

Farming on Motuihe Island and Motukorea Island in the Hauraki Gulf

Memories recalled by Roni Harrison and her partner Terry Gibbons.

They had the kiosk concession from 1984 until the kiosk burned down in 2002.

Also the farming concession from 1998 until the last stock were taken off the island in 2005 to make way for the restoration of the island. Roni and Terry left the island in 2007 and Roni's son Michael in 2010.

Farming anywhere can be a challenge, but to decide to operate a grazing concession on two islands close to Auckland City has to be a leap of faith that verges on madness.

We had held the Kiosk Concession since 1984, first with the Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park Board, and then the Department of Conservation until 2007.

We had watched from our kiosk operation, first the Lands and Survey farmer John Allen, then the Land Corp farmer John Allen until 1990, followed by Land Corp Motutapu Island farm managers. Motuihe grazing was managed as a run off until a Concession was granted to Terence Darby in 1994 who lived on the island. His operation failed and he left 2 years later when Motutapu Farms Ltd, the grazing Concessionaires on Motutapu Island commenced grazing Motuihe again as a run off.

The sheer cost of trying to manage stock from another island was prohibitive both in time and financially. Weather and tide dominated access, Motuihe was a popular boating destination with visitors enjoying the outdoors, and stock had to be kept safely away from them.

We applied for the Concession Permit advertised, feeling that we had good background knowledge of the requirements, but finding that we had to accept Motukorea (Browns) Island as well if we took on Motuihe. We formed a company as required by DoC with the Zambucka family and commenced our Grazing concession for both Islands on 25th September 1998.

Previously we had gone back to the mainland or Australia in the winter months, bought property, renovated and returned in time for the Kiosk season. Faye Allen, our neighbour on Motuihe used to help out as staff, worked the Kiosk while we were away. She opened at her own discretion, buying and selling, even catering at times.

We had to bring a caravan on to the island to house contractors when the top house (former farmer's house) was being used for holiday accommodation. This was sited up in the farm complex area and used when repair jobs on the farm required our contractor or one of our partners to stay overnight or a few days. During the week DoC workers or contractors were usually able to use the top house. Mike, my son, eventually moved into the caravan, finding its proximity to the Trust nursery a bonus, as he kept plants in good condition and planted his corridor.

We travelled over the farm to bush areas at times to cater for a specific group, with cattle used to people walking around carrying spades, etc. Terry used to help them travel plants with the tractor and transport tray, with catering equipment, tables, chairs, BBQ etc for some groups as well. One such was Graeme Campbell, the first

DoC Conservator who celebrated his 50th birthday with a present of a fence post each from his guests to protect Taraire Bush, and a BBQ onsite with us. Terry always wore his white chefs coat and hat, making an interesting site sitting on the tractor, pulling the trailer with Mike and I in the chiller van behind him carting the food. This became great fun for all and was a regular site on the farm.

Graeme put together a booklet of information about Motuihe for his guests and I asked and was allowed to copy and sell them at the Kiosk.

Roading became an issue following the years of Furuno Fishing Competitions on Motuihe Island. Heavy trucks and equipment rolled along the roads from the barge ramp as the set up crews arrived, and when the competition was over it all had to go back down again. Once I had been reported to DoC as being seen removing foreshore sand with buckets and a wheelbarrow. I had been filling holes in the road with this.

One of the splendid aspects of life on islands are the people from other islands. There is a connection through shared experience and willingness to learn, through trial and error, developing the ability to solve problems yourself. Always there if you need each other, respecting the distance when you are busy with your own lives.

Harold Morton used to Farm Motuihe Island, and he was famous for the size and quality of the vegetables he grew here. He could often be seen by the boats in the bay filling his wheelbarrow with seaweed for his gardens, trudging back and forth. His son Rob Morton lived on Waiheke island and when the macrocarpa trees on the Motuihe Island farm were blown down or looked in danger of it, he came over and took them back to Waiheke where he milled the wood and made an absolutely wonderful building, (I think it was his home) The whole family were supporters of conservation and very helpful to me in my early endeavours.

Managing the stock

Dogs were not allowed to land on Motuihe so we managed our stock movement by persuading them that the sound “Coomm oonn” meant an open gate to fresh new grass. We barged and trucked weaners onto Motuihe as they were light and wouldn't pug the ground as much as heavier cattle. They were young and learned good habits quickly making it possible to move them with minimal effort. As Honorary Warranted Officer for DoC, Terry was still able to attempt to keep dogs off the island, among his other unpaid duties His appointment was rolled over for another three years on 12th Dec 2001.

Sheep were also trucked on as a grazing tool. We farmed Romney Finnish Landrace sheep having good feet for the winter months of wet clay muddy terrain and threw mostly twins and often triplet lambs. These followed the cattle in an ideal situation keeping the farm looking tidy. Unfortunately by the time we started, the fencing needed attention with sheep regularly getting into areas we didn't want them. Sheep needed shearing and we went north to purchase the extras required at the Motuihe shearing shed. We found a man called Tony who came over and sheared with Terry, usually staying 3 nights happily shearing, fishing and enjoying the Kiosk hospitality and we the company. Sheep need a lot of help, foot bath, flystrike, dagging, crutching, facial exema etc

Another problem was the pasture we inherited which had sprung into long stalky grass and weeds. When we trucked on our first weaners the poor little things developed pink eye immediately, needing treatment. A cattle crush became necessary as stock grew larger and needed Franklin Vets attention more often, plus we needed also to confine to treat them ourselves.

Motutapu Island Farms stock were still on Motuihe when we took over the grazing, they having had a problem getting them all off. They took 147 head off on 10th October 1998 but didn't get them all so we had three very large but lonely beasts trying to be the best friends of our little weaner beef cattle. Eventually I charged them for grazing they having taken neighbourliness too far and those big cattle eating large amounts of grass over a prolonged period.

When we left Motuihe in Feb 2007 we had also left a steer on Motukorea. We had made three attempts to get this white steer off with the others and had to abort the first attempt entirely, cancelling the barge at the last minute. Tried to round it up and pen that one with a few others overnight didn't work. We had a lot of helpers next time, Motutapu Farms also brought over dogs. Peter Fletcher the current manager having been a good neighbour. All to no avail, it eluded us time and time again, always taking with it a few others sideways. We gave up eventually loaded all but that one. It led a lonely life as the only resident and kept a very low profile, people looking for it came away puzzled, but it was spotted from time to time.

The sale yards at Tuakau where our stock were auctioned had spare paddocks to hold them over until auction day and hay to feed them. But they suffered cramped quarters on the trucks and pooped over each other in fright so that when we saw them in the auction ring they didn't look like themselves at all. Sometimes they had to be held for a day or so because of weather or tidal constraints which meant our stock buyer Kerry Bowron had to find paddocks handy for them around Tuakau, all this at a cost of course.

Grazing cattle also meant birth of calves when heifers were brought onto Motuihe. Terry assisted cows when birthing became a problem, Friesian cattle were big boned. It was very satisfying when, after hours of effort from both, the calf was eventually born good size and well, with the cow able to recover quickly and take over the care. Sadly there were dead calves born at times when the offal pit on isolated farms proved a realistic option.

Grazing, prior to mowing the headland before camping season started, was an ongoing event. Cattle were enthusiastic, walking sedately along the road until going through the open gate from the house paddock. There, encouraged by the promise of new pastures their gait suddenly changed as they kicked their back legs up and galloped off down the hill. This had to be undertaken when there was little likelihood of casual boating visitors as they were growing and fast. The beach and foreshore were an interesting diversion and some would always head off to investigate. It could take some time and effort, involved much shouting, but Mike, Terry and I managed to get them up the road and safely shut into whichever paddock they had to start on. The next task was shifting them back up again to the farm area and after a couple of days to dry the cow pats (I collected as much as I could for my gardens and nursery) mowing the area commenced

Our partners too came over at times to help. They were used to using dogs but our cattle didn't know dogs and were spooked by them, finding the shouted instructions and barking an absolute shock. But once in the yards these guys were so efficient in applying cattle treatment that my gratitude and admiration for them abounded.

I was an absolute pest to them, completely ignoring the "We will do it Ronnie, why don't you" I was up on the rails, in the race, growling at them both men and beasts. I objected to rough handling and tried to soothe our terrified stock with platitudes and the sound of a voice they recognised. My usefulness was the meals I provided them with once the drama was over.

Managing a farm on a public reserve

I remember one occasion when I went to help. Terry had found some men camping on the island with dogs and a fire going. They must have been fishing and were drinking. Not a good combination but sometimes a woman can defuse things. When we arrived there were three small children shivering outside and no sign of dogs at all. I was not happy to see children there at that time of night. Terry hadn't seen them before either, when there was a yelp from inside the tent. The men had taken the children out and hidden the dogs inside. They had obviously seen Terry when he spotted them. I was critical and no help at all, thankfully just escaped in the vehicle as one man tried to punch me. We wisely left them to it but they were gone when Terry checked in the morning.

People walking around the island particularly on weekends often opened gates if they weren't locked and left them open. This could mean a great deal of time was suddenly needed to put stock back where they belonged at a busy time for the Kiosk operation. The staff we hired found themselves with a variety of hats which seemed to go down well thankfully.

We lost stock in common with other islands around us. Sheep on Motuihe were killed by a big brown dog, fortunately seen by other boaties, reported to Terry on VHF radio, he then let other boats in the vicinity know to keep watching, then rang the police, who were waiting for that boatie and his dog as they arrived at their boat ramp (a community effort). The guy paid us for our loss because although his dog was not guilty he just felt so sorry for us and he was not charged. Three cattle were chased off the cliff edge down the opposite end of Motuihe. They hadn't been butchered so why remains a mystery.

I felt great sadness because of the killing of a cow on Motukorea. These had come on as heifers and were lovely stock, placid and friendly. The people who killed her sawed off her hind quarters and just left her there. We don't know how much she suffered, but resolved to put wild Black Angus from the hills of Gisborne on next, so that they would be harder to catch.

In a funny incident while the friendly cows were still on Motukorea the coastguard got a call from a man who was up a tree on the Island having had to climb to get away from wild beasts. A new boatie he had turned left instead of right by accident and decided to go ashore as an adventure. He turned off his cell phone after his call to coastguard in case the beasts tracked him down. Luckily he was found safe and sound

up in the tree despite being out of touch. The New Zealand Herald reported the incident tongue in cheek

Barges

Getting stock onto both islands was a mission. The weather and tides dominated of course. Tide times and height, weather, wind strength and direction, truck availability, barge availability when all factors suddenly lined up well, there was a dance in concert with all participating. The prevailing wind was a South Westerly and blew directly onto the barge ramp at Motuihe. As the trucks had to negotiate a sharp bend in the road up to the cattle yards, Terry had to sometimes take the tractor down to tow them around.

We were so lucky with the Subritzky barge operators and developed a very close relationship with some of them who regularly serviced our islands. I always took them down hot food to help the time spent waiting for the trucks to unload. The Neville Bros truck drivers were experienced stockmen and we noticed quite a difference in the way they handled our stock compared to others we had to get at times. Neville Bros also had a delightful habit of forgetting to send their invoice until sometimes a year or two later.

There were times when we had to loose load cattle between islands. The Ponui Island barge was able to take a smaller number, although Subritzky's usually did the x Tuakau sale yards when we couldn't get trucks. Loose loading them onto the island wasn't a problem really, but to get them off could be a drama. They were happy and relaxed cattle but balked at actually getting on board the barge. Time and time again they would jump off the side of the ramp into the waves in the bay which meant we had to all jump in too to try to herd them back onto land to try again. Finally the barge worker had a brain wave and we raced around getting grass, sticks, seaweed etc putting them over a small gap between the ramp and barge through which the cattle could see the waves moving. The darlings walked on as quiet as angels, no problem. Soaking wet, and I can't swim, a much relieved crew split up, we headed for home and dry clothes then leapt into our boat to help if needed at the other end where they had to drive the barge up onto the beach at Motukorea.

Motukorea was a different challenge where the barge had to tiptoe onto the beach at a certain place so trucks could drive off and quickly line up the old yards, unload then get back to the barge before the tide receded or they would be trapped until the next tide.

This barging between islands requires operators with a high level of skill and experience. Tides shift the levels of sand on the foreshore so where you were able to land last time requires an approach from a different angle or an entirely different place. The faster boat can check the levels of tide before the barge gets there to help time wise. Loose loading has its advantages, when off loading the barge can be away quickly and does not have to wait for trucks.

DoC Boats manager Lionel Brock was another person who was very helpful to us. DoC had purchased the vessel "MV Hauturu" fitted with a very strong Hi Ab for lifting gear and machinery on and off wharves in the Hauraki Gulf.

A former Police Officer, Lionel skippered the “Ocean Star” a beautiful old vessel that brought all our gear out to Motuihe Island in 1984. We benefitted greatly from contact with Lionel, who fitted our urgent deliveries of large items in whenever he could. He lived on Waiheke Island and was able to relate to our isolation in a way that not everybody could.

Our Partners the Zambucka family used one of their barges, plus Lionel loaded the Hauturu to help to bring heavy machinery out to Motuihe following our commencement of the Grazing Lease.

Subritzky’s barge brought over the Komatsu 15tonne digger plus a large loader and a truck to build the transpire evaporation ponds at the far end of the parade ground up on the headland. The 5mm red chip for the ponds was barged over on the Moehau towed by the Wainui, where it was dumped onto the beach with the old Preistman clamshell bucket. Then it was loaded and trucked up to the ponds proving to be a very big job both in time and effort. Terry finished the job using the digger, finally a great improvement on the previous system of processing visitor toilets.

This heavy machinery had to then be taken off Motuihe, but Murphy’s law dictated that a howling South Westtherly storm blew up at that time. The delivering barge cancelled, deciding it was too dangerous to attempt the ramp. So Jeff Brebner who was to become a long term friend was asked to call in on his way back down from Kawau Island on the Port Kennedy to do the job. He initially protested but being a kindly and experienced skipper he decided to give it a go. And he did it. Everything was lined up close to the ramp so that when he touched he could signal, then speed was of the essence as he held the vessel as steady as he could in the pounding, pushing seas. These diggers and loaders were not fast machinery but they raced at their top crawl to all get aboard and allow him to back off before he lost the battle. He still talks fondly about the hot roast dinner I supplied for him to enjoy once he got underway. It’s a long way from Kawau Island in those conditions.

Making Hay

Our partners decided to make hay on the island, equipment was barged on and a wonderful time was had by all, haymaking, fishing, eating, drinking, family visits excitedly planning. The big round bales were stacked high in the farm shed area and covered. It became my responsibility to feed out some time later. While I could drive the tractor this was a new skill to develop. I found my ability to roll out the bale smoothly wasn’t up to speed.

First I had to fit the thingy on the back of the tractor, then select my bale and grab it out of the pile with the forks, hold it firmly in place. Proudly chugging my way up in Winter to my waiting four footed fan club I then tried to roll it as I had been advised. My roll was too loose, they didn’t bale it properly, it fell off in lumps. There was then a competition between me and my fan club. I had to stop the tractor, climb off quickly and disperse the clumps so that my fan club didn’t stand all over and poo on the hay. Excitedly they were trying to beat each other to the best bits and didn’t appreciate my interference. Luckily they were quiet, used to me and put up with my bossy ways once they learned that I would get back on the tractor, roll out some more lumps and repeat my performance. A few smart ones would wait for me to stop then try to tear off the hay while it was still clasped by the forks. Some long time later a very tired

tractor driver would take the thingy off, put the tractor away in the tractor shed and wearily trudge home.

The Whale

The 15 tonne digger came in handy when a big Bryde's whale washed up dead on Motutapu at Station Bay. Terry had to take the digger over to bury it. It took some time to dig a hole big enough, then trying to drag it to the hole which had been sited close but not adjacent, took on the mantle of a nightmare. It was rotting and not all the parts were able to move in concert. Another friend Bruce Corbett, who used to sail with his children and friends regularly, came to take us over for a sail on their yacht when my grandchildren were visiting in school holidays. It was to be an unusual adventure for them, and we certainly knew when we were getting close to Grandad. Whew !!! It had turned out to be one of the most foul smelling jobs he ever did and despite determined washing, the experience seemed to stay on his clothes for weeks following.

Communications

Communication had improved since Motuihe residents had to light signal fire to attract attention, and ours was called a Country Set. It worked very well quite often, but was prone to hysteresis when the power to it fluctuated due to generator spikes or weather. Also it was an old fashioned radio set, not many of them still around so it presented as a serious challenge when its parts retired themselves at the most inappropriate times.

Then Terry had to spend hours trying to ascertain where the problem was this time, taking advice over the VHF radio from Lawrence who was our telephone guru from Telecom. Familiar with the inner Gulf Islands and with good friends in common, Lawrence and Terry found ways to get him over to Motuihe when it was just not happening for Terry in the Country Set repair quarter. We had purchased the Rangi Ranger from Motutapu Farms Ltd when they upgraded their vessel, specifically to assist where the need for urgent travel coincided with unavailability of any boat to come to the wharf. Lawrence would drive from Auckland to the Panmure or Half Moon Bay wharf and Terry would race over to get him. Trying to run any business in isolation is a challenge never mind losing the ability to ring anybody quickly when barging stock, veterinary advice, emergencies, deliveries etc.

Lawrence wasn't able to stay and had to be returned to whichever wharf he had departed from. At times this meant he could get parts required and send them over on the next ferry for Terry to install successfully.

Huddled in the tiny Country Set room in the generator shed they would spend hours trying various combinations to kick start the reluctant retiree into life again until their determination won.

Imagine our excitement when our neighbours on Rakino Island were given a Larc set. It was modern, French, and a huge improvement on the Country Set they also been putting up with. To our distress though we didn't qualify, our population count was too low.

Water Supply

Water for stock was a big part of the responsibility for Terry. He had to fill the 5000gal tank by starting the Lister generator in the pump shed to connect the pump, a

challenge every time and one which many tough hardy visitors were unable to achieve. Underground water existed, just had to be accessed. Some paddocks had troughs that were filled by the dam. Climbing down into the space between the two huge tanks and opening the valves to specific troughs, water was gravity fed and worked well as long as equipment and availability allowed for the flow. When old underground piping gave way the leak had to be found and repaired quickly as there was only a finite amount available. Stock or visitor interference to troughs could cause the loss of vital water unless found quickly and repaired.