



The Possibilities of North Island Wilderness

by Jamie Stewart, FMC Administrator

A Personal Experience of Wilderness

Some think that definition on a map is the final desecration of wilderness. The label and the line reveal the wilderness, and under the glare of that spotlight the wilderness wits. Others, scouring maps for adventure, are drawn to the declaration 'wilderness'.

The map was Kaimanawa Forest Park, and the hopeful red words declared 'Wilderness Area', or perhaps 'Proposed Wilderness Area'. They straddled the southern Kaimanawa Range above the thick line of the 'Army Training Area - Access Prohibited'.

On a misty day, I disembarked from the bus on the Desert Road and began walking. I arrived at Kuripapango several days later, having tramped over Patutu, Thunderbolt and the Tawake Tohunga Range. It was a memorable trip. I sang Amazing Grace in a storm-swept tent on Karikaringa, was chased off Manson by a bristling front, and all the way navigated like my life depended on it, which it probably did. Like many before me, I found my first personal wilderness experience in the heart of the North Island.

A Watershed for Wilderness

The FMC-organised Wilderness Conference in 1981 was New Zealand's watershed for the designation of wilderness areas. Visionaries, such as Les Molloy, had convincingly presented a philosophical justification for wilderness areas over an extended period, but it was the Wilderness Conference that catalysed agreement and eventually action.

Out of the conference, and the subsequent Wilderness Advisory Group, came proposals and criteria, which are as relevant today as they were 30 years ago. Of the wilderness areas proposed and designated since, only the Ruakituri in Te Urewera was not fully considered at the time.

The 1985 Wilderness Policy set criteria about the nature and size of wilderness areas, and also considered that, 'a wilderness system should have a wide geographic distribution, and contain diversity in landscape and recreational opportunity'. Landscapes vary in the recreational opportunity they provide; some are more accessible than others.

The State of North Island Wilderness

In 1981 the North Island had two gazetted wilderness areas: Te Tatau Pounamu and Hauhungatahi, both in Tongariro National Park and gazetted under the National Park Act in the 1960s. Neither met the size criteria, and popular tracks lie near their boundaries. However, unlike the Otehahe Wilderness Area in Arthur's Pass National Park, they remain to this day.

The Tongariro National Park Management Plan 2006-2016, justifies their continuing status, 'both areas embody the criteria and values of remoteness, challenge, solitude, self-reliance, and discovery; they are contrasting areas: one has mainly forest (Hauhungatahi) while the other (Te Tatau Pounamu) has more varied and richer vegetation as a result of different geological history and environmental conditions; and each allows for different recreation opportunities'.

The leading North Island wilderness area proposal at the 1981 conference concerned a vast tract of the Raukumara Range. The Raukumara proposal had the advantage of secure public tenure and the periodic threat of hydroelectric development on the Motu River. After the demise of the ill-conceived East Cape to West Cape walkway proposal through the area, the Raukumara Wilderness Area was finally gazetted in 1988 with an adjusted boundary that extends from the true right of the Motu River to near Mt Hikurangi.

In 2006, the Raukumara Wilderness Area was joined by the Ruakituri Wilderness Area, 100 kilometres to its south, on the eastern side of Te Urewera. While both are forested, the former is characterised by deeply incised gorges and difficult access while the latter lies on gentler yet more complex terrain, as described in the 2003 Te Urewera Management Plan:

'The isolation and intactness now provides an opportunity for people to travel on foot for several days, very much on nature's terms in the spirit of true wilderness, in an environment very different from other wilderness areas, yet characteristic of how much of New Zealand once was.'

Ridge after ridge: dusk over Mt Ruapehu and the Kaimanawa Ranges

To enter the Ruakituri Wilderness Area through the notch above the spectacular Waitangi Falls, where the rough route ends abruptly in immaculate forest, is a stark transition between civilisation and wilderness.

Pleasingly, the wilderness classification of the Ruakituri was maintained by the Te Urewera Act 2014, which codifies the Treaty of Waitangi settlement between the Crown and Tuhoë. This Act is itself beautifully written, a rare fusion of statute and poetry:

'Te Urewera is ancient and enduring, a fortress of nature, alive with history; its scenery is abundant with mystery, adventure, and remote beauty. Te Urewera is a place of spiritual value, with its own mana and mauri. Te Urewera has an identity in and of itself, inspiring people to commit to its care'.

The Act establishes Te Urewera as a legal entity in its own right, recognises the special relationship between Tuhoë and Te Urewera, and also recognises the place Te Urewera has in the hearts of many New Zealanders:

'Te Urewera is also prized by all New Zealanders as a place of outstanding national

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value and intrinsic worth; it is treasured by all for the distinctive natural values of its vast and rugged primeval forest, and for the integrity of those values; for its indigenous ecological systems and biodiversity, its historical and cultural heritage, its scientific importance, and as a place for outdoor recreation and spiritual reflection.'

The significance of having our home-grown recreational concept of 'wilderness areas' accepted as part of a new, indigenous way of recognising and managing our interactions with a significant natural area should not be underestimated. The Te Urewera Act may prove to be a one-off, but equally it may prove to be the harbinger of a new way of exercising guardianship of natural lands, of which wilderness is now an accepted part.

Progress has been slower on the last of the proposed North Island wilderness areas, the Kaimanawa-Kaweka. This vast area stretches east from the Desert Road to the foothills of

Hawke's Bay. Despite the outward appearance of wilderness, the land has a long history of contested tenure.

The proposed wilderness boundaries included both Maori and Defence Force land, along with existing public conservation land. Les Molloy foresaw difficulty with this proposal, writing in the conference proceedings:

'It would be difficult, if not unreasonable, to have the lands revert entirely to public ownership. All that is important is for their wilderness qualities to be preserved, perhaps by voluntary covenant through an independent organisation like the QEII National Trust.'

This agreement though has proven elusive. The Defence Force has its own interest in the land. The *Sustainable Land Management Strategy for the Waiouru Military Training Area 2000* describes how the Defence Force has 'come to see itself as part of the ecosystem - both affecting it and being dependent upon it'. Operational and health and safety matters unfortunately preclude public access from most of what is a unique natural area with 'very high wild and scenic values' and 'the highest concentration of biogeographically significant plants in New Zealand'.

Meanwhile, Maori Trusts seem wary of dealing with a Crown that failed to return some of these lands, gifted to the Crown to provide for settlement of returned soldiers, until the 1970s. Research commissioned in preparation for Treaty of Waitangi settlements in the Taihape Area (Fisher & Stirling, Taihape Inquiry District: *Technical Research Programme*, 2012) casts further light on how the tenure of this land became so fragmented and fraught. When considered in the context of wider grievances, it is clear why future public access, let alone wilderness area designation, remains uncertain.

However, in the *Kaimanawa Forest Park Management Plan 2007*, which is rich with the language of wilderness, the idea 'has not been abandoned'. The public conservation land has been classified as a remote experience zone, 'to prevent irreversible management decisions which would compromise any future Kaimanawa wilderness area option.' Meanwhile,

the Defence Force, through their Sustainable Land Management strategy, and the Owahoko B&D Trust, through a Nga Whenua Rahui covenant with DOC, are protecting the natural and historic values of the surrounding land.

A Wilderness at the Heart of the North Island?

On my tramp across the Kaimanawa Range, I crossed other lines unmarked on the map. The region is split by three conservation management strategies, and two territorial authorities. But most importantly it is bisected by property boundaries that forbid access. I unwittingly transgressed. As a 17-year-old, confronted with range after range of hills, I didn't think of such things. But, looking back, it changes my perception of the trip. My claim to the experience is compromised.

I was at a stage in life that I needed wilderness in its most visceral sense. Molloy's 'deep urge to gamble and probe the limits of one's levels of endurance' or Aldo Leopold's, 'freedom to accept rewards and penalties for wise and foolish acts against which civilisation

has built a thousand buffers'. At this time, I could not have found this experience elsewhere in the North Island. I would not have coped with the relentless forests of the Urewera or Raukumara. I needed an uplifting environment, to walk with absolute freedom and solitude along untracked ridgelines and view distant ranges piling on each other like waves to the horizon.

I suspect others have this need too, one unlikely to be satisfied anywhere else in the North Island, where you can tread the tussocky, tangled headwaters of the Rangitikei, Mohaka, Waikato, Ngaruroro and Tararua in a single day. How many people live alongside the lower reaches of these rivers, and wonder from where they flow? I'm hopeful. It seems plausible that with future Treaty settlements, and the inspiration of the Te Urewera Act, that we may someday see a new way of stewarding this region. A way that doesn't draw arbitrary lines across maps. Holistic management may allow for, among other worthy interests, increased public access and a viable wilderness area for future generations.

A Kaimanawa-Kaweka wilderness area remains a possibility worth pursuing.

Campsite beside the Mangamaire River, Kaimanawa Range



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