

Real Maori radio takes to the air

Wellington listeners are currently getting nearly their full moneys worth from state subsidised Maori radio, Te Upoko o te Ika on 1161 Khaz.

The Maori language station planned to finish its two month on-air time at the end of June, because that's all the funding could buy.

Nga Kaiwhakapumau i te Reo is the backing group, and spokesman Huirangi Waikerepuru says Te Upoko o te Ika has shown that regional Maori radio is a reality.

He says Radio New Zealand's parent body, the BCNZ, gave a grant of ten thousand dollars towards the costs of getting the station on-air, but this was eaten up by Radio New Zealand charging over this amount for the hireage of transmitting equipment. That, he says, is not what the Waitangi Tribunal meant when it said the Broadcasting Corporation, as an arm of the Crown, had an obligation to promote Maori language.

Mr Waikerepuru says RNZ's pleading poverty in having to charge for its services, doesn't change the obligation it is under, to provide equitable radio services to Maori and Pakeha.

Te Upoko o te Ika has been broadcasting from 6.30 a.m. to 12 mid-day each week day and from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m. on weekends.

A typical day has been karakia to start, then music with news on the hour, and headlines on the half hour. A rangatahi show runs from just before eight to half past, with studio guests after this time. Talk-back has then taken place, with between nine and eleven being most lively with callers quizzing guests in Maori and English. A kohanga hour has rounded off the morning, with a news roundup just before mid-day. Piripi Walker and Kura Anderson and Tama Te Huki seconded from Radio New Zealand's Continuing Education Unit, Replay Radio and RNZ Wellington respectively, are the only full-time station staff. All others are voluntary.

Maori speakers willing to get behind the microphone or the programming, have volunteered their time, and their nervousness has soon disappeared in the whanau atmosphere at Te Upoko o te Ika.

Its base was found by station patron, Wellington Mayor Jim Bellich, just across the road from the Wellington City Council headquarters. The building is to be demolished soon after June and in fact radio staff had to rewire the second floor site, as well as build a sound studio and partition a section for office use.

A news team have been operating late each night to compile news for the morning show. Those without Maori language skills have written their news in English, which has then been translated or rearranged into Maori. Interviews have been carried out in Maori or English, depending on the interviewee's ability to get their point across in Maori.

The Court of Appeal hearing and the Federation of Labour conference in the first week of broadcast in May brought many native speakers to Wellington and consequently much news that never appeared in the Pakeha media, did so only on Te Upoko o te Ika.

Tu Tangata's editor, who last worked in radio some six years ago, soon found familiar ground but in a language he hadn't known then. He said it's shown him how adaptable the Maori language is to carrying diverse and sometimes very specific meanings in a news story.

He says that has big implications for the Maori journalists training at Waiariki Community College and even bigger ones for Radio New Zealand's proposed Maori radio repeater stations.

He says the Maori journalists must have at least, a working knowledge of the language, as well as a sharpness and depth in recognising what is news in any culture.

Nga Kaiwhakapumau i te Reo has now backed up a successful claim to the Waitangi Tribunal regarding the tino

taonga that the Maori language is. It has fired its broadcasting shots clean across the bow of a yet to appear waka, the Maori Radio Board. This is the Maori flag-ship of the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand, but the Maori people who've privately accepted Board membership have yet to do so publicly. Perhaps they're having doubts about the proposed model of Maori repeater stations as adopted by the broadcasting hui at Takapuahia in November last year. (See Tu Tangata Issue 33).

Te Upoko o te Ika has also scotched BCNZ board views voiced at that hui, that Maori stations could only be maintained for a week or so before dying. Its lively talkback, frequently jammed because only two lines of the RNZ gear were operable, showed what listeners wanted, more Maori radio.

The local energy was high, at times it threatened to blow the programme right off the airwaves, but that was a lot of the attraction as people tuned in to 'their' station.

It had an impossible radio audience to satisfy, from the 'Rasta dreads', other rangatahi, kohanga children and parents, through to tauira and kaumatua. Sometimes it sounded like Te Reo o te Upoko was trying to reach everyone at the same time.

The music alone is worth a mention. It was possible to hear Porirua reggae band, Dread Beat and Blood, followed by soft harmonies of the Maniapoto Sisters, then the dire doom sound of Third World, then a Sid Melbourne bird song. A lot of Maori music, unplayed by Radio New Zealand stations because it doesn't make the play-list (which is because it doesn't get played) was unearthed and it sounded ka pai, parekareka ana. Te Upoko o te Ika has appeared out of the water for the fourth year in a row.

This time its stay has been a longer one. I don't think it'll like returning to the water.