

Karori Sanctuary - How it started

This is how the sanctuary idea and vision evolved and developed and how the sanctuary got started as told by the founder Jim Lynch.

Circa – 1990; Natural Wellington

Eve and I joined the local branch of the Royal Forest and Bird society in 1989. Colin Ryder was on the branch executive and was very keen to get me involved as he knew I did Planning and management training and systems design. I became an executive committee member in 1989, the branch Deputy Chairman in 1991 and branch Chairman from 1993 to about 1996. Eve also joined the committee as treasurer.

Early in 1990 as leader of the F&B conservation committee I proposed we develop a strategic plan for the branch. This was to take the form of a comprehensive inventory of all the natural assets of Wellington city and then to describe how they should be managed in future to ensure they were preserved. This plan was called “Natural Wellington”. I first set up a group of local bird and botanist types to brainstorm where they thought the best sites were and then Chris Matheson and I, and often Eve and one or two others, visited and photographed every one – 33 sites in total. When we had done this I wrote up the **Natural Wellington plan** then took it to the Regional and City Councils and many other community and conservation groups. I had a set of overheads and slide photographs that I used to talk to and must have addressed 40 or 50 groups during this time - selling the idea of conservation in the city. Eventually it was taken on board as a main strategic driver for a whole range of things including the WCC conservation site listings in the District Plan, WRC selection for KPA (Key Protected Areas) and was copied widely around the country. This document had a big impact as it formed the basis for WCC purchases of new parks and the basis for possum and other pest and weed control around the city. It was also the inspiration for the sanctuary as its theme was to “Bring the Birds back to Wellington” (something which has now been well and truly achieved).

1992 - The Karori Sanctuary Proposal

I knew that we wouldn't “Bring the birds Back to Wellington” unless we did something out of the ordinary. The city was biologically in a poor state with even tui' in danger of local extinction and very little happening on the ground other than small scale local planting schemes. One of the sites that stood out while I was writing Natural Wellington was Karori reservoir. In 1990, Chris Matheson and I had sneaked in the back way behind the scout den at Campbell Street and walked down the track to the top dam. I can still remember the feeling of awe as we walked out onto the dam into this amazing valley. (The dam was full tat the time). It was then that I knew we would have to do something very special with this place one day. It was also very obvious once I had mapped all these sites that it was very strategically placed. It was like the hub of a wheel with all the other sites radiating out from it. I immediately started talking (1990) to the WRC (Barry Chalmers and the late Conrad Pharazyn) about the valley and how we could improve it

for conservation purposes. At that stage it was still a fully operative water supply area so we couldn't think of doing anything serious there that would intrude on that use.

At that time Eve and I visited a place in Northland near Kaitaia with some friends and saw an interesting experiment where Don McKenzie from DoC was trying to keep out rats from a small bush patch with a low level electric fence. The idea didn't work but it gave me the idea that electric or barrier fencing to keep out predators might be a possibility.

Around then we had a couple of addresses to our local F&B branch; one by Raewyn Empson, DoC Wellington (now the sanctuary's Conservation Manager), who talked about how DoC was planning to eradicate rats from Kapiti Island (achieved 1995). Raewyn played a Kokako tape and said how wonderful it would be to have these singing in Wellington again. The other talk was by Alan Saunders, Manager of the DoC Threatened Species Unit, who talked about "Mainland Islands" and particularly Marpara forest and how they were protecting Kokako - not with fencing but with intensive pest control. That really set the thought processes going. After the meeting I talked to Alan and said we had an ideal site in Wellington for something like this in the Karori Reservoir. He looked a bit skeptical but said to come and talk to him about it. At that time some pretty amazing advances with pest eradications were happening and we all had a real sense of optimism that some big breakthroughs were imminent and could change the game significantly.

However, I may never have acted on Alan's invitation except that almost immediately after I talked with him the WRC decommissioned the top dam at the reservoir and the WCC announced it wanted to get the land back as a public reserve. I knew immediately that if we were to do anything with it, it would need to be now. So I called Alan again to see if we could count on his support and he said to put something on paper for him to look at.

At that time, June 1992, there was a meeting of parties interested in the future of Karori reservoir, lead by John Gilberthorpe (WCC Parks and reserves Chairman). This was held in the valley near Denton Park and included Councilor Andy Foster – now a sanctuary Trustee. At that meeting I explained the importance of the reservoir to conservation and proposed the idea of fencing the area and reintroducing rare birds to the city. I think they all thought I was quite "off the wall" and while it might be a nice idea it was quite impractical. I undertook to investigate it further.

I also floated the idea with F&B people at the time and I think all had the same view – great idea but hopelessly impractical.

So I sat down one night and wrote the sanctuary proposal. It took about two days all told and I simply treated it like a business proposal – drawing on my management systems and organizational design background and all I had soaked up about conservation and biology in the three years previous. It included everything from the broad concept to the details of restoration and the economics and was set out in a coherent and convincing

way. I also used my background as an instructional designer to make it readable and informative, sent it off to Alan Saunders and set up a meeting.

The meeting was held at the TSU and included Alan and DoC staff in Colin Miskelly (a current sanctuary trustee), Graeme Taylor and Mike Avis. They were extremely enthusiastic with the proposal and confirmed that with current technology the task was feasible. Alan's comment was that several years ago it wouldn't have been feasible and I had picked it at the earliest possible time to make it happen. They suggested a few minor changes and the Proposal went forward for discussion with other parties.

This proposal and DoC support for the technical feasibility was the key to the sanctuary getting started. It set out the vision in a way which people could relate to and really captured their imagination. Even so I still had to face a lot of skepticism and scoffing even from conservation people. However that original vision has not changed at all. In fact a reading of that proposal now confirms it is still the sanctuary vision including the visitor centre and community involvement.

Late 1992/early 1993 - Selling the Proposal

Once I was satisfied with the shape and content of the proposal I set up a presentation pack and talk and set about selling the idea. The first groups asked to back it were the conservation NGO's, (F&B National Office, Botanical society, OSNZ, ECO, Maruia Society) who all formally endorsed the proposal.

The proposal was also presented to the WCC, WRC and local DoC people. Without exception these all fully endorsed the proposal and all were enthused about the vision and complimentary about its clarity and breadth and the way it was presented and sold. Howard Stone, WRC CEO at the time described it as the best idea ever to cross his desk. The outcome of the proposal was that I arranged seed funding of \$60,000 to conduct a feasibility study.

Mid-Late 1993 - The Feasibility Study

With the allocated funds I set up with the WRC and WCC a joint feasibility study. Barry Chalmers and Ernie Gates were the WRC principles and Rosemary Barrington and Andy Foster the WCC principles. I was the Chairman of the committee and in charge of designing and running the process.

We advertised for a part time Project Manager to help run the process and Stephen Fuller was appointed. Stephen had an ecology background and had done a range of related contract and work.

The study tested all the key aspects of the vision; tenure, fencing, eradication, restoration, tourism viability and operating structures. It included a draft business plan and costings and an assessment of financial viability. There was no manual available on building a sanctuary. Most of the work was original and ground breaking design. The fact it has all held up so well is quite remarkable.

The process took about 6 months and late in 1993 the feasibility study was accepted by the WRC and provisionally by the WCC subject to public consultation on the proposal.

1994/95 – forming the trust

After the study (1994) a steering committee of 9 people was formed with myself as Chairman and including Stephen Fuller as a part time (and only) employee, Don Huse (current CEO of Auckland airport), Leon Grice, Neal Thorsen, Andy Foster, Ian Dixon and Alan Saunders from DoC. The committee ran the public consultations and selling (presentations to over 50 groups), setting up the Business Plan, introducing many people important to the project, setting up the trust deed and appointing the initial trustees.

The trust was established in June 1995 with Michael Morris as Chairman and myself as Deputy Chairman. The trustees were Jacky Renouf, Nancy Ward, Helen Ferner, Prof John Wells, and Andy Foster. Leon Grice, Colin Miskelly and Peter Love were appointed shortly after.

The karori Sanctuary was on it's way!

Jim Lynch
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