

parks

A park system which began as a place for city folk to relax has expanded in 30 years to become the major conservation parkland in the north. With a physical area of more than 37,000 hectares, the Auckland regional parks include two mountain ranges and more than 100 kilometres of prime coastal land. Attached to it are marine reserves, 'mainland islands' of habitat restoration, 500 kilometres of tramping tracks, and special wildlife reserves.

In the absence of any national park north of Tongariro, the Auckland regional parks are the major public lands available to more than a third of the country's population. Perhaps not surprisingly, statistics show they receive nearly eight million visits a year, around twice the number of all our national parks put together.

The prime driver for the initial parks system was recreation, but the habitat set aside is also vital for the survival of many native plants and wildlife, including forest and coastal species. Management of the parks increasingly takes into account these natural values, with pest eradication budgets which must be the envy of national park administrators, and wildlife habitat recovery schemes which are bringing back native populations of birds and fish.

Among the outstanding wildlife projects is the strict control of rats and other pests from the Wenderholm coastal park just north of Auckland, so that native pigeon numbers have soared to flock sizes of 40 or more, and threatened bush robins have recently been



GORDON ELL, BUSH FILMS



West Mahurangi Regional Park protects coastline and coastal forest.

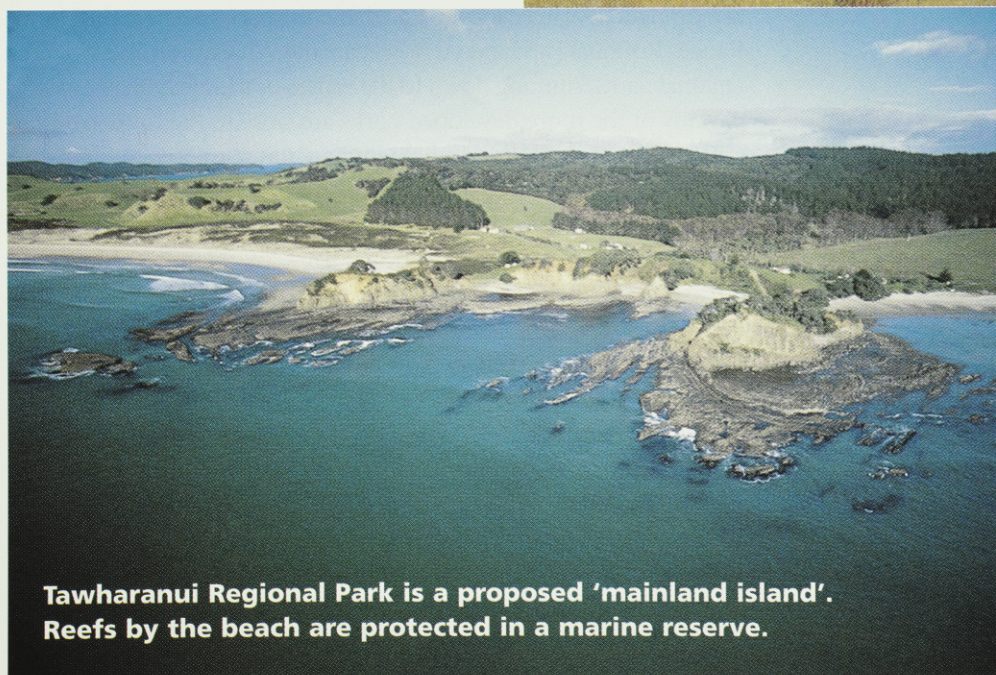
Huge 'picture frames' have been installed at most parks, drawing attention to the scenery. The sponsored frames have been the cause of some controversy. Auckland Regional Parks cost \$16 million a year to run but access is free, and \$4 million is recovered from such sources as leasing water rights, farming, forestry, camping fees and sponsorship.

reintroduced. The Muriwai gannet colony, developed some years ago in conjunction with North Shore Forest and Bird, attracts more than 250,000 visitors a year: add visits to the nearby surf beach and this park draws more than a million people a year.

Broadly speaking, the Auckland regional park service provides what it likes to call an 'accessible countryside' of bush, beach and farmland within a 20 to 90-minute drive from central Auckland. Several parks are serviced by regular buses.

Obvious gems are the fine coastal parks, often purchased as working farms, and giving ready access to areas otherwise closed off from the populace. A string of 12 such parks extends around the eastern shores of the Hauraki Gulf from its south-west shores in the Firth of Thames to near its northern limits at the Tawharanui Peninsula facing Little Barrier Island.

These parks, which are often headlands surrounded by reefs and edged with beaches, preserve the quintessential north. While picnic grounds may front the beaches, the headlands and valleys hold substantial remnants of coastal forest. The remains of Maori pa sites and settlements are often obvious, usually interpreted as part of the park, along with the pioneer homesteads and local history. On the adjacent farmland, pathways give further access to the countryside.



Tawharanui Regional Park is a proposed 'mainland island'. Reefs by the beach are protected in a marine reserve.

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