

Parks and Forests Manager's Report for period ending 11 April 2003

1. Manager's comments [Murray Waititi]

1.1 Robin Blake to retire

Robin "Lofty" Blake has announced that he wishes to retire on 30 May 2003. Lofty has been with the Council, (in its various forms) since 12 November 1962. Lofty started as a labourer for the Forestry Department of the Wellington City and Suburban Water Supply Board. Since then he has held a number of roles; Leading Hand, Ganger, Foreman, Forest Protection Ranger and his current role of Environmental Management Ranger.

Over the years, Lofty has accumulated a huge amount of "on the ground" knowledge of the biodiversity in our region; knowledge that will be impossible to replace. Lofty is truly one of the characters of the Council and will be sorely missed both as a professional and as a person.

1.2 Answers to questions raised at the last meeting

1.2.1 Mangaroa 1080 operation

At the last meeting I was asked to provide you with further information on last years Mangaroa 1080 operation and its effect on the parks and forests. It was an Animal Health Board operation run by the Council's Biosecurity Department. Parks and Forests' involvement in the operation was that of an "affected party" as we manage land, which was part of the control operation.

In approving the operation, conditions were imposed by the Medical Officer of Health and Upper Hutt City Council. Those conditions specified that the parks and forests within the treated areas (Tunnel Gully, Rimutaka Incline and Kaitoke Regional Park) were to be closed for a period of seven days to the general public, and for a period of three months to dogs.

When the conditions of the operation became known to us, we compiled a public notification strategy to inform the public of the operation and the closure of the parks. The public notification strategy included:

- advertising in the local newspapers
- setting up a hotline for the public to ring if they had any queries
- erecting signs at appropriate places in the parks
- informing Councillors through a memo in the 18 October 2002 Councillor's Information Bulletin.

Security and patrolling of these areas, and at the Upper Hutt depot, was also stepped up prior to, and throughout the duration of the operation.

Closing the parks, and the advertising surrounding the use of 1080 caused visitation for the month of November to drop from 23,190 to 14,498 (some 40%). However, visitation recovered to normal levels by the end of December.

Only 74 people contacted our 0800 information hotline. Most enquiries or complaints received were by interest groups that had planned events/outings in the parks, i.e. Search and Rescue, school camps, filming companies, which had to be cancelled following the commencement of the operation. It is difficult to avoid this disruption as the operation is very weather dependant and thus the exact timing is uncertain.

Overall, the operation went smoothly and while the public was inconvenienced for a time, the backlash was minimal. This was a combination of both the operation being well run, and the fact that it rained on the only weekend the parks were closed.

2. Planning and policy [Dr Philippa Crisp]

2.1 Management planning

2.1.1 Draft Regional Parks Network Management Plan

The draft Regional Parks Network Management Plan was publicly notified in early March (following a final consideration by the Department of Conservation). The Plan and associated public meetings were advertised in the major daily and local newspapers, as well as through an extensive mail-out to interested parties. We have also held three public meetings to discuss the Plan. The level of Councillor support at the meetings was overwhelming. Thank you.

The public has until 16 May 2003 to make submissions on the Plan.

2.1.2 Review of resource information

As part of the review of all the parks and forests management plans, a review of the "resource information" contained in the Regional Parks specific plans, Forest Lands and Current Water Collection Area plans has begun. This is the physical (geological, topographical), biological, cultural and historical information on each area. Much of it has not been reviewed for at least ten years. A review of the physical and biological information has commenced, while we are currently beginning the review of the cultural and historical information.

2.1.3 Draft Regional Forests Management Plan

A workshop for Councillors was held on Thursday 10 April 2003 to discuss the draft Regional Forests Management Plan, which covers the future water collection areas, namely the Akatarawa and Pakuratahi Forests.

Work is continuing on the draft management plan for the current water collection areas (Hutt and Wainuiomata/Orongorongo Water Collection Areas) including updating of resource information and will be available for Councillors in due course.

2.2 Capital works projects [Graham Laws]

2.2.1 State Highway 2 Kaitoke realignment

Staff met with Higgins Contractors, consultant ecologist John Campbell, and Barbara Mitcalfe from Wellington Botanical Society to assess sites for relocating swamp maire plants that will be disturbed by the highway earthworks. Some trees will be planted in the bush remnants near the water supply lakes

2.2.2 Construction started on Kaitoke toilets and Ranger's office

Contractors have started work on the toilets and ranger's office at Kaitoke.

2.2.3 Pakuratahi Bridge

We are about to begin work on the new footbridge over the Pakuratahi River. The footbridge is part of the Environmental Education infrastructure works in the Park. It will give school groups ready access to the bush and river as well as providing an extra loop walk in the Park.

2.2.4 Munitions Bend Bridge being restored

Consultants have prepared plans for repairing the bridge timbers and building a footbridge along the upstream side of the structure.

3. Marketing and Design [Amanda Cox]

3.1 Signage at Battle Hill

The large park entry signs for Battle Hill Farm Forest Park were completed during March, and the Western construction team installed them early in April. The Battle Hill signs are prototypes and similar signs (with some minor modifications) will go up in the other parks shortly.

Transit NZ has approved the layout of sign inserts for the Pauatahanui roundabout signs, although a completion date is not yet available. We have also arranged for a brown highway sign at the Paekakariki Hill Road/Grays Road intersection, to further direct park visitors.

Trail maps and photographic material for the free-standing interpretation signs and information boards have been forwarded to Designtalk for layout. Information for the interpretation boards will follow once we have completed verifying the contents with interest groups and local Iwi.

3.2 Queen Elizabeth Park entrance

Funding for the redevelopment of MacKays Crossing – including the Queen Elizabeth Park entrance – has been delayed in the latest Transit funding round. However we have continued the planning process so that we can be ready to go should the funding become available.

Ross Jackson is working with Boffa Miskell to evaluate the two alternative proposals for the entrance. Assuming Transit continue the momentum, the advantages and costs of each proposal will be presented to the Committee in due course.

4. Environmental asset management [Dr Philippa Crisp]

4.1 Control operations

The balloted hunting in the Wainuiomata/Orongorongo Water Catchment Area is began 5 April. Hunting will continue throughout the “Roar” over April. Goat hunting is being planned for after the “Roar” in the lower Hutt Catchment.

Recent weed control operations include:

- Blackberry in Queen Elizabeth Park
- Holly, old man’s beard, Japanese honeysuckle, buddleia and road dumpings in Akatarawa Forest
- Old man’s beard and Japanese honeysuckle in Cannon’s Creek
- Old man’s beard in Dry Creek
- Tradescantia, selaginella and honeysuckle in Kaitoke Regional Park.

4.2 Monitoring

Staff have completed re-measuring the last of the exclosure plots in the Hutt Catchment. This final plot was located on Quoin Ridge.

Rangers have begun tawa fruitfall measurements and installing mustelid and rodent tracking tunnels in the Wainuiomata/Orongorongo Water Catchment Area.

A survey for new insects and fungi that may be damaging the forest was completed by Vigil (Forest Research Institute) in February. The work involved a flight over the Hutt and Wainuiomata/Orongorongo Water Catchment Areas, Akatarawa and Pakuratahi Forests and the Northern Block of East Harbour. The later forest was included because it is the closest to Wellington Airport. Any large areas of dieback were noted and then checked by ground survey. Samples of diseased tissue were taken for the identification of any new pathogens.

4.3 Environmental planning

The pre-publication phase of the Hutt Catchment 1080 operation has been completed. A news release on the operation was issued in early March. The Upper Hutt Leader was the only paper to publish the article. Letters have been sent out to permitted hunters to inform them of the operation, while tramping groups, police, doctors, hospitals, vets and dog clubs have also been notified. Ken Wright (Biosecurity) is currently providing information about the operation to hunting groups and local secondary schools. He is also preparing the applications for Resource Consent and Medical Officer of Health approval.

A coastal dunes expert has recently visited Queen Elizabeth Park to help with some decisions about the removal of large areas of weeds. We are currently completing the weed plans for Cannon's Creek, Queen Elizabeth Park and Wainuiomata/Orongorongo Water Catchment Area.

We have been working with Tim Porteous (Environment Division) and Peter Hanford (Forme Consulting) on a monitoring kit for care-groups and landowners. Peter has prepared the kit and will be trialling its use at various locations throughout New Zealand (including the Wellington area).

5. Western sector [Matt Ballantine]

5.1 Battle Hill Farm Forest Park

5.1.1 Maintenance

A new bridge has been installed by field staff adjacent to the ford in the front paddocks to help the public keep their feet dry. The short loop in the bush reserve is proving popular with both casual visitors and education groups and the new bridge will enable them to make better use of the tracks at times when the water level is higher.

A new chicken coop has recently been completed and is ready for its first tenants. The farm yard chickens have proven a real hit with park visitors and education groups and the new facility will enable children to have a look inside a chicken house and watch eggs being gathered without frightening the residents. It is now more accessible to casual visitors and will add to the farmyard feel.

5.1.2 Ranging services

Camping has remained popular throughout the summer season and the fine spell of weather has been a real bonus for the campers. The swimming hole has been well used and parents and caregivers appreciate the shallow water areas for the toddlers. A large number of girl guides and scouts have been visiting Battle Hill and have enjoyed the opportunity to sleep under the stars. The fire ban has meant that the traditional camp fire has not been possible but some groups have been quite creative and have set torches up in a circle instead.

Education groups are continuing to make regular use of the Park, ranging from senior students to pre-schoolers. There is also a growing number of Japanese groups visiting Battle Hill to experience a real working farm.

5.1.3 Events held

There have been a large number of events held at Battle Hill, keeping the Park Ranger John Bissell well out of trouble. These have included another booked out Sunset tour and the Capital Coast Adventure Ride.

Early in March the Pauatahanui Food and Farm Festival was held for the second time at the Park. The event was bigger and better than the first one and hosted a greater variety of farm type activities. These ranged from helicopter rides to dog trialling demonstration, to quad safety courses. The number attending was in excess of 2000 people and looks set to keep getting bigger every year.

The Alpaca and Llama breeders' association held their open day at Battle Hill again. This was an event that was free of charge to the public and visitors enjoyed the opportunity to get up close to these unique animals. The main event of the day was an Alpaca auction and then an Alpaca shearing demonstration.

There have also been the usual run of large equestrian events held on the Park. Numbers have been good. People attending the event are commenting on how good the Park is looking and how that adds to the aesthetics of the course.

5.2 Belmont Regional Park

5.2.1 Maintenance

Recent vegetation cutbacks of track networks throughout the Korokoro Valley and track repair work has resulted in positive feedback from Park users.

5.2.2 Cannons Creek fire

Ranger staff attended a fire at Cannons Creek, which started Friday 21 March. The fire burnt through part of the lower Cannons Creek Valley. Significant damage was caused to plantings which had been previously put in by the Friends of Maara Roa group. Other Council assets including signs and fences were also damaged in the blaze. Three youths were arrested and charged with arson by the police. Fortunately damage and spread of the fire was limited by a good response from fire fighters including the use of five helicopters on Friday evening. Damage and the rate of spread was also limited by light winds.

Another minor scrub fire was attended and put out by the Fire Service at the Oakleigh Street entrance to the Park on Saturday 22 March. Fire danger remains very high in the Park.

5.2.3 Events held

Belmont Guides attended the Stratton Street education facility for a Ranger talk and walk during February. The Lower Hutt Cadet Unit held a successful camp at Dry Creek during March.

5.3 Queen Elizabeth Park

5.3.1 Maintenance

During March, we became increasingly concerned with the drought conditions in the Park. In many places the grass had died and we were beginning to lose some of our plants despite only choosing hardy species. We desperately needed some decent rain. Luckily, that rain came in early April.

5.3.2 Events held

The Children's Sand Dune Discovery Day was held at Paekakariki Surf Club. This was a great day for the kids with mural painting led by Vanessa Patea of Taniwha Murals and story telling by Rihari Singleton of Hatch Storytellers. They were able to blend conservation, culture and entertainment superbly. We are keen to have Vanessa and Rihari back next year as part of our Regional Outdoors Programme.

The last of our summer events was held on 30 March 2003. Landscape Architect Frank Boffa and Botanist Barbara Mitcalfe led a walk through our remnant bush restoration site and the proposed wetland development.

5.4 Whitireia Park

5.4.1 Park now possum free

A sweep of the Park by specially trained possum finding dogs uncovered one possum. The possum was later found to have a lethal dose of poison in its stomach and would have died within days of being found.

The results of this search were very pleasing and suggest that Whitireia Park is possum free.

6. Eastern sector [Fraser Oliver]

6.1 Akatarawa Forest

6.1.1 Maintenance

Using prison inmates, the maintenance standards on Cannon Point Walkway have been constantly improving (vegetation control, track surface) and feedback from users reinforces this.

Directional signs have been repainted using the new Council colour scheme.

6.1.2 Events

Good planning and co-ordination between Parks staff and user groups has meant that several large events i.e. Karapoti Classic, army training exercises, fund raising 4WD events, etc. which historically closed the Forest to all other users have been able to proceed alongside regular recreational pursuits. This has increased the volume of users and minimises the impacts of access restrictions imposed on recreational groups and adds to the diversity of the Forest.

6.2 Pakuratahi Forest

6.2.1 Maintenance

With the spring/summer growth, vegetation control has become the priority. Mowing of the Rimutaka Incline and several areas in Tunnel Gully reserve has been completed. Watertable and culvert maintenance has been achieved using prison inmates whilst contractors have addressed maintenance requirements on all access roads to both areas i.e. grading and metalling.

Construction staff have upgraded a 10 metre steel section of the footbridge that crosses Collings Stream on the upper section of Tanes Track.

6.2.2 Events

Several events advertised in the Regional Outdoors Programme have proceeded as planned. These include the Rimutaka Rail Trail Walk and the Mount Climie 4WD Trips. Both events have attracted good public participation and feedback identifies a definite demand for events of this nature.

Casual use of the Rimutaka Incline and Tunnel Gully Reserve by the general public has been intense with swimming in the Pakuratahi River very popular. Fortunately the river is adjacent to the Rimutaka Incline Walkway for a major portion of the walkway.

6.3 Kaitoke Regional Park

6.3.1 Maintenance

Overhanging vegetation around the campground loop road was cut back and all directional signs were repainted in the new Council colour scheme.

The Eastern Hutt River hut was given a long overdue spruce up which included replacing the stove, windows and clearlite. Rusting sections of the chimney were also replaced.

Work has begun on reopening the conservation corps track linking the campground with the Pakuratahi Forks area.

6.3.2 Events

Talks on environmental themes have been given to over 180 children from three different schools, while 450 seedlings were potted up at Plateau School in preparation for Arbor Day planting.

Hutt Valley Orienteering held a race at Te Marua and the Hutt Valley Harriers used the Te Marua end of the Park to begin the River Trail marathon.

6.4 Wainuiomata

6.4.1 Maintenance

The northern boundary fence project is progressing well with line cutting and bulldozing completed on a section adjoining one boundary landowner. Job contract specifications for the construction, have been forwarded to interested contractors with offers have now returned.

This year's upgrade work on the Nikau Track has been completed. Many steep sections have been graded and much of the track has now been metalled. Unfortunately a plate compactor was stolen from the site during the time this work was being carried out. The standards of walking routes are gradually improving in the recreation area and we are looking forward to increasing the track network by forming a series of loop walks over the next few years.

It may not be Te Papa, but the upgrade of an old utility shed should be a memorable addition for visitors to the Wainuiomata Treatment Plant area. We aim to house many of the small relics related to the Catchment's history inside the shed and exhibit some larger engineering relics in bays close by. It will help give visitors an insight into the history of 'water collection engineering' and 'natural resources' of these fascinating valleys. All work has been carried out by our carpenter, Bryan Leeney.

The latest goat control operation in the Catchment has focussed on targeting small mobs in remote areas. Lower kill numbers show that the methodical professional control strategy has greatly reduced the Catchment's goat population. Nine goats were destroyed during this operation, clearly highlighting the benefits of sustained pest control. Left unchecked, these prolific breeders would soon be back up to pre-control numbers.

As with most of the parks and forests, signs throughout the Wainuiomata Recreation Area have recently been refurbished using the new Council colours. The signage looks good, giving the area conformity with the rest of the Parks and Forests network. It also fits in well with the ongoing upgrade of the area.

6.4.2 Events

The prolonged sunny spell has seen people flocking to the small swimming holes on the Wainuiomata River in the recreation area. Apart from the usual disregard by some people to keep the place tidy, there have been few problems. These sites are extremely well used.

Tours in both the Wainuiomata and Orongorongo Catchments were held on 23 February, 9 March, and 23 March. The Orongorongo tour of 23 March was the last of the present season and completed six planned trips, which, in general, has been a successful venture. The Wainuiomata tours carry on through to the end of July.



Murray Waititi
Manager, Parks and Forests