduce a

free ranging kiwi population into some Wellington forests after an absence of about a century. We all hope that over the next 10 years the brown kiwi population will be considerably larger and more extensive than it is today. Although we are thrilled at recent progress we know too that local iwi and especially the Wainuiomata Marae are also delighted that the kiwi, a taonga, are once again nearby. Sep and Mate are with us this evening and I would like to thank them both and others at Wainuiomata Marae for their blessings on the kiwi that have been released. We hope of course that our collective efforts will bring enjoyment to all who see and hear our national bird living wild in Wellington forests as well as to the many volunteers who are helping to make this happen.

We were saddened by the death in March 2009 of Bill McCabe QSM who was President until late 2008. A seat built at the Catchpool Carpark Information Kiosk was dedicated to Bill in December 2010 and we feel it is an appropriate memorial to his quiet and respectful leadership and for getting things done by persistence and by persuasion.

Another step in our history commenced in 2006 when the Trust's website was redesigned and expanded by Peter Cooper. Our website, www.rimutakatrust.org.nz, is now the major source of information about us and is regularly visited by many enquirers in New Zealand and from overseas. The website continues to be skilfully managed by Peter and it is a credit to him for his knowledge and enthusiasm that it is so effective. Our public profile was further extended three years ago through the formation of a presence on 'Facebook' and this is a credit to Kelly Anso who enthusiastically manages the page.

Peter Cooper has contributed often to the kiwi establishment programme and since 2009 has vigorously organised and led a new programme of replanting in the lower Catchpool Valley, especially near the carparks and camping ground, that is supplementing the natural regeneration of native vegetation on slopes where pine forest once grew. Good progress is being achieved and we expect that in 40 or 50 years these slopes will be substantially clothed with attractive secondary native bush, including northern rata that is always so colourful in the early summer.

In recognition of individuals who have demonstrated outstanding service in the furtherance of the objectives of the Trust the committee agreed in 2012 to create an award to be known as the "Rimutaka Award". The first Rimutaka Award was made to Peter Cooper in 2012 together with Life Membership in recognition of his service, including serving on the committee, as webmaster and as Vice-President for several years.

The Trust was again publically recognised for its achievements in forest conservation in 2010 when an Encore Award (Community Partnerships category) was awarded jointly by the Minister of Conservation, the Department of Conservation and the Greater Wellington Regional Council. It was followed in 2012 by a second Encore Award in the Recreation Volunteers category. To our delight we also received a Hutt City Wellington Airport Regional Community Award in 2012.

Many have contributed generously to the work of the Trust over the past quarter century. On behalf of the whole membership I would like to recognise and thank all who have willingly and cheerfully put so much effort into what has been achieved, both members and non-member volunteers. I particularly wish to thank all past and present members of the Executive Committee who have put much thought and time into our governance, management and operations and who have brought us to where we are today. And a special thank you to Janet, Kelly, Rosemary and Melody for organising this celebration. Can I also acknowledge the many financial donors and other contributors who have made our various achievements possible over the past 25 years.

It is important to acknowledge our links with the Department of Conservation with whom we have cooperated closely over the past 25 years. We have always enjoyed a pleasant and constructive working relationship with staff and we look forward to maintaining friendly cooperation well into the future, and to also developing a wider relationship with the Greater Wellington Regional Council.

As we look back on our achievements as we celebrate this evening it is also a time to look ahead and to ask ourselves, what of the future? Our Vision and objectives are now wider than those set out 25 years ago but they still encompass one of Sabina and Vivian's key arguments, that of promoting community participation for effective forest park management – a theme that is no less important today than it was back in 1988. We are optimistic that the Trust will continue to flourish as a volunteer-based group of like-minded people who can work together to offer independent advice on the policies and management of the Rimutaka Forest Park. And we also look forward to taking practical action in forest conservation as we are doing now. I hope, as you may also hope, that we will build on our progress and over time we can continue our constructive contribution in making the forest park a better place for our children, our grandchildren and to the wider Wellington community well into the 21st century. Thank you all very much indeed for being a part of this fascinating journey.

Two further points.

We are extremely fortunate that three well known artists have very generously made some of their work available as a part of our celebration. I wish to acknowledge Jeanette Blackburn, Phil Waddington and Janet Andrews for donating several splendid pieces of their natural history art that will be sold with the proceeds helping to continue our volunteer-based work. Thank you so much for your generosity. Phil is with us this evening. We became aware yesterday that Phil has been nominated for a 'Wellingtonian of the Year' Award. On your behalf may I congratulate Phil for his nomination and we wish him every success in the judging.

Finally, may I please put in a reminder of our Annual Meeting next Tuesday evening. Following the Annual Meeting Dr. Barry Dent has agreed to speak about the "Restoration of a Cook Strait Seabird Island" – a project he is closely associated with in the Marlborough Sounds. I can assure you that Barry's talk will be both interesting and lively, and it's not to be missed! Thank you!