

A personal view of the 2009 Biodiversity Seminar

from Tony Watkins

Saturday 19 September 2009

Awake with first light. It was before 6am. Decided I may as well get going, and with just a couple of cups of tea I was on my way and at Papatoetoe just after 7am. This made life easier for Clive and it was only minutes before we were heading North together in his Koleos. A coffee and sticky bun at the BP Service Centre while Clive was trying to get a toll ticket. Neither machine would work. By 10.20am we were at the Pakaraka Hall for the all-day Seminar on the Biodiversity of Northland, organised by the Waimate North Landcare Trust and the NZ Landcare Trust.

The sheer joy of a traditional country hall with mud-covered cars parked all over the place. Perfect. So different from the pretentiousness of Auckland. A friendly greeting from other people pulling over onto the grass verge. This was obviously going to be a great day.

It had begun at 10am with a welcome from Daryl Way and a talk on the Waimate North Journey by Geoff Wightman. We had missed most of that, so I later checked it out on their excellent website, but we were in good time for John Innes talking on forest fragments. You need to penetrate 100M into a forest before you get the climatic conditions which will support a normal forest ecosystem. His very detailed work related to Tawa fragments in the Waikato. Getting rid of possums and fencing resulted in a dense forest cover and although this resulted in a rich ecosystem on the ground it actually reduced the number of Tawa seedlings, raising questions about favouring small trees over big trees. There was a very quick recovery in the first 3 to 5 years and then it slowed considerably. In terms of bird life rats were the big problem, and reinfestation of predator-free fragments surrounded by paddocks was rapid, so that keeping an area rat-free was more difficult than getting it rat-free. Rats did a lot more damage than stoats. Some amazing film clips. One of a rat getting out along a fern frond to get the eggs from a fantail nest. Another of a possum robbing a nest. In summary nothing was quite as simple as it was made out to be.

Mark Smale talked about the gumfields. Once extensive from Dargaville all the way up, most of the gumfields have now been turned over to agriculture. He focused on my favourite gumfields just south of Ahipara. The rock crust beneath the surface layer completely impenetrable to water. If you break that crust the water gets in and you end up with a swamp. This raised an interesting debate about a wind-farm proposal. I thought it was an interesting idea as it would prevent any other development from a large area. It is impossible to live within kilometres of the noise from a wind-farm. Mark was totally opposed, as the foundations would penetrate the crust and allow water to destroy the landscape. I felt the Dalmations had been doing this for years. Someone else raised the question. Mark conceded his presumptions were wrong. It was that kind of day. People were honest, open and thoughtful. Everyone in the hall was involved and committed, and they all knew you had to make compromises and tough decisions to move forward. All so different from pretentious academic conferences.

Alan White, the DoC Biofund Manager, was rather too bureaucratic, which he had to be of course, although his explanation of the vexed history of DoC was a good reminder of how

much everything has changed. The important thing was that he made himself available, and I came away with his card to follow up on possible funding for a guidebook to Te Ohu.

The lunch was as good as they get. Country style. Generous, healthy and filling. The big trays of quiche matched the big crowds. How did they do it? Someone must have had an enormous oven. Of course someone turned up with Kerikeri avocados and oranges. No compromises there. The sun poured down, the landscape was superb out the back of the hall, and there was much to think about.

Steve Allen demonstrated his personal design for a possum trap which could be mounted half way up a tree. It seemed to avoid the problems of Timm's traps while still giving an instant kill. Bought one for \$25 to try up at Te Ohu. His photographs of possum kill would have been a PR stunt anywhere else, but here he was making no fanciful claims. Like me, others were concerned about birds. He had caught a rat and a feral cat, but never a bird. He also had a small rat trap of the same design. By the time I was back home I had decided to try a couple. Getting rid of rats is expensive in a house and prohibitive in 400 acres of bush. By now my attitude to rats was changing.

Helen Moodie convinced us to all go back inside for Kevin Matthews talking on what goes unnoticed in our backyard. Knockout. He was simply amazing. From orchids to katipos, and geckos to lichen, nothing seemed to have escaped his eagle eye, and half of what he was showing was either on his Ahipara farm or close by. I could have listened to him for hours and he could have talked for hours. He was simply passionate about the small scale of everything around us, and his delight was backed up by scientific knowledge. A farmer? You do not hear anything as good as this at the University. At long last he solved my gecko question. The two I had found were chevron skinks, so rare as to be almost unknown in Northland. He wondered if I had stumbled upon a colony completely unknown to the scientists. I promised to send him some photos. Meanwhile I wondered if my friendly skinks were still living in my pile of bricks where I had released them. I rather liked the idea of not carting them off to an anthropocentric world which was not their world. Over a couple of days we had become friends.

Suzi Phillips talked mostly about food for kakas. It seemed to me that they would eat anything, but perhaps I missed something. After being spoilt by feeding kaka on Hauturu I had assumed they were not all that rare, and I was surprised to discover they had become extinct on the mainland. The ones around Warkworth or Auckland were flying over from Hauturu. I wondered if the one I had seen at Te Ohu was lost, or perhaps my identification was wrong. However the way they fly is distinctive. "The gannets of the bush" was the way I described them to Helen Momota, who had never seen a kaka.

Helen Moodie suggested "10 things you can do". I was intrigued to learn that 40 schools in Northland were linked into the Enviroschools programme. Something John Key could do would be to keep their funding up, but we did not go down that track. The best one liner for the day was the response to the question about getting young people involved. "Send them a text".

There was so much to follow up on. Those little snippets. A control for "wandering jew"? Tell me more. The best bait for rats. Jot down that name. Helen put up some links as the questions flowed in, and someone in the room could always help with answers.

Somehow everything in the day had been on time and the show wrapped up a little after 3pm, with a lavish feast to go with afternoon tea. The apple slice was the biggest I had ever seen, even in the army. The all-day display on environmental courses available in Northland was impressive.

I was totally spoilt to have Clive drive me all the way back to Papatoetoe to pick up my car. We only stopped to try and get toll tickets, but neither of the machines were working. Called in at Il Piccolo to pick up a pizza to share with Helen. Liam turned up so I sent him back to his shop to fetch me a couple of the bottles of the Pinot Noir he had been raving about. A day such as this deserved to be celebrated with good wine. I was on a high. More than anything else a seminar like this renews your energy and enthusiasm. I could not wait to get back up to Te Ohu.

NOTE - All comments and opinions in this diary note are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Waimate North Landcare Trust.