

Muaupoko people cleaning up the Lake

(Ginny Lee).

The Muaupoko people of the Levin district have had an early success in their stand for the right to control the lake they own.

Lake Horowhenua, central to the tribe's cultural and economic heritage, was until recently administered by a board on which Maori members took their places beside pakeha local body and Lands and Survey Department representatives.

Frustration came to a head in April this year when the Maori members resigned demanding that power to look after the lake be vested in its Muaupoko owners, through the Lake Horowhenua Trustees.

By mid-June, the trustees had received agreement in principle to most of the issues they raised, from the Minister of Lands, Mr Elworthy.

Now the finer details are being worked out and if this is successful a new set-up under the Reserves Act could see the trustees in control by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, the Lake Horowhenua Reserves Board is no longer meeting, and is likely to meet only once more — to close itself down.

Mr Elworthy has told the trustees he is sympathetic to their desire for the dissolution of the board.

He saw at a meeting at the lakeside marae Pariri in May, that the board was "unsatisfactory" for the Maori people.

Although the Muaupoko tribe have had half the seats on the eight-member board, it has been difficult for them to manipulate the European structure.

"It's been no good for us because of the European representation," trustee and former board member Joe Tukapua told the Minister.

More importantly it's the injustice of having mere representation on the running of your own property that angers, according to the trustees' liaison officer Matt McMillan.

The lake bed, a chain strip of land around it, and its outlet the Hokio Stream, are in Maori hands but special legislation gave control of the WATERS to the board in 1905.

The sacred waters are gravely threatened, many Muaupoko believe.

Once a rich source of food, especially eels, the lake is now badly polluted. There was also some fear early this year that eels would be killed by power boats, which had traditionally been barred from the lake.



Matt McMillan

The holding of the New Zealand Power Boat Championships on the lake angered some of the Maori people, and only one Maori board member voted for the champs to go ahead.

There was considerable Maori support for a group of mainly young people who defied the boats and rowed out onto the lake in protest.

Several were arrested and there was a tussle with a police boat. Two men were convicted on charges of assault and one of them on a charge of obstructing a police officer in execution of his duty. A third was also convicted of obstruction.

Though penalties were light there was resentment in some quarters of the Maori community. Joe Tukapua made public his dissatisfaction with the outcome of the trial. He did not believe the police were in execution of their duty in trying to remove tribal members from their own lake.

Many sections of the Levin community are also following with concern the moves now being made to bring an end to the main cause of the lake's polluted state — the discharge daily of up to two million gallons of sewage.

The treated sewage has proven almost fatal to the lake over the last decade.

Water and soil authorities recognised the problem and in 1980 the lake was given a classification which meant the sewage could no longer enter the lake legally.

The classification, CX, says the lake

is sensitive to "enrichment". It is enrichment from phosphates and nitrates in the sewage which has turned the lake murky with algae and weed, and, according to residents, slowed the movement of the Hokio Stream and clogged it with weed.

Bacteria from the sewage (faecal coliform) are also way in excess of the level allowed by the classification.

The Levin Borough Council belatedly applied for and got, the right to continue this discharge into the lake until 1986 while it pursued alternatives.

It now wants to trial discharge onto land and into the stream. The stream proposal is another thorn in the side of many Maori people and other conservation-minded groups who seek the protection of eels, shellfish on Hokio Beach, and recreation rights.

Many of them feel the whole load of Levin's sewage should be discharged onto land in the long term, leaving the stream well alone even in early experimental stages. They will be pushing the council hard over the next few months as it seeks water rights from the Manawatu Regional Water Board.

"The lake is going to die if the sewage isn't stopped soon," Matt McMillan said. But he acknowledges the trustees will have a tough task hurrying along the process of ceasing the present discharge, when control is in their hands.

The trustees also want to administer the 14-acre Muaupoko Park, an area that is now crown land and where several boating organisations have their headquarters. The Minister of Lands says it must remain in public ownership.

The park is maintained by the Levin Borough Council and the Horowhenua County Council and the trustees are anxious to talk to these bodies.

But the atmosphere for discussion deteriorated somewhat with the Minister's quick and public decision in favour of the trustees.

Several councillors felt the Minister should have taken them into his confidence before making an announcement. Now the Levin borough is awaiting concrete ideas on how the lake would be administered, before it decides on its desired role. It is also seeking a meeting with the Minister.

Mayor Jack Bolderson has made it plain he considers the lake an important regional asset.

The trustees are quick to point out that it can remain so under their control.

They have no intention of denying public use of the lake, says Mr Tukapua. Using the lake for large events could even be increased.

The trustees will seek the right to gain income from lake users. "Businesses in the town have benefitted from activities on the lake for years," said Mr McMillan. "It's about time the owners benefitted too."

