

Punaruku

On the eastern side of Northland between the Bay of Islands in the north and the small township of Hukerenui to the south lies Russell State Forest. This is the largest continuous piece of forest in the region, comprising nearly 10,000 ha, and at the southern end of this forest lies Punaruku.

Some forests have a way of bouncing back in spite of what people do to them, and Russell State Forest in general (with Punaruku in particular) is a case in point. The whole area has in the past been burned, logged, grazed, had broadleaf trees and tanekaha ringbarked throughout since the early 1950s, been replanted and is now naturally regenerating.

Pre-European Maori had a close relationship with the forest, using it as a food, timber and spiritual source. While most lived in the protective pa that dotted the coastline, the local tangata whenua also had pa sites in the forest. Punaruku has a number of pa sites, urupa and tapu areas, and contains the sacred giant kauri, Horiwehiwehi.

Punaruku is 3000 ha in extent and is the largest continuous sequence of regenerating kauri in the country. Because of this the area was designated under the "Kauri Forest Management Review," for kauri extraction up to 800 cubic metres a year. Initially all of Russell State Forest was earmarked for production, but conservationists on the Northland Park Advisory Committee several years ago reduced this to the Punaruku and Papakauri blocks. This was fortuitous, as local conservationists might now be fighting to save the whole of Russell forest, not just Punaruku.

Following the creation of the State Owned Enterprises, Punaruku was initially handed over to the Forestry Corporation because it was regarded as a "management area." Since then the block has been placed in the Lands Department; part of it is to be reviewed by the Waitangi Tribunal as a land claim has been lodged by the local Ngati Wai.

Besides the kauri, a number of reasons make Punaruku a special area. It has been classified as having high wildlife values by the Wildlife Service (Ogle 1982) and contains important habitat for a number of endangered birds such as kaka. Kokako were last seen in Punaruku in 1961, the endemic New Zealand falcon in 1979, and brown teal occupy the lower reaches of the Punaruku Stream, outside the forest. Other birds of note found here are the pied tit (not a common Northland bird), kiwi and native pigeon.

The vegetation is a mosaic, reflecting the bush fires at the turn of the century and before, past logging and "kauri management." The most mature forest is confined to the valley heads and steep gullies. Most of the ridge tops support stands of secondary pole kauri which has lost some of its associated podocarp and hardwood species through ringbarking — including Hall's totara, tawa, taraire, and kohekohe. Off the ridge tops hardwood/podocarp forest occurs. Kahikatea is abundant in the low lying areas and along stream beds. A hybrid tree, seemingly a cross between a northern rata and a pohutukawa, is recorded near Puke-moremore trig, although it is probably



Top: Another truckload poised to tip spoil. Bottom: Portable sawmills are chewing away at kauri remnants on private land as farmers cash in "alternative" crops. Logging controls are urgently needed so that some forest is left for long term use of kauri. All photos: Terry Fitzgibbon

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Nigel Clunie, DSIR botanist in Kaikohe, considers Punaruku to be "by far the largest and best stand of regenerating kauri in the country." It has been estimated that approximately 25 percent of regenerating kauri in Eastern Northland's public estate is found in the forest.

We cannot understand why a commercially-minded company like the Forestry

Corporation wants to log Punaruku. The 100-year-old sapwood that will come from the forest is virtually unmarketable. Instead the Corporation would do better to save the 45,000 ha of kauri estate on private land. This would ensure that part of the private kauri estate could be managed on a sustained yield basis, leaving Punaruku and other public kauri forests to recover from the ravages of humans. ✎