

Warawara

The Spirit Forest



A waterfall tumbles under kauri/broadleaf forest at Mangamuka, in New Zealand's far north. Resistance to aerial 1080 poisoning to control possums here arose mostly from fears of contamination of watercourses such as this. Subsequent tests found no trace of the toxin.

Warawara Forest wraps like a cloak about the tiny Te Rarawa community of Pawarenga, giving shelter, food and medicine. Dame Whina Cooper once called the forest “Te wairua o Te Iwi o Te Rarawa – The living spiritual being of Te Rarawa people.”

For the Te Rarawa people – Gloria Herbert is their Runanga Chair – the forest of Warawara is a sacred storehouse, and a place of fairies and spirits.

“Every feature, every part, had a name,” she says, “but the people with that knowledge are mostly gone. Some wrote it down; others passed on what they knew orally, but many died without recording it.”

Warawara is special too, for the creatures and plants that live there. Rated second in Northland in the biodiversity rankings, it’s home to the province’s only population of rifleman – the country’s northernmost. Kiwi still survive there, as do kaka and long-tailed bats, and the flora still awaits a thorough survey, says Department of Conservation biodiversity manager, Northland, Eric Van der Speck. “It’s one of those neat places where botanists are still excited about the possibility of undiscovered things.”

But in the late 70s, the forest’s magnificent stands of Northern rata stopped blooming. Possums had finally reached Warawara.

“Our poor old trees must have got a hell of a shock,” says Runanga Executive Officer Kevin Robinson. He remembers too, how the kukupa, the native pigeon, became scarce. “Of course, we now know that possums will take the eggs and chicks of native birds.”

Something had to be done. But the answer – to treat the entire forest with 1080 – was not one everyone wanted to hear.

“A lot of protests spilled over into our rohe,” remembers Kevin. “Mainly about the water. And they said; ‘all the birds will be killed.’”

Hui were held, and debate raged. “We encountered some fierce resistance from some hapu,” says Robinson. Some threatened to sabotage any 1080 operations.

Then one day veteran forest campaigner Stephen King walked onto the marae with bags of greenery; twigs and small branches with leaves and flowers all tagged with their Maori and botanical names. “People were overwhelmed,” recalls Herbert. “The truth was that many people were seeing and learning for the first time about the forest as a real living environment and how all that biodiversity was being endangered.”

Then, King produced some photographs of Warawara’s crown. He’d been documenting the decline of the forest from the air.

“He showed us that the forest was dying,” recalls Robinson. “The canopy was bare – we couldn’t see the real extent of the damage from the ground.”

“A pre-operation survey estimated 20,000 possums, eating one or two tonnes of foliage every night.



Gloria Herbert, Chair of Te Runanga O Te Rarawa.

“That was something our people could take on board. In the end, the decision was an easy one. It was unanimous.”

The kaumatua gave their approval for a one-off aerial operation using 1080 cereal baits, which ran without protest or disruption.

“We got a 91 per cent kill of possums and a 100 per cent rat kill,” says Robinson. “The post-drop water tests came back negative.”

Encouraged, the Runanga decided to take the fight to the possums. Always mindful of the lack of employment opportunities for their people, they told the Department of Conservation they felt they should be the ones to conduct future ground-based control operations.

DOC Kaitaia area manager Steve McGill says he has no problem with that – the contract process takes account of

the tenderer’s relationship with the forest – providing they perform to contract performance targets, in other words, a 5 per cent residual trap catch (RTC).

Runanga business manager Vance Winiata says it’s an

opportunity he’s determined to develop for his people. “I want to perform on this contract. It’s a huge resource with a continuous rotation.

“The first thing for me as the forest manager is obviously to eliminate the possums because of the damage they’re doing to our fauna and flora. But the other thing is for me to provide employment for our whanau.”

After a number of years and a shaky start, McGill says that’s starting to happen for Te Rarawa.

“Initially, a contractor from Otorohanga came up and put in a couple of supervisors. They trained up the local guys. That was very successful; it built up a lot of capacity for the local iwi and they learnt from that. They ended up with some very skilled operators.”

Now, he says, he has a lot of confidence in the Te Rarawa operation.

The possum control contract has become one of the cornerstones of what Vance Winiata sees as the economic and social revival of Te Rarawa.

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