



Epiphytic ferns festoon the trunk of a red beech (*Nothofagus fusca*) in Karioi Forest, on the fringe of Tongariro National Park. Karioi is the focus of a collaborative pest control programme between the forest's Mana Whenua, Ngati Rangī, and the Department of Conservation.

Hard Cho

oices



A lot of people talk about the deathly silence in the forest after a 1080 drop. I can't say I've heard that, but I don't think it's a part of people's imaginations. I think it's the rest of the forest respecting the death that's been brought about.

Keith Wood steps out as if it's a midsummer afternoon, coat still draped over his big forearm. This strapping forester is more than just at home in Karioi; it's a sacred place of his people, Ngati Rangi.

As we splash up the scoria path and enter the scrubby margin, the rain seems to ease a little, and by the time we emerge out from under the tall rimu into the clearing at Rotokura's lakeside, the deluge has stopped.



Lake Rotokura nestles under the foothills of Tongariro National Park, central North Island, a sacred place for the kaitiaki, Ngati Rangī.

The clouds haven't just parted; they've evaporated. The sun is back, and it's beaming through the leaves; setting the forest to steaming.

Wood doesn't look remotely surprised. He says Ngahere Papatuanuku – Mother earth – is a benevolent being, she gives to all in need; “everything that lives and breathes”. Then adds, “be it weed, possum, whatever”.

High in the canopy, kakariki are already chattering again, then comes the thin trill of a grey warbler.

In this serendipitous sun Karioi looks glorious, but back in the early 90s, it was in very poor health indeed. That's when the Department of Conservation first decided an aerial 1080 drop was in order to combat the growing legions of possums, rats and stoats.

“Our people objected strongly,” remembers Wood. “They objected to the use of 1080.”

So a hui was held. “That was the first time that DOC had taken the time to actually come and talk to us about their reasons for needing to go out there with poison,” Wood recalls.

The Department took some of the kaumatua for a flight above the canopy, so they could see, for the first time, that the treetops were dying.

“That won the argument,” says Wood. “Seeing the impacts on the forest, which we normally don't see from the ground.”

Nowadays, Wood says DOC and Ngati Rangī hear each

other much more clearly, against a background of trust and understanding.

The two have since entered a co-management agreement, and Wood says that now DOC is setting out its rationale for pest control for their consideration, his people have a much better appreciation of what their options are.

In the end, Ngati Rangī agreed to a programme of pest control. Reluctantly, they accepted that the first strike had to be an aerial operation – bait stations simply wouldn't get the numbers down. Subsequent programmes were ground-based, and done by Ngati Rangī.

“It wasn't a choice made lightly,” recalls Wood, who says the elders are acutely aware of their obligations. “Because of our responsibility to the generations ahead of us – we're exceedingly cautious about our accountability to them.

“For us, future generations will judge the things we did.

“We have a foot in each camp; the spiritual and the physical, and we're forever questioning ourselves, what will be the effect of what we do?”

It's the spiritual element that raises the toughest questions for Wood and his people.

“That's why we looked at the mauri – the holistic context – of the forest.”

Wood says that over the years, a respect for one another's philosophies and priorities has allowed such considerations to find expression in the co-management programme.

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take on your philosophical views and offer the same sort of respect to things that we would.”

But he'd still like to see a more integral role for Maori in decision-making.

The programme is working. Ngati Rangi contractors like Francis Ponga are out most days, refilling bait stations and monitoring traps and tracking devices.

Ponga says he's thought about looking for higher-paid work at places like the nearby pulp mill, but it's the knowledge that he's making a difference that keeps him in the job.

Like so many, he'd prefer that he didn't have to go about spreading poison through the forest, but he sees the damage wrought upon Karioi by pests every day – sees the forest responding – and accepts that it's the right choice.

The storm might never have happened. Rotokura, the sacred lake, is perfectly still, save for the ripples from rafts of ducks. A carpet of fallen beech leaves; red, yellow, and ochre is shining the sun back into the survivors above.

Somewhere at Ruapehu's feet, a kaka breaks the moment with a screech.

“We would hope to restore the mauri of the forest,” Wood tells me. “Giving off a higher quality of life, more energy. We often talk about how we would measure such things.

“Mauri may be our concept, but I believe everyone can feel that life presence; the health of the trees and the vibrancy of the birdlife.

“And if you sit here long enough and quietly enough, you can actually feel that energy.”



The trunk of a red beech bears the fruits of a sustained pest control programme in Karioi forest, Tongariro National Park. The forest has responded in spectacular style, and with it native birds such as kaka, kakariki and kereru.



Pest control contractor Francis Ponga replenishes a bait station on the boundary of Karioi Forest, on the fringe of Tongariro National Park.

