

Ngunguru Sandspit and Whakairiora Mountain: Irreplaceable

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Goal

To fully protect the environmental and cultural significance of Ngunguru Sandspit by placing remaining land (comprising part of Ngunguru Sandspit and Whakairiora Mountain hatched on photo) into the scenic reserve.

Location and description

Ngunguru Sandspit, 30km north of Whangarei on the east coast, is the only unmodified Holocene (timeframe 11,700 years - present) sandspit north of Auckland. The nearby Whakairiora Mountain's forest cladding includes a unique native forest type.

Both landscape features lie in an unspoilt area of estuary, forest and sea coast typical of the virgin Northland coastline. It is a rare - probably the - only opportunity to protect a pristine example of this environment from the type of suburban development that has swallowed so much of the Northland east coast. There are environmental, cultural and economic reasons to do so.

Environmental

The Northland east coast ecology is influenced by the currents from the tropics. Between Cape Brett and the Poor Knights these currents have their greatest impact and Ngunguru Sandspit/Whakairiora Mountain lie central to this small as yet unexploited area of rich coastal scenery and habitats.

Whakairiora Mountain has been identified by environmentalist Wade Doak as a 'botanical treasure'. The area around the mountain includes representative sites for eleven types of coastal forest and is the only recorded example of five of these. Specifically the groves of kawaka (native cedar) contain specimens up to 40 feet high. kawaka is a nationally threatened tree. The kawaka/matai combination is unrecorded elsewhere in Northland. New Zealand ecologist and ecohistorian Geoff Park and coastal scientist Jim Dahm agree this is probably unique. It is a 40 minute walk from forestclad Whakairiora Mountain to the natural, unmodified Ngunguru Sandspit.

A lamentably rare opportunity in Northland and New Zealand.

The 2005 Department of Conservation survey for the Protected Natural Areas Programme, identified Ngunguru Sandspit as a priority for protection and this was partially achieved recently after five decades of community effort. 'It is an excellent example of an unmodified sand barrier beach and dune field developed between a tidal estuary and a broad open bay'.

The vision to extend this protection to all of the Sandspit and the adjacent Whakairiora Mountain could provide a haven for many identified rare and endangered species of flora and fauna.

This area of coastal forest, estuarine-brackish-freshwater wetland, shrubland and sanddunes provide habitat for a highly diverse range of species: thirty-six bird species including four endangered, six vulnerable, seven declining and five sparse species, all facing habitat reduction due to coastal development; North Island kaka, Northern New Zealand dotterel and variable oystercatcher, threatened invertebrates - the third largest population of *Succinea Archeyi* snail in New Zealand, black katipo which is in serious decline, black mudfish which is in gradual decline, threatened and regionally significant plants such as pingao.

The preservation of the area will provide a vital link to other areas of important vegetation and significant habitats for indigenous fauna. The new reserve would be part of and enhance the successful Kiwi Coast initiative whose goals are enthusiastically supported by private landowners around Ngunguru. There is a local commitment to conservation backed by local experts of national and international fame.

Cultural

New Zealanders are deeply attached to their coastal and forest environments and the local community express a spiritual reverence for this area. The archaeology and history of the Sandspit and Mountain justify this.

Tangata whenua hapu Te Waiariki, Ngati Takapari and Ngati Korora have a long history of occupation with the whole area holding official Waahi Tapu status. There is evidence of past gardening and cultivation, village life and a pa called Rangikorero, trading, middens, terraces, house sites, storage pits, artefacts and urupa. The Sandspit was the site of a battle in the 1830s which ended the southern tribes' sustained campaign against Ngapuhi. Blood and bones make it sacred. The archaeological evidence embedded in the Sandspit and the Mountain is extremely rare in Northland and rare in New Zealand. There are fifty recorded sites and certainly unrecorded sites. Enormous middens record past use made of the local resources also trading patterns are indicated by Mayor Island obsidian present here. An early site contained the bones of three extinct birds including the giant New Zealand eagle believed extinct since the 14th century indicating hundreds of years of occupation. To quote Independent Maori Statutory Board chairman David Taipari "The traditions and whakapapa of mana whenua...bind these places to the people forming part of their identity.'

Early intercultural contact took place here; the HMS Buffalo captain charted Ngunguru River in 1836; Kauri sawmill in 1840, one of the country's first; 1880s local rangatira Paratene Te Manu established a school on the shores of Ngunguru River on his return from England; the Ngunguru River was a typical river highway for the extraction of coal for the young colony. In its entirety the rich archaeology needs to be preserved for Maori, historians and archaeologists of the present and future. Another perspective to the irreplaceable nature of the Ngunguru Sandspit and Whakairiora Mountain.

Ngunguru Sandspit Protection Society works in partnership with DOC, Iwi and the community including the school to manage and enhance the Sandspit. This organisation is keen to extend this area.

Economic

Tourism is Northland's second biggest income stream and it is growing in this region faster than the nation average. To protect this fine example of the Northland coastal environment will protect the region's economy. A recent publication by National Geographic Traveller ranked the Tutukaka Coast 2nd equal internationally among the 100 best global coastal locations for tourists. The reviewer emphasised the natural environment plus the cultural aspects and warned of the danger of degradation due to unplanned and inappropriate development. The preferable outcome would be to increase the attractions of this coast by the creation of a reserve of national and international significance. Ngunguru will soon be linked to Whangarei by a cycleway under construction. It is on the internationally recognised 'Te Araroa Trail' great hike. Eco-tourism is already the basis for some local businesses due to Ngunguru's proximity to the Poor Knights Marine Reserve. The area boasts two surf schools and a paddle board school. Numerous businesses that service holiday homes. A wide variety of recreational activities within a small area. Low impact, easy access, wilderness experiences. Water based activities- kayaking, paddle boarding, surfing, snorkelling, diving and swimming. The amenity value of Ngunguru is increased by the beautiful Sandspit and Mountain vista. A community of artists of international repute draw inspiration from the local landscape and rely on the summer tourists to sustain their existence.

As the world faces global warming hazards a note of caution has been sounded by both national and local government about the vulnerability of coastal property. The Sandspit helps protect the estuary and shoreline settlement from the forces of erosion. The remaining privately owned area of the Sandspit is zoned Coastal Hazard 1 & 2. The Insurance Council of New Zealand has warned that property in such areas is 'subject to known risks... coastal erosion, inundation by the sea and tsunami risk'. Consequently, it will soon be impossible to insure. Local council and the rate payers will not

wish to pick up the cost. There are recorded breaches of the Ngunguru Sandspit in the past. To develop further coastal property increases the risk and jeopardises existing property by undermining the stability of this dynamic coastal feature.

Conclusion

In August 2011 83.4 hectares of the Ngunguru Sandspit came into Crown ownership and is now administered by the Department of Conservation as a scenic reserve. Associated land remains with Todd Property Group.

The compelling reasons outlined and wide local, national and international support show that the total area should be included in the reserve.

Ngunguru, Northland and the world would then have access to a precious, priceless treasure, now and in the future.