

Interview with John Laurence, chairman of the Motuihe Restoration Trust (April 2017)

In 2002 Ronnie Harrison, the concession holder on Motuihe Island, sent out an invitation to boating clubs in Auckland to assist with the restoration of Motuihe Island. She had previously set up a Restoration Trust in 2000. The invitation was received by the Outboard Boating Club (OBC) and Lois Badham, who worked in the OBC office, showed it to John because he was the secretary/treasurer of the OBC. They both thought it would be a good thing for the OBC to become involved in as many of their members were regular visitors to Motuihe. The OBC committee agreed that it was a way for the club to give something back to the Hauraki Gulf.

Ronnie invited John to a series of meetings at the DOC office in Karangahape Road. The OBC was the only boating club represented, other people present were Mike Lee, Peter Whitmore, Michael Wood, John Craig (Professor of Ecology), Hariata Gordon (Ngati Paoa) and other community and conservation people. Since the Restoration Trust was established in 2000, very little had actually happened because of the rabbit problem. Groups had tried to plant the trees that Ronnie had grown around her house, including the Victoria Boating Club, but the rabbits ate them.

John is a nurseryman with considerable knowledge in plant propagation. He proposed raising funds and building a nursery capable of growing 25,000 trees a year in root trainers. John was elected chairman of the Motuihe Trust a position he still holds to this day. Many people have said that the Motuihe restoration would not have been the success it is without the input of John Laurence. In 2003 a group from OBC built the original nursery which cost \$12,000 with half the funds provided by the OBC and the other half by the WWF. They had visited Tiri Tiri Matangi to get ideas about designing a nursery. The OBC members have been substantial sponsors of the restoration of Motuihe, paying an extra donation to Motuihe when they pay their annual club membership fees. This is still happening today.

The first plantings of trees that came from Ronnie's nursery around her house was in 2003 between the road and the cliff from the Ranger's house to the Top House. Also, DOC fenced off Ramp Paddock, as there were still some stock on the island, and that area was the 2004 planting.

John Hawley produced a comprehensive conservation plan which was signed off by DOC and the Trust in 2005 after much consultation and discussion. John Craig, who was also involved with the restoration of Tiri Tiri Matangi was an advisor to this document. This plan has been followed ever since. There were other strategies suggested at the start eg do nothing and in 50 years the bush will come back and also some groups wanted their own areas to restore. However, the Trust has stuck with the approved plan.

Ronnie applied for and received permission for a pest eradication programme. In the 1990s DOC had carried out a pest programme which eradicated the rats and mice but the rabbits and cats remained. Over a period of 18 months an eradication programme was carried out using Magtoxin and 1080 carrots and the rabbitier Don Thomson with his dog and gun. The island was declared pest free in late 2004. The restoration programme could then go ahead without restraint.

Early sponsors were Mobil Oil, Lotto, Sky City (half the tractor), OBC (the other half of the tractor which cost \$35,000). Mobil Oil contributed \$30,000 for the kiosk including transportation, set up costs, freezer and solar panels. The mower, sprayer and mulcher were purchased. The sprayer was

used to spray moth plant, rhamnus, kikuya and gorse. Before the kiwi release the tractor was driven over paddocks to planting and weeding sites, however the tractor has to stick to the mown tracks now in case there is a kiwi in the grass. The trailer was designed specifically for the Trust as a multi purpose vehicle. It can tip and was initially used to display large placards about the history of the island. It also carried people, plants and equipment.

The stock on the island were finally removed in early 2005. There were several strategies suggested for the management of planting, weeds and cattle. The one adopted was to take the cattle off Motuihe from the start of the main planting programme. Ronnie was also the concession holder to graze cattle on Browns Island.

Because of his horticultural knowledge, John was able to teach others about seed collection and plant propagation. Large areas were left for the grass to grow long to prevent the significant bank of invasive weed seeds germinating. When the big planting days occurred, Michael Harrison, who lived on the island, together with volunteers went out and set up grids with string and delivered the spades and plants to the planting area. This enabled large numbers of plantings in one day.

In terms of the future, John sees monitoring of the plants and wild life as an important way for the community to be involved. On going issues will be weed control, public transport and the availability of team leaders who can supervise volunteers. . He hopes self guided walks will become popular. He feels tangata whenua will have a more significant presence, perhaps welcoming and guiding. He hopes there will be a marine reserve around the island to preserve the coastal and in shore environment. A visitors centre will have a static display telling the island's story and education for school students would focus on comparing the restored environment on an island with the main land environment. Motuihe will continue to attract day visitors with some camping. The experience for visitors will remain as close to nature as possible.