



Trustee Mark Farnsworth in front of a large karaka tree.

Photo: M. Bellingham



Mobile sand dunes invade the western side of Tapu Bush, the last major forest remnant along 140 km of coastal dunelands.

Photo: Ross Cochrane

Rare forest remnant granted protection

by Mark Bellingham

The mana of Tapu Bush has long protected the forest there, but in 1982 a charcoal business threatened the future of what is a major cultural site and one of New Zealand's rarest types of forest, prompting the Maori owners to give formal protection to it.

Tapu Bush lies nestled in the dunes of the Pouto Peninsula, south of Dargaville. This 80-ha coastal dune forest remnant is the last major forest area on the 140 km of west coast dunelands that embay the Kaipara Harbour.

When I walked into Tapu Bush, the forest appeared to be low and no higher than the surrounding belt of kanuka — the persistent westerly winds have shorn the canopy down to a level height. But nature only reveals her secrets to those who venture further into this sacred area. The kanuka gives way to puriri, mangeao, kohekohe and rororo (*Nestegis montana*) as one drops off the dune crest and into the gully below, with the canopy rising higher and higher above.

Trees and shrubs below the canopy abound, while the dimly lit ground is carpeted with karaka seedlings, astelias and ferns. On the ridge crests, giant gnarled totara carry a wealth of epiphytic orchids, astelias and ferns.

Drying winds and free-draining sand have a profound effect on Tapu Bush. The predominance of rororo and large mangeao is unusual in Northland, as is the virtual absence of moisture-loving plants like nikau, tree ferns and filmy ferns.

The natural character of the Kaipara dunelands has changed substantially in the past 1,000 years, with the arrival of the Maori and pakeha in New Zealand. Hot, dry summers made the duneland forest susceptible to the fires which were part of the shifting Maori agricultural pattern. But the pakeha probably had the greatest influence, for today the dunelands are covered in pasture and exotic forests. Gone is the broad zonation of coastal scrublands, coastal forest, broadleaf-kauri forest and podocarp-broadleaf forests which once covered these dunelands.

Yet Tapu Bush has been preserved by the mana of the tapu, placed on it by the Maori of the Pouto Peninsula, in recognition of the fact that it contains an urupa (burial ground). Bodies were washed in a nearby lagoon, then taken to burial caves in Tapu Bush. The bush was also used as a training ground for tohunga. However, although it was a burial ground, this didn't stop European settlers from testing the soundness of many totara with their axes. Trustee Mark Farnsworth showed me the scars on the trunks of a few totara, that obviously were too gnarled for felling.

But the greatest threat to Tapu Bush appeared in September 1982 when the lessee of the Te Uri-o-Hau Incorporation land bulldozed a road into the bush and began cutting trees for charcoal. The road was noticed by staff of Pouto Forest Farms Ltd, which owns the northern fringe of Tapu Bush and an injunction was

issued preventing any further damage. The matter was taken before the Maori Land Court, in order to obtain permanent protection for Tapu Bush as a Maori Reservation.

By December 1983 the owners of Tapu Bush had achieved their aim — a Maori Reservation to protect the tapu and cultural features within the forest.

A fringe of kanuka forest is included in the reserve to protect the mature forest and Pouto Forest Farms have set aside a further seven hectares of low manuka and bracken as a buffer between their developed land and Tapu Bush.

At the court hearing Mr Morehu Kena said that his elders wanted the reserve to be made a public reserve for all New Zealanders. It is certainly appropriate that ownership of a reserve such as Tapu Bush, with its deep cultural significance, should remain in the guardianship of the Maori people of Pouto Peninsula.

Footnote:

The southern Pouto Peninsula is also notable in that it has the last major areas of mobile dunelands with good populations of the native sand-binders, pingao, spinifex and *Coprosma acerosa*, dune scrublands and dune lakes, with many dabchicks, crakes and ducks.

It is regrettable that the only area with permanent protection on the Pouto Peninsula has been set aside by the Maori people of Pouto and no lead has come from Lands and Survey and Forest Service on the large areas of Crown land.