

Mike Lee's submission to Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Bill select committee - 20 July 06

Madam Chair, Honourable members,

Good Morning. I am Michael Lee Chairman of the Auckland Regional Council, I am here today with my colleagues Cr Sandra Coney and Cr Paul Walbran, I am speaking on behalf of the people of the Auckland Region. It is said that there are three precious, much-loved elements to Aucklands' landscape. The Hauraki Gulf and its islands, the remarkable volcanic cones-and the Waitakere Ranges. The Hauraki Gulf is protected by the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Act 2000, and the Cones by the enlightened, visionary 1915 Act. But we are here to talk about Volcanic the Waitakere Ranges.

The Waitakere Ranges are unique from an environmental perspective. This large continuous rainforest area, about 20,000ha, is botanically rich with a high diversity of native fauna and flora, including 43 regionally threatened plants.

The Ranges are unique from a cultural and identity perspective in terms of both their Maori and European history, and for their iconic landscape status to Aucklanders.

This iconic backdrop to Auckland draws 2.5 million visitors a year from all over the region, inspired by recreational, artistic and cultural endeavours, and a love of nature – all within the unique context of being only a 30 minute drive of the city's CBD. [a catchment of over a million people] can I also say that the Waitakeres first became world famous in the 1960's as the training ground for Arthur Lydiard and his revolutionary marathon training methods – the famous Waiatarua run which created Olympic Champions like Peter Snell and Murray Halberg.

Yet it's not all about aesthetics. The Waitakere Ranges provide a vital element of the Regions civic infrastructure with 5 water storage lakes, providing precious drinking water for one in four Aucklanders.

Its wilderness and rural characteristics combined with its proximity to several town centres [and the CBD beyond] make the Waitakere Ranges an especially attractive place to live.

Viewed within the national context - at present 31 per cent of New Zealand's population live in the Auckland Region, yet the Region comprises a mere two per cent of this country's land area. And the squeeze is getting tighter. Every 4-5 years Auckland grows the equivalent of Hamilton City's population.

Again, this is what makes the Waitakere Ranges unique as an important heritage feature lying, as they do, so close to the Country's major metropolitan area.

There is an urgent need to protect this incredibly precious resource from inappropriate development. This is why we all so strongly promote the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Bill.

It is inevitable that the Auckland region will continue to grow, potentially reaching two million people by the year 2050.

Pressure to develop the Waitakere Ranges is nothing new and neither is the public will to protect them.

We can thank the foresight of people like Sir Algernon Thomas, Auckland University's first professor of geology and botany.

Concerned to protect the great Kauri forest from further exploitation, in 1894 he successfully persuaded the Auckland City Council to recommend to the Government of the day, that it set aside 3500 acres in the heart of the ranges, as a reserve.

Following the Government's lead, a number of citizens of vision and foresight also gifted their land, creating the foundation of what was to become the Centennial Memorial Park and then the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park.

The Auckland Regional Council's vision is for Auckland to be a world class city region. The ARC has put a lot of work into ensuring that the region's growth can be sustainably managed over the coming century. We will achieve this by promoting quality, compact urban environments within defined metropolitan areas. Imperative to the vision of being a world class city/region is the protection of our iconic landscapes, natural and heritage features.

This Bill provides us with a long-term instrument for getting the right economic, cultural, social and environmental balance for the Heritage Area.

I am sometimes asked why this Bill is so important when around two-thirds of the Ranges are already protected as ARC Regional Parkland.

Yes the Parkland is protected, however this is about much for than the forested parkland. It is also about the west coast beaches, the unique and charming Titirangi village, bush living environments and the eastern rural foothills. The value that the people of the Auckland region place on this area is not constrained by the boundary to the regional park.

For us, protecting two-thirds of this exceptional resource is not enough and it is imperative that the area is protected as an integrated whole. This Bill does not turn private land into parkland but recognises the shared interest that the public and private owners have in the future character of the area.

It's vital that a holistic approach is taken to ensure that the Waitakere Ranges continue to be unique – for all the right reasons.

In closing I want to recall the words of the eminent New Zealand scientist, the late Sir Charles Fleming.

“Development of our national culture demands the retention in all districts of those skylines of native forests that represent the mystery and adventure we of the unknown to every youngster in farm and suburban home”.

Sadly history is littered with tragic examples of heritage and resource mismanagement and opportunities lost. Sir Algernon Thomas got it very right more than 100 years ago and it is my true hope that, in 100 years time, the same comment can be made about the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Bill. This is an idea whose time has come.

