

Interview with Peter Whitmore (26 April 2017)

Peter was the first Chair of the Motuihe Restoration Trust and as he is still on the Trust today, is the longest serving Trustee.

Peter's first contact with Motuihe was as a Sea Cadet in the early 1960s. He lived in Wellington but the Sea Cadets had a camp on Motuihe for two weeks. The Navy were still there at the time and the cadets slept in one of the barracks in hammocks. He remembers observing the hard training the naval cadets had to go through.

Apart from a few visits by boat after he moved to Auckland in 1981, he had no further contact with Motuihe until the late 1990s when a relative visited from overseas and stayed briefly on Motuihe as part of her exploration of Auckland. She was impressed by the efforts Ronnie was making to try to grow seedling trees and plant them out on the island. After learning about this, Peter contacted Ronnie. Then he and his wife Jill started visiting Motuihe because they thought their business could become involved in the island as a project. Ronnie must have been impressed by their interest because Peter was invited by her to join the Trust that she and her partner Terry was setting up.

Prior to the formation of the Trust, there were early discussions with Peter and Jill about a project to fence off valleys, particularly behind Snapper Bay. However, at that time the island was over-run with rabbits which would frequently cause devastating damage to newly planted trees. The fences would keep the stock out but not the rabbits so that initiative did not go ahead.

The group Ronnie had pulled together to act as trustees, besides Peter, included Ann Fenn of the Auckland Conservation Board, Mike Lee, at that time a Councillor on the Auckland Regional Council, Stephen Jackson of the New Zealand School of Outdoor Education and Hariata Gordon representing the Ngati Paoa Tribal Trust, in addition to both Ronnie and Terry. The inaugural meeting was held on Motuihe on 30 June 2000 and Peter was selected as Chair. Although not formally a trust member, Michael Wood, who had worked in the past with Ronnie and Terry on legal matters, agreed to take the role of Secretary. Later, in November 2001, he too became a trustee.

On the weekend of 30 September/1 October 2000 the trust members were back on the island for a visioning exercise that would eventually lead to the preparation of its formal proposal to the Department of Conservation (DoC). Then on the 12 October the Trust became officially incorporated.

During the first two years regular meetings of the Trust were held, mostly using the DOC offices, at the time on Karangahape Road. Items dealt with included preparation of the Trust's proposal to DOC, which was finished and lodged with them towards the end of April 2001. This involved a lot of work, including in the areas of vision, goals, structure and governance, and management of archaeological and historical sites. Peter rated it as a major accomplishment for such a small group. Work on the island on weed control and marking out possible track routes also continued.

However, in other respects, Peter said the Trust ran into a gridlock. In June 2000 Ronnie had already heard informally through DOC that another organisation called Terra Nature, established by an expatriate living in the USA, also wanted to become involved with the restoration of Motuihe. DOC did not know what to do, so everything was put on hold. Peter was involved in a number of meetings and negotiating sessions related to this. At one stage our Trust offered to combine with the Terra Nature group, but they were not interested in any arrangement. They wanted full control.

In late 2001 the Trust heard that some of the big name people involved with Terra Nature had started to drop out, presumably because nothing was happening. Then finally, despite the possible financial incentives Terra Nature might have been able to offer, in late March 2002 DOC contacted our Trust to say they were ready to start working with us again.

During this hiatus period something extremely major was achieved. The rabbits were also preventing development. Without an eradication programme, re-establishing native vegetation was probably going to be a losing battle. Peter acknowledged the huge effort Ronnie put in during this time in preparing and submitting an application for a resource consent to eradicate the rabbits.

Finally approval was given and DOC took the major step of coming on board to organise and finance this move. First, poisoned carrots were dropped from the air, and then for months after the remaining rabbits were hunted down until the eradication was finally successfully completed in 2004. The island's cats also went.

Although the old kiosk on the island was run by Ronnie and Terry, and not by the Trust, its burning to the ground on the night of 8 July 2002 was a major setback for everyone. DOC did not want to rebuild in the same location for archaeological reasons, and the building was uninsured so there was no money to build a new kiosk elsewhere. Peter thinks that the loss of the wonderful selection of food, drinks, and ice creams that the kiosk provided is one of the major reasons why the ferry services have declined so much since this time.

After the Trust had worked through these early challenges, Peter stood down as Chair, taking the Deputy Chair position, and John Laurence took over the Chair role at a Special General Meeting on 20 September 2002. John had become interested in the project and had been attending Trust meetings for some time prior to that, becoming a trustee in August 2002.

Since standing down as Chair, Peter's particular interest on the island has been the provision of walking tracks. He has always felt that giving people good access to the island, so that they can appreciate all its beaches, bush areas and its special character is a high priority. Track development has been slower than Peter would have liked. This has been the result of time delays in getting DOC consents and ensuring tracks do not disturb archaeological sites, other Trust priorities, and more recently delays caused by Treaty Settlement issues. However, the opening of the Saddleback track as an all-weather visitor track during the year ending June 2012 was a big step forward and its extension towards Bald Knob is now well advanced. Also, the track route on the south side of the island, behind Ohinerau Beach, is marked out, and there are now established track routes in areas that were previously grass.

Peter stepped down from the Deputy Chair position at the AGM on 2 December 2014 and Steve Nelson was elected. Peter is keen to continue his work for the Motuihe Trust. He thinks the transformation of the island through re-establishment of native vegetation has been amazing and the track system is also slowly improving. He hopes that the planned visitor centre to be built on the surgeon's cottage site will come to fruition and that access to the island will improve with more ferries.

Then maybe the people of Auckland will really discover what a jewel they have on their doorstep.