

TE UREWERA

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Te Urewera Board and Tūhoe look to the future after Court resolution

Te Urewera Board and Tūhoe are moving ahead with plans to re-imagine the future of Te Urewera as the homeland of Tūhoe and a place that is accessible to all New Zealanders.

This follows the High Court’s decision on remedies for the Board’s technically unlawful decision to decommission of end-of-life huts in 2022.

“The board and Tūhoe acknowledge the High Court’s decision and now is the time to move ahead so we can get on with realising the potential of Te Urewera as the homeland for Tūhoe and a place to be enjoyed by all New Zealanders,” said Tāmati Kruger, chair of Te Uru Taumatua (the Tūhoe iwi authority, which carries out day to day management of Te Urewera) and who was also chair of Te Urewera Board when the decision was made.

Te Urewera Board and Ngāi Tūhoe previously acknowledged in 2023 that the decision to decommission many of the Department of Conservation-owned huts in Te Urewera was technically unlawful, despite support from Te Uru Taumatua and DOC, because the parties did not have a valid Annual Operational Plan in place as required by Te Urewera Act.

“We are pleased to say that the parties have agreed a fully compliant Annual Operating Plan for Te Urewera which sets out Te Urewera Board’s priority activities for the coming year, including the completion of the decommissioning programme in a safe and responsible way during the winter season,” Mr Kruger said. “Although the Courts acknowledged there is no requirement for public consultation on decommissioning, we will continue talking to the Federated Mountain Club and other groups with a connection to Te Urewera on the changes.”

Mr Kruger said the Board, which speaks for the legal entity of Te Urewera, was looking forward to the next steps in meeting Te Urewera Act’s purposes of reconnecting Tūhoe people with their homeland, protecting the biodiversity of the whenua, and welcoming manuhiri (guests) to enjoy Te Urewera.

A key part of this journey was reimagining Te Urewera as if it had not been disconnected as a national park: how Tūhoe and manuhiri would live in, make livelihoods with, and care for the land in alignment with Te Urewera’s own intrinsic values and traditional culture. New fit for purpose facilities within Te Urewera are part of that conversation, Mr Kruger said.

“Since their Treaty settlement in 2014, Tūhoe have been on a path of rebuilding capability, knowledge and responsibility. The iwi’s experience in constructing a living building in Tāneatua, two ecological community buildings in Te Urewera, delivering the technology for the Nature’s Road to sustainably seal SH38, and building a self-sustaining hapū village pilot for 25 residents has given it the technology, knowledge and skills to design superior settlements and facilities that will align with Te Urewera’s values and conditions.”

TE UREWERA

“There is now a suite of knowledge to help us provide for Tūhoe members and kaimahi, to support pest control and biodiversity work, and to make Te Urewera accessible and hospitable to manuhiri.”

Mr Kruger said that this work would take time and he asked the public to be patient.

“As the Court noted, many Tūhoe saw the DOC huts as a continuing symbol of the disconnection of Tūhoe from Te Urewera when it was made into a national park in the 1950s, without consultation and excluding Tūhoe from decision-making about their home. The huts, many of which were near or at the end of their lives, and associated health and safety obligations were also a material drain on the resources of DOC and Tūhoe to manage Te Urewera.”

“The intention of the Tūhoe settlement and Te Urewera Act was never to simply create an iwi-branded national park, or to swap out a DOC hut for a Tūhoe hut. Te Urewera is rugged, wild, and ancient, so it is easy to forget how much of what many people think is its essence was shaped and determined by government workers in recent decades as a national park.

“There will always be endless bush and recreational opportunities in Te Urewera, and manuhiri will always be welcomed with open arms. But when our thinking is unconstrained by the decisions made by a very few for their own purposes in the mid-20th century, there are endless possibilities to provide a greater number of better, more authentic, more accessible experiences for manuhiri, while also being more true to Te Urewera and Tūhoe.”