

**Pirongia Te Aroaro o Kahu Restoration Society**  
**Annual Report**  
**2020**

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, katoa.

This year we have faced unprecedented challenges because of COVID-19, especially in relation to any fieldwork on Mt Pirongia and Okahukura. We were fortunate with the timing of the lockdown in that our pest control and kōkako monitoring were pretty much complete. When lock-down restrictions were relaxed at the end of May, we lost no time in trying to make up lost time, and I'm proud of the way our committee and volunteers have pulled together to make sure our pest protection was the best possible in the circumstances. The advances we made over the past year remain impressive regardless of the bumpy ride COVID-19 has given us.

For Mt Pirongia, we are in our 14<sup>th</sup> year of annual pest control using bait stations across 1030ha of the maunga targeting rats and possums. Steve McClunie has redone the whole grid with pink triangles to replace the old flagging tape, and Kane O'Donnell has been a map master with his GIS expertise. More volunteers helping with grid maintenance has kept our overheads down. Also appreciated is the goat culling programme that DoC has funded which will pay dividends for vegetation quality on the maunga. To maintain protection for nesting kōkako until Autumn, we cleared out uneaten Pindone baits and refilled with Ditrac blocks in January. These were removed in June and rat populations were reduced from 65% to 4.16%. We also began trapping mustelids this season, thanks to incredible commitment from Richard Still, Brian Bowell, Greg Hill and Tom Davies.

Responding to the planned aerial 1080 operation over the wider Forest Park and aligning with our objectives to maximise kōkako protection, we have been working on a bait station grid extension at Sainsbury Rd, covering 250ha. The work should be completed by EcoFX before the aerial 1080 operation proceeds, allowing the area to be permanently excluded from such operations.

On the kōkako front, annual monitoring has been underway since their re-introduction in 2017. This season saw only single nesting attempts by our breeding pairs which are currently at 5 and was probably due to the drought conditions over summer and autumn. 100% of nests fledged chicks successfully, adding seven chicks to our population and reflecting excellent advice from our professional kōkako ecologists Dave Bryden and Amanda Rogers, and a top-class volunteer effort around pest control work and nest monitoring. Two kōkako chicks were able to be banded and a number of our supporters were present for that special event.

Fledging success this year brings the number of unrelated founders at Pirongia to 11. We are aiming for 40 founders long term for a genetically robust population. Our Kōkako app to report sightings was discontinued with ThunderMaps this year as the cost of maintaining it

was prohibitive. However, reporting of kōkako activity continues. We have been delighted with superb photos and videos of Pirongia kōkako sent to us by members of the public especially near the Grey Rd carpark.

Our Okahukura pest control project to protect kōkako at Northern Pureora Forest is abuzz under the terrific leadership of Dianne June. We had our largest volunteer numbers ever this year (68), allowing the entire 1,000ha bait station grid to be serviced in one day. Special thanks to the Waikato Tramping Club and the University of Waikato Science Students Association for their input to this project. Radios purchased with our DoC grant earlier in the year are making fieldwork co-ordination much easier so are greatly appreciated as is the bait bagging fundraiser through DoC which raised \$5400 last July. LUV driver certification training was completed by two of our committee members, but we are massively grateful for the DoC staff and vehicles made available for our Okahukura fieldwork. Our efforts saw rat indices reduced from 38% to 9%. Reports of kōkako being seen or heard by our volunteers have increased markedly since we began pest control in 2015, so we look forward to the outcome of the kōkako census planned for May 2021.

In more general terms, this year was a milestone for us as we employed our first staff member – a part-time operations co-ordinator – in March and it has been a pleasure to welcome Gemma Fernihough to our team. Selwyn June was presented with Life Membership in November at a well-attended function near the Corcoran Rd carpark, recognising his outstanding contribution to the aims of the society. The second Rifleman survey on Mt Pirongia was completed in July with a total of 463 of these birds found in our grid on Mt Pirongia. A decision on the source site and timing of the translocation to Maungatautari is yet to be made. Our collaboration with DoC on the management of *dactylanthus taylorii* populations near the summit of Mt Pirongia is working well although more volunteers would be welcome. Several trips took place Jan/Feb for checking flowering and hand pollination. New plants were found and caging work done. The Tahunui site was remapped. The sown plots in Mangakaraa were checked in the spring of 2019 to ensure they are still findable and marked but it is too early to expect any signs of growth, and new plots were sown near the summit. A survey of robins was begun but was interrupted by COVID-19.

We have made good progress upgrading our envirocentre building in Pirongia Village with the completion of toilets, interior painting, installation of new carpet in one of the classrooms and preparing to connect to ultrafast broadband. Peter Smits has beautifully restored the wooden pews at the centre. The next step is to install a small kitchen and Dianne and Maxine have been progressing a sign for the centre. We are rapt with the generous support by Frontier Scaffolding for the repainting of the centre's roof.

Environmental education is an area where we continue to receive enquiries from schools and we have just received a grant from the DV Bryant Trust to develop a resource in collaboration with local iwi that allows them to tell their stories relating to Mt Pirongia. We

are also collaborating with Maungatautari Ecological Island Trust on a number of activities, including an ecological corridor proposal which would link up our two maunga.

COVID-19 highlighted that our constitution did not allow for virtual meetings and this has prompted us to review it. We decided to take advantage of how people responded to lockdown by giving more attention and appreciation to nature by running a photographic competition in June. The entries we received were amazing and I'm sure you'll see a number of them featuring in our regular publications and annual calendar.

Our diverse programme of projects and activities would not be possible without grants and donations, and I want to give sincere thanks to the following who have generously supported us over the past year:

#### Grants

WRC Natural Heritage Grant	\$	83,700.00	Pirongia Pest Control and Operations
DoC Grant: Okahukura Project	\$	40,601.70	Okahukura Pest Control
DoC Grant Pirongia Kokako	\$	46,230.00	Pirongia Kokako Monitoring
WRC SSCIF Grant Okahukura	\$	5,000.00	Okahukura Pest Control
Trust Waikato	\$	8,000.00	Co-ordinator expenses
WDC Pirongia Ward	\$	2,000.00	Envirocentre
Len Reynolds Grant	\$	5,000.00	Operations
WWF	\$	5,000.00	Pirongia Grid Maintenance
Waikato Ecological Enhancement Trust	\$	6,500.00	Pirongia Grid Maintenance
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>202,031.70</b>	

#### Donations

DV Bryant Trust	\$	25,000.00	Environmental Education
ForestMakerHoney	\$	1,000.00	General
C van der Hoeven	\$	1,000.00	General
Waipa Networks	\$	700.00	Mt Pirongia Pest Control
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>27,700.00</b>	
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>229,731.70</b>	

#### In-kind support and donations

Blue Wattle Ecology	\$	2,064.00	Vehicle and equipment use
Digital Wings	\$	2,000.00	Co-ordinator computer
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>4,064.00</b>	

Another resource that is absolutely critical to what we do comes in the form of volunteers. Our committee is constantly amazed at the many people wanting to contribute in so many ways so our maunga and ngahere can be full of life – you are awesome! We are especially grateful to the University of Waikato Science Students' Association and the Waikato Tramping Club who continue to give us tremendous people support for our Okahukura project.

Volunteer hours came to 9307 this year involving about 110 people representing an 11% increase on last year's hours, driven mainly by the rifleman survey and starting mustelid trapping on Mt Pirongia. At present, we have 207 members and sponsors of hectares, and 82 hectares of pest control are currently sponsored in total. Our registered volunteer numbers stand at 350. Our Mangakaraa podcast, available for free on the internet <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO-Gxc1yfWk>, now has over 4,762 views while our facebook page has 1416 likes

This is the time to also put my shy but intrepid committee into the limelight and acknowledge their passion and hard work. Steve McClunie is our vice-Chair and pest control guru and is ably supported by Ken Allen, Dianne June is our secretary, volunteer co-ordinator and the powerhouse behind our Okahukura project. Tom Davies is our treasurer and takes on lots of other fiddly bits, Greg Hill has the health and safety portfolio and co-leads the mustelid trapping with Richard Still, which has taken a massive effort to get up and running. Parva Zareie is brilliant with publicity, Gerry Kessels and Peter Elley are all-round stalwarts and it's hard to come up with more superlatives.

Outside of the committee we have some superb people assisting us: Alison Sellars for Dactylanthus co-ordination, Kane O'Donnell for GIS services, Brian Bowell and Selwyn June for trapping and reporting, Antoinette Wilson for newsletter prep, Anne Aitken for HR services, and Dale McClunie, Joanne Roxburgh, Heather-anne Lang, James Ranstead, James Masters and Isla Trapski for all their contributions to special projects. I'm sorry if I have missed anyone. Last but not least I want to acknowledge our key collaboration partners DoC Hamilton office and Pirongia Forest Park Lodge. Their co-operation and generosity in helping us with our mahi is magnificent. Best of all, the Lodge wardens feed us with kōkako footage and tidbits which we treasure. A heart-felt thank you to you all.

COVID-19 sent shockwaves through our accepted status quo and has made us question how we are living and what we want out of life. The lull created by lockdown let us reflect on the things we take for granted, some of which we could lose permanently. Whatever the long-term impacts of COVID-19, two things came through with shining clarity: we need to have strong communities that can care for each other and placing nature at the centre of our affairs is one of the smartest things we can do. We're blessed to have both in this group and in a post-COVID New Zealand I hope that the sense our mahi makes will infect more mindsets so we don't exploit our environment but integrate it and regenerate it for the benefit of everyone.

Kia kaha

Clare St Pierre  
Chairperson

16 July 2020