

Chathams Heritage Programme Takes Off

Forest and Bird volunteers visited the Chatham Islands earlier this year. Their mission: to fence forests, dunelands and wetlands as part of a push to encourage conservation on the islands. Mark Bellingham reports on progress.



Long time Forest and Bird member Stan Hemsley returned to the Chathams for the first time in 40 years to help with the project and to visit old time acquaintances. Photo: Mike Harding



Moriori tree carving, Hapupu National Reserve. Photo: Mark Bellingham



Driving posts – the hard way! Photo: Mike Harding



Wellington Conservation Corps members and the bust of Tommy Solomon, the last full blooded Moriori. Photo: Mike Harding

SHOWER CLOUDS scudded across the sky; the warmth of the sun was lost to a wind which felt as though it had just left Antarctica. It was one of those Chatham Island days one hears about on the weather forecast, but which locals assure you is a figment of the weather forecaster's imagination.

Despite the daunting weather, the Forest and Bird volunteers set out for Hapupu Reserve, 40 minutes away on the other side of the island. After negotiating various stray sheep and the fairways of the Kaiangaroa golf course, they headed into Hapupu, a bush remnant famous for its Moriori tree carvings on the large kopi (karaka) trees.

The group were enthralled by the tree carvings which for decades have been a stark reminder of an indigenous culture which was almost lost. It was then they began to understand the locals' scepticism about weather forecasts. Out of the wind it was pleasantly warm and the party could concentrate on their goal: to help Chatham Islanders to protect and restore their forests and natural heritage.

During the next week, numerous islanders told the mainland visitors how much forest had disappeared from the Chathams – even in their own lifetimes – and how this loss was linked to a loss of identity. All Chathams settlers – Moriori, Maori and Pakeha – had relied on the natural environment for shelter, materials and inspiration.

The Ngati Mutanga and Ngati Tama of Taranaki were lured to Rekohu (Chatham Islands) in 1836 by their tribesman Paki Whara's description of the islands:

"It is a land of food – he whenua kai! It is full of birds, both land and seabirds of all kinds, some living in the peaty soil; with albatrosses in plenty on the outlying islands. There is an abundance of fish and shellfish; the lakes swarm with eels; and it is a land of the karaka berry..."

Today, with just 10 percent of the forests left and numerous bird species extinct, the Chathams is no longer the natural paradise it was painted 150 years ago.

Denise and John Sutherland run Chatham Lodge, which is hosting increasing numbers of people who come to appreciate the Chathams heritage. As John explains: "We've got to get the bush back and then native birds. We've got to conserve the fish,

the shellfish and the crayfish so that tourists can gather them and eat them too. We've got to preserve our historical buildings and evidence of our past to be able to draw on the part of the tourist market that's interested in those things. If we don't do all this, we're going to be in more trouble. If we do, we're not only preserving an on-going income for islanders: we're also making this a more viable and more pleasant place in which to live and work."

The Forest and Bird party at Hapupu erected interpretation signs, which explained the importance of the tree carvings, the forest ecosystem and its birdlife. The trip also involved building a track and nature trail in Henga Scenic Reserve, behind Chatham Lodge and a walkway through Rangaika Reserve, on the Southern Tablelands.

The project marked the start of the Chatham Islands Heritage Programme – a co-operative effort by Chatham Island landowners, the County Council, Forest and Bird and the Department of Conservation to protect and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the Chathams. In its first year the programme has received funding from the Lottery Grants Board for projects at Hapupu, Henga, Rangaika and fencing of 800 ha of wetlands and dunelands at Ocean Mail.

Next year the aim is to help a number of landowners fence stock out of their forests. With 1991 also being the bicentenary of the European discovery of the Chathams, we plan to publish a guidebook for the growing number of visitors to the islands.

The Forest and Bird volunteers, who came from Christchurch, were helped by the Wellington Conservation Corps to clear and mark the tracks in Henga and Rangaika Reserves. The Henga track, on John Sutherland's land, passes through some magnificent kopi strands, the last tree carving in Henga, and out to the limestone bluffs overlooking Long Beach.

Perhaps in the future the forests of the Chathams will have recovered and the sight of the endangered pigeon – New Zealand's most endangered bird – will be more common and the call of the tui no longer confined to the southern bush and outlying islands. 🐦

Quotations from A Land Apart (Michael King and Robin Morrison, Random Century (NZ) Ltd).



Five years after Forest and Bird helped fence the Hapupu Reserve, the regeneration is evident (left). Such protective measures are desperately needed in areas such as the Ocean Mail Reserve (right) which was fenced this year. Photos: Mark Bellingham

