

Speech notes – book launch 24 August

*Natural History of Rangitoto*

Auckland Botanical Society

*Toitu te marae o Tane*

*Toitu te Marae o Tangaroa*

*Toitu te Iwi - Tihei Mauri Ora.*

*e nga mana, e nga reo, e nga kaiwhakatipu rakau, tena koutou*

*e nga moutere ataahua Rangitoto tena koe. Rangatira ma nga mihi nui ki a koutou. Na reira tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.*

Distinguished guests, ladies & gentlemen greetings. Could I first of all express my heartfelt thanks to Dr Mike Wilcox President of the Auckland Botanical Society and the committee of the Auckland Botanical society for affording me the great honour of launching this superb book - *the Natural History of Rangitoto*.

To launch a book researched and written by so many distinguished Auckland botanists and biological scientists is a special thrill for a former biological sciences student like myself.

I want to therefore acknowledge the book's editor Mike Wilcox and contributing authors Dr Jessica Beever, Dr Ross Beever, Dr Dan Blanchon, Dr John Braggins, Phil Brown, Dr Rhys Gardner, Leslie Haines, Dr Peter Johnston, Dr Andrea Julian, Rick Kooperberg, Carol Lockett, Dr William Malcolm, Dr Nicholas Martin, Shirley Tomlinson, again Dr Mike Wilcox (also a contributing author), and Maureen Young.

Congratulations to you all - you have, as Ewen Cameron has pointed out in the foreward, created a superb scientific work, beautifully presented and thus attractive and user-friendly to the widest possible readership. Again as Ewen points out, the book contains a meticulously compiled inventory of 1181 plant & fungi species. Ranging from the most primitive groups (algae) to the most advanced (orchids) – recording virtually every living thing on this remarkable island. And Rangitoto *is* remarkable - so unique that it has its own ecological district.

“Iconic” is a word somewhat overused, nowadays but I can think of no better way to describe Rangitoto's dramatically beautiful ever-present visual influence on Auckland and its people. More than any other natural feature this much loved island provides a distinctive and unique sense of place for Aucklanders.

Last Saturday evening, as it happens, I was asked to launch another book *‘No Left Turn’* - A political history of New Zealand by Chris Trotter (highly recommended by the way). In my speech at that function I noted that history was rather like geology, with the diligent historian uncovering the hidden formations and tapping away here and there to reveal the patterns in the sedimentary layers of human generations. And in unlocking the secrets of the past, the historian, like the geologist can tell us profound truths about the present. Of course I pointed out, that geological time scales totally dwarf human history. But isn't it funny - it seems there are exceptions to not only every rule but even to self-evident truisms like human history versus geologic time. Because at only 600 years Rangitoto is a landmass that is much younger than human history, younger than even the relatively short human history of New Zealand - the most recently permanently settled landmass on the planet.

So in sharp contrast to its millions-of-years-old neighbours, Rangitoto is incredibly young in historical terms and I note John Braggins refers several times in his chapter to Rangitoto's "youth".

The question of the age of this volcano and its time of eruption has in the past has provided some scientific debate. A debate that was effectively ended by Prof Laurie Milliner who secretly cut down an old pohutukawa tree and counted the rings. Also subject to some debate has been the state progress and age of the vegetative succession on Rangitoto.

In that regard it is useful to recall that the first person to write about Rangitoto's vegetation was the French naval commander and explorer Dumont d'Urville in Feb 1827. D'urville of course was an accomplished botanist and entomologist and also he had with him on the *Astrolabe* a number of first rate naturalists:

Jean Rene Constant Quoy teacher and naturalist - navy physician

Joseph Paul Gaimard staff-surgeon and naturalist

Pierre-Adolphe Lesson Surgeon younger brother of the more famous René Primèverre Lesson who visited New Zealand (Bay of Islands) on the earlier *Coquille* expedition with d'Urville in 1824.

Here are two interesting excerpts from d'Urville's Atlas of the voyage:

The first from chapter 2 and 3.

25th Feb 1827

*Two hours later we entered the channel which had excited our curiosity. On the left is an island (Rangitoto), flat at both ends, with a high peak in the centre and covered with flourishing vegetation that forms a curious contrast to the bare land on the coast opposite.*

Translated by Olive Wright 1950

And from the Hydrography chapter– This directly from the French which I found in the National Library.

*“Rangitoto est la plus méridionale et la principale de ces îles; c’est un cône surbaissé, de 10 milles de circuit, entièrement boisé depuis la base jusqu’au sommet, qui offre un double mamelon peu prononcé. On l’apercevait dès le point du jour; nous en étions alors à 8 ou 9 lieues.”*

“Rangitoto is the most southern and the principal of these islands. There is a smooth cone, 10 miles around, entirely wooded from the base almost to the summit which offers double hillocks which are slightly pronounced. It could be seen at the break of day when we were 8 or 9 leagues off.”

And in contrast:

*“À l’O règne une côte uniforme, taillée à pic, triste et stérile, qui vient terminer au S. par la pointe de Taka-Pouni.”*

“To the west dominates a uniform level coastline, with sharp cliffs, sad and barren, (“triste et stérile”) which comes to an end in the south with the headland of Takapouni” ( Takapuna).”

It is a great pity that d'Urville and his colleagues didn't manage to get ashore on Rangitoto to botanise. At that stage of the voyage d'Urville was much more focused on geographical discovery and map making. He was very much interested in finding a way through to the west coast and his expedition travelled up the Tamaki estuary and crossed to the Manukau. The volcano d'Urville attempted to climb was Mt Eden.

Meanwhile Quoy and Gaimard were busy collecting and describing characteristic marine invertebrate species such as the oyster borer *Lepsiela scobina*, *Trochus* and *Myadora striata*. Durville's name however remains associated with Rangitoto's flora with the crevice colonizing shrub *Peperomia urvilleana*, and the grass *Paspalum urvillei* and of course the coastal tree *Houpara Pseudopanax lessonii* – collected and classified by Lesson the elder.

If the vegetation cover on Rangitoto in 1827 was so extensive as reported by d'Urville, then this raises the question of human impacts direct or indirect on the progress of succession. And sure enough we read in the book about 19th century fires, herds of Fallow deer, herds of goats and then the thousands of possums and wallabies of recent memory.

What a fantastic achievement by the then newly-formed Department of Conservation to embark on a programme in 1990 to totally eradicate possums and wallabies - and to achieve that enormously difficult task within 10 years.

But the removal of those pests enabled, or at least coincided with, the expansion of other invaders - especially the woody weed, evergreen buckthorn *Rhamnus alaternus*.

We would also all be very mindful, despite the vigorous recuperation of the pohutukawa/rata forest, of wider ecological dysfunction. That remaining animal pests, principally ship rats are disrupting what would be natural and fundamental plant/bird/invertebrate ecological processes and severely restricting the range of wildlife species which would naturally be present.

That is why it was so heartening to be present on Motutapu in early June 2006 to hear the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Helen Clark and the Minister of Conservation Hon Chris Carter announce government plans to progressively remove all animal pests from both Rangitoto and Motutapu to create an open sanctuary. A wildlife sanctuary of 3881 ha significantly bigger than Hauturu (3083ha), Kapiti(2000ha) and nearly 20 times bigger than Tiritiri Matangi (197ha).

The Auckland Regional Council strongly supports the Rangitoto/Motutapu open sanctuary project for the following reasons:

- The intrinsic benefits of increasing native biodiversity;
- The benefits for research and education – including the opportunity of enabling pupils from low-decile schools, for instance from south Auckland, to experience at first hand native bird and wildlife species they are most unlikely to experience in their normal lives;

- The economic benefits wildlife sanctuary a mere 5 nautical miles from the Auckland CBD would bring for instance for our visitor industry
- The enhancement of Aucklanders' quality of life such a sanctuary so close to the marine suburbs would bring in having our most loved iconic volcano truly come to life with native birds, lizards and invertebrates –
- Finally a Rangitoto/Motutapu sanctuary would breathe life into the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park

Finally to return to the book, can I once again congratulate Mike Wilcox and the contributing authors and the many other people who helped in its publication. Can I thank Punoromia Publications and also the printers – Book Builders.

To the authors I say as botanists and natural scientists in expanding scientific knowledge you have followed in the footsteps of your spiritual ancestors, Thomas Kirk, Thomas Cheesman, Leonard Cockayne and others such as Professor Arnold Wall, Marguerite Crookles, Lucy Cranwell and Laurie Milliner and of course Dumont d'Urville and his entrepid colleagues. Auckland is in your debt.

*Na reira tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutoa katoa.*