

A black and white photograph of a rugged, rocky coastline. The foreground shows dark, layered rock formations with some sparse vegetation. In the middle ground, a white rectangular text box is centered, containing the title and author information. The background features a vast, hazy landscape extending to the horizon under a cloudy sky.

RESTORING KARIOI MAUNGA

KRISTEL VAN HOUTE

Photo by Kristel van Houte

Returning to Aotearoa NZ in 2006, I was driving home pondering my feelings and my relative unease at the transition from life in the “developing” world to life in the “developed” world, and reflecting on what the entire “moving back home” experience entailed. Having spent the best part of three years in Samoa and then with A Rocha in Kenya – life, it seemed, was now tame in comparison (having been previously surrounded by various levels of hardship and poverty compared to the abundance and freedom we take for granted in Aotearoa New Zealand).

And what now? – I contemplated. What significance could the newly established A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand (ARANZ), bring to a small seaside community? And do we experience a different kind of poverty in our own local context? Driving across the Whaingaroa/Raglan deviation or “divi” from Kirikiriroa/Hamilton the view opens up – farmland, with remnants of scattered native bush greets me – and far across to the horizon there is the Tasman Sea – and standing, sentinel-like, Mount Karioi – Karioi Maunga.

Karioi is a heavily eroded volcanic cone. The mountain is steep and has dissected slopes that include seven peaks over six hundred metres above sea-level. The western slopes of the mountain end in the sea by way of steep coastal cliffs over one hundred metres high and a beautiful beach – well-known as a surf spot of international significance. Silent, brooding, Karioi often is ignored, and yet it is unique and significant. As well as being the most northerly mountain in NZ to have unbroken vegetation from the sea to an altitude that supports a podocarp /montane forest, it is also the second largest coastal forest between Taranaki and Auckland. The mountain also has special cultural, environmental and historical significance to Whaingaroa *tangata whenua*, who are the *kaitiaki* (guardians and conservers) of the *maunga* and its *taonga* (resources, treasures) for future generations.

The Karioi restoration project actually started more than 15 years ago when a community became divided over the use of 1080 poison to control mammalian pests on Karioi Maunga. Following common practice, the primary method employed by the Department of Conservation (DOC) to reduce predator numbers on the large area which comprises Karioi, was through the aerial application of poison (sodium monofluoroacetate/1080, a naturally-occurring toxin, highly toxic to mammals).

In 2009, against the background of community opposition to the aerial application of 1080, a community-based predator control programme was initiated with the purpose of improving biodiversity on Karioi. An invitation from *Te Whakaoranga O Karioi* to ARANZ resulted in a long-term relationship / partnership to develop the project, and includes individuals from the local *hapu*, the community and land owners. DOC and the Waikato Regional Council (WRC) were also supportive.

Specifically, the predator control project was implemented to protect not only forest birds but also a remnant population of Grey-faced petrels/*Oi* (*Pterodroma macroptera gouldi*) that nest in burrows around the shorelines of Karioi. *Oi* are a native species of seabird that were once widespread on coastlines of the North Island. Mainland populations have been in steady decline due to their vulnerability to introduced predators, and unless active pest management is in place to protect *Oi* nests

from predators, existing populations are unlikely to survive. *Oi* are also a “*taonga* species,” with special cultural significance to Māori.

The initial Karioi project was set up as a pilot to

foster enthusiasm and volunteer support within the local community through encouraging community involvement in an alternative method of pest control – trapping. This provided a substitute to the use of poisons, considered anathema by many within the community. Initiating a community-led project meant a stronger emphasis for the community to care for the mountain’s long term ecological health as well as other potentially beneficial outcomes such as education, work experience and local employment opportunities.

And four years on? What has taken place? Since its inception, two hundred regular, one off and occasional volunteers have contributed over ten thousand hours to the project with 120 students and youth from a range of backgrounds visiting the project each year. There is growing support for the project, with a considerable assistance from local professionals, DOC and the WRC – all of whom have contributed significant amounts of time, knowledge and funding. The level of volunteer support has enabled the expansion of the project – with many volunteers showing long term commitment to the project.

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Karioi from Ngarunui beach. Photo by Kristel van Houte



Oi, a *taonga* species with cultural significance for Māori.
Photo by Oliver Ball



Karioi Volunteer with Stoat trap.
Photo by Kristel van Houte.



Kristel and young people with a possum trap
Photo by Tania Ashman

involvement of children and youth and also sought to engage entire families in activities. Working days (building rat trap tunnels), trap checking, monitoring, workshops, community events and camps are inclusive of all ages. One example of this *whanau* approach was an outdoor activity-based camp for children (ten to thirteen years) organised in conjunction with our partner Desert Spring Community Centre (DSM). The camp incorporated a *tuākana-teina* role-modelling concept, using older teenagers to help run the camp, thereby developing leadership skills and involvement in the project.

Our education program includes visits to a range of ecosystems – from the Mountain to the Sea – *Maunga ki te Moana* – exploring not only forest ecosystems but also freshwater streams, a diverse rocky shore and the estuary – wonderful to navigate by kayak. Exploring this amazing diversity is for many participants a new and unique experience and alternatively, for others, an opportunity to share about something they love.

Although the Karioi project remains small – especially when compared with the overall size of the mountain itself – there have been many encouragements on our journey. The community-based approach (a core ethos of A Rocha around the world) has drawn together a wide range of people and organisations including local community groups, land owners and businesses, local *hapu* representatives, WRC, DOC, local schools and tertiary institutes, clubs, churches, community and youth groups – that previously may have had no shared agenda. Since the start of the project a community that was divided over the use of 1080 pest control has united to work towards achieving agreed biodiversity goals for the mountain. This change in attitudes and the gradual transformation of people's lives through their involvement in the project has been matched by a degree of ecological improvement. Preliminary monitoring suggests that bird life in areas where pests are being controlled is now more abundant. And yet, the reality is that invasive species will continue to exert substantial pressure on native biodiversity. Despite our hopes for success, there is the recognition that genuine transformation of communities and ecosystems requires a long term commitment. Such a task can seem enormous and at times, overwhelming.

For me, a source of inspiration has been Mother Theresa's life – and her work in the Calcutta slums. Her determination and belief in doing simple things and engaging at the grass roots level has been inspiring and encouraging. Yet during her life she too felt the enormity of the task she was taking on – she struggled with doubt like we all do – and the knowledge that despite her best efforts, people would continue to suffer extreme hardship and poverty.

There are so many examples around us demonstrating that when individuals and communities act locally, real hope and restoration can be experienced. And when we ask ourselves – why bother, Mother Theresa challenges us and says – “What we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop was not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.”¹

What follows is a song written by the children in Te Roopu Aroha ki te Reo (The total immersion unit at Raglan Area school) about the legend of Karioi and the place she holds in the hearts of the local people.

A long time ago, Karewa was the husband of Karioi
But he flirted with her sister, Pirongia.
Oh, the pain!
Karewa was pushed out to the sea,
he turned to his children who were glistening.

Look after Karioi
Respect her
Understand the signs of the environment,
as they will guide us

Karioi is from Whaingaroa
She is the mountain of the western side
She stands by the side of the sea
She is beautiful and she is an important woman
Her hair flows, she descends down to the sea

Atawhaitia Karioi...
Look after Karioi...

The waters flow from her
which are medicine for the whole world
She gives us strength to breath
There are trees on Karioi and birds which fly
around

Karioi is the guardian for Tane Mahuta!
Atawhaitia Karioi...
Look after Karioi...

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¹ Online: http://thinkexist.com/quotes/mother_teresa/2.html. Accessed 4 April 2013.