

Kaimai-Mamaku Forest – a haven of history



Bay of Plenty

The magnificent Kaimai Range forms the prominent eastern skyline of the Hauraki Plains, rising steeply from the bed of the Waihou River along a fault line that has thrust the mountains high above the surrounding plains. It forms a narrow barrier between the Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions, stretching from Karangahake Gorge in the north to nearly Rotorua in the south. The park, established in 1975, covers an area of 37,000 hectares and its highest point is Mount Te Aroha at 952 metres.



Human connections to the forest

The Kaimai Range was a barrier between the coast and inland areas for the first Māori settlers. However, it was not long before they established routes from the coast inland. Later these same tracks were used by Europeans, often with Māori guides, as they explored the area.

Both Māori and early Europeans felled kauri and other tall native trees in the area, but much of the forest remained untouched until the gold rush in the late 1800s. The gold rush caused a huge demand for timber, and miners had virtually unlimited rights to cut down as many trees as they wanted.

To overcome the rugged terrain, a variety of methods were used including bullock teams, log chutes, driving dams, tramlines and stream driven haulers. Many of today's tracks follow these historic access ways. About a third of the park's native timber was removed before logging of native trees stopped in the 1970s.

Farming has also had an impact on the park most intensively prior to World War II. Stock droving became a feature of the Kaimai road especially for transporting stock to local fairs, and later the area was used for over-wintering stock.

Today the major threat to the forest is the introduced brushtail possum, whose damage can be seen on plants throughout the park, especially rata. The Department of Conservation is controlling possums in Opuiaki, in the northern Mamaku, to reduce their impacts on native vegetation. Goats were once a major threat in the park, but thanks to intensive goat control operations their numbers are now very low.



A unique geology of precious metals



The high northern part of the Kaimai Range is a block of ancient volcanic rock that originated from a line of volcanoes similar to Mt Ruapehu from about 16 to 3 million years ago. This rock has been uplifted along the Hauraki Fault and tilted to form a steep scarp slope facing the Hauraki Plain to the west and a gentler slope down to the Tauranga Basin in the east.

Near this fault line, the rocks fractured and the resulting breaks in the ground were filled with percolating hot water.

The silica dissolved by the water then crystallized to form quartz reefs where gold, silver and other precious metals may be found. The main quartz reef, Buck Reef, runs five kilometres up the Waiorongomai Valley and is one of the largest reefs of its type in the world. The valley attracted large-scale gold mining activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The lower southern and eastern part of the Kaimai Range is covered by a sheet of volcanic rock called ignimbrite, resulting from an eruption about two million years ago from a volcanic centre nearby. The Mamaku Plateau is also composed of ignimbrite, in this case erupted from the site of Lake Rotorua 140,000 years ago.

Rare flora and fauna

The park contains a wide range of vegetation from dense, low-altitude forest to windblown scrub and grassland. The park marks the northern limit of plants such as kamahi, red beech and silver beech, and the southern limit of kauri. This combination of plants makes the forest unique.

Although they can be quite elusive, common birds to look out for in the park include the fantail, North Island robin, kererū, silvereye, tūi and tomtit. Kiwi and

kākā have been recorded, although are rarely seen. The park is also home to small populations of the rare Hochstetter's frog and the threatened Te Aroha stag beetle, a large black beetle with antler-shaped mandibles.

A national park proposal

In the 1960s the Forest Service offered 99 year leases at 10 cents per acre per year to clearfell areas of Mamaku State Forest for conversion to exotic pine plantations. By 1972 the service had announced plans to clearfell and convert up to 25,000 hectares of native forest in the area.

These plans met immediate opposition as the growing conservation movement of the 1970s brought the value of the park's natural attributes to the fore. Local and national conservation supporters recognized that much had already been lost and the downstream effects of soil erosion, loss of water quality and loss of habitat for native species were already occurring.

A federation of concerned groups called the Kaimai National Park Promotion Council was formed and they referred a petition seeking to have the forest declared a national park to the Government. They did not manage such a high level of protection, but in 1975 the Kaimai Mamaku State Forest Park was gazetted. However, the draft management plan was controversial as it emphasized timber resources and provided scant protection for native species.

The Forest Service gradually softened their stance and subsequent legislation provided for greater protection of natural and historic resources within forest parks. Today the park is managed by the Department of Conservation.

Further information

For more information about the Kaimai Mamaku Forest Park, contact the Tauranga Department of Conservation Area Office (phone 07 578 7677) or the Te Aroha Visitor Centre (phone 07 884 8052) visit www.doc.govt.nz.



Butlers Incline, Waiorongomai