

Chairman's Speech Notes

Official Opening of Whakanewha Regional Park

Mihi

Acknowledge Prime Minister, tangata whenua, councillors, distinguished guests

We gather here today some 13 years after this land was bought and saved from subdivision to celebrate the official opening of Whakanewha Regional Park.

Of course the park for all practical purposes has been open to the public since the day it was bought, but an 'official opening' of a regional park is a traditional rite of passage for regional parks when it is considered that the land has been brought up to the very high standard we expect of a regional park. An official opening is a sort of coming of age and a solemn confirmation by the ARC that this land will be held in perpetuity on behalf of the people of the region for generations to come. An official opening is also an opportunity for the tangata whenua to renew their connections to ancestral land as we saw here today with the arrival of the waka taua 'Te Kotuiti'. Finally it is an opportunity for the ARC to showcase and promote the values of the Park in question and the regional Parks network in general.

The Auckland Regional Parks network has been described as one of the outstanding achievements of local government in New Zealand.

Since the network was began by visionary politicians notably Sir Dove Meyer Robinson founding chairman of the Auckland Regional Authority and Jim Holdaway, who is with us today, in 1965 the network has grown to include nearly 40,000 hectares of land and 150 km of coast line.

Each regional park has its own unique history and its own special story on how and why it was bought into public ownership. Whakanewha of course has its own history. Its human history goes back many hundreds of years. I myself first laid eyes on this land on New Years Day 1979. It was then a very remote place, regenerating native

bush and weeds and over-run with wild long horn cattle not strictly ecologically correct but still beautiful. The place where we stand now, Poukaraka, was known in the middle 20th century when the OBrien family farmed the land, as 'Blue Gum Flats' where every year one half of the Waiheke island played the other half at Rugby. In the 80s when my daughters rode their horses through here they called this area – the maze - as it was an interesting jungle of giant woolly night-shade trees and old man gorse.

In 1980 or 1981 the landowners the Roschild family in New York sold the property which was perhaps four times greater than the size of the park today to Chris and Margaret Reeves – a dynamic new breed of farmer-developers. While Chris focussed on developing a subdivision the Te Whau Point part of the property he sold this section - some 500 ha - to a syndicate of local people which included his brother-in-law Bryan Seward around 1991.

Inevitably the syndicates plans for the clearance of tea tree for firewood and a coastal subdivision led to a classic Waiheke 'greeny v developer' set-piece battle. But due to the good sense and good will of all the parties involved this was one environmental battle that had a happy outcome for everyone.

There is of course not time to relate the full story as I saw it from what was a fairly unique vantage point (as the chair of the local branch of the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society and an ARC member). But very briefly though many people played a role in the long and fraught process of securing this land into public ownership, I want to briefly acknowledge and especially thank the following:

Peter Lee¹, Graeme Rogers and Don Chapple who in 1992 intervened with the syndicate of land owners and persuaded them to consider selling the Whakanewha Block as a park.

Pat Duncan Taylor & Joe Waite who got up a petition of hundreds of signatures and put together a display board which they took across to the city campaigning for the land to be purchased as a park.

¹ no relation

The cause was taken up by Jim Eagles business editor of NZ Herald then the owner and editor of the local newspaper Gulf News. Jim not only campaigned through the pages of the Gulf News but became actively involved in persuading the Auckland City Council and the Department of Conservation to support and contribute to the purchase.

In regard to Auckland City's contribution I want to especially thank Gordon Hodson the then chairman of the Waiheke community board at the time and later city councillor and also Sandra Lee then the city councillor for the Hauraki Gulf and the members of that community board which included Cr. Faye Storer, Lynne Stewart, Judie Voulaire and Dave Whiting. The City & Community Board together made a very generous grant of \$280,000 towards the lands purchase. The City then went on to purchase the adjacent Rangihoua block which is the site of one of the most outstanding pa sites in the country. Here I wish to acknowledge city council officers of the time Martin Fuller, Wayne Donnelly and David Stubbs.

As we know the land has a long and rich Maori history – the support of Maori therefore was critical. Here I wish to acknowledge Kato Kauwhata chairman of the Piritahi Marae and also Kameta Andrews of Ngati Paoa for throwing their considerable mana behind this cause. Also Mason Clarke who actually died on the beach here five years ago. In my mihi I greeted the tangeta whenua Ngati Paoa and Ngati Maru. I also greeted Ngati Whanaunga and Ngai Tai. I also wish to acknowledge Joe Tupuhi Chairman of the Ngati Paoa Trust Board, Board members and captain of the waka taua 'Te Kotuiti', the Kaihoutu Eugene Rawiri and his Nga Kaihoe or crew members.

The impact of this energetic campaign eventually reached Wellington and the then Minister of Conservation Denis Marshall who came to Waiheke in 1992 and walked over this land. Consequently the Nature Heritage Fund (then called the Forest Heritage Fund) became involved and here I wish to acknowledge Di Lucas, Gerry McSweeney and Allan McKenzie for their approving a grant to help purchase the land and also the Auckland Conservation Board led by Ewen Cameron for their support.

While a strong consensus was formed for the public acquisition of the land it was across the water in the ARC where the final decision would be made to buy it or not. And unfortunately, the Regional Council was deeply divided about this point. In the end the recommendation to buy was carried by a narrow majority. Here I want to acknowledge the former chairman of the ARC the late Phil Warren, Deputy Chairman Paul Walbran, Cr Ruth Norman, Cr Jenny Hoadley, Cr Maire Leadbetter and Cr George Thew. I also want to thank the then General Manager of Regional Parks Rob Small whom we brought down to the land in March 1993 and who immediately saw the possibilities of transforming the Whakanewha block into a classic regional park. There was one catch however, because of internal politics ARC's support was conditional on a capped contribution of \$300,000. Which was some way short of the asking price. We had to get around this by negotiating with the owners to reduce the area of land to be purchased (which was a tragedy) and as no further funds were forthcoming from other agencies I went to the Forest & Bird Cole bequest committee of which I happened to be a member and with the support of the late Jacqui Barrington the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society made a top up contribution of \$20,000 which enabled the deal to be concluded. Here I want to acknowledge Gordon Ell the then National President of the Society and John Staniland chair of the Cole Bequest Committee.

As you can see the process was complicated and difficult but in the end we got there. There was an epilogue to all of this regarding the controversial airport development but this is not the time and place to talk about that. Suffice to say that also had a happy ending – and the result is before us.

I want to thank Tony Oliver Principal Ranger Southern Parks, Andy Spence Ranger at Whakanewha for their work over the years which has transformed this land into an outstanding regional park. Also to other rangers like Dan Beauchamp and the many many volunteers.

Part of the difficulty we experienced at that time in buying this land was I felt due to almost a prejudice against Waiheke. There was a body of opinion which did not take the island seriously one felt. Today Waiheke is a vital part in the region's visitor industry and important player in New Zealand's wine sector as the very successful

Waiheke Wine Festival attests. Whakanewha Regional Park is now a very popular destination for people visiting Waiheke and for locals alike.

I know that all the people who fought so hard to see Whakanewha protected in public ownership, now sleep better at night knowing that this outpost of coastal wilderness is saved in perpetuity. And for all those people who had a hand, in its saving - those who I have mentioned and those who I have not, I want to say thank you.

In closing I want to quote two outstanding New Zealander. These quotes were inspirational during the difficult months in 1992 and 1993.

The first from Sir Charles Fleming the eminent geologist and biologist.

“Development of our national culture demands the retention in all districts of these skylines of native forest that represents the mystery and adventure of the unknown to every youngster in farm and suburban home.”

Then the late Maori Queen Te Ariki Nui Dame Te Atai Rangi Kaahu at the opening of Waharau Regional Park 1979.

“I go back in memory to a small girl who spent summers on this land. I hope that the children of Greater Auckland, especially will come here to enjoy what I enjoyed, to bump into nature, and to find here a real adventure playground. When a child I had a child’s impression that New Zealand was a great open space of mountains, forests, hills, riverbanks and beaches. Fortunately there were far-sighted people who realised that land is restricted, resources are perishable, and open space it is diminishing. Well indeed it is that most New Zealanders now consider regional parks a priority .”

Finally acknowledge another distinguished New Zealander who has taken time out of her incredibly busy schedule to come down to Waiheke today to honour us by formally opening this regional park. Ladies and gentlemen the prime minister the right honourable Helen Clark.