

Variation to the Regional Parks Management Plan 2010 to incorporate regional parkland at Piha (Taitomo)

Hearings Panel's Report

Date 27 November 2017

1. Recommendations

That the Environment and Community Committee:

- Incorporate the attached Variation into the Regional Parks Management Plan 2010 (RPMP) relating to 78 Hectares of land at Piha (formerly known as the Byers Block), purchased for addition to the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park.
- Accept the Hearings Panel's recommended changes to the notified draft variation to the Regional Parks Management plan (in the attached Variation).
- Accept the submissions to the extent that recommended changes to the notified draft variation to the Regional Parks Management Plan have been made in relation to those submissions.

2. Procedural Matters

The Council's Regulatory Committee appointed Greg Hill (Chair), William Kapea and Gerald Rowan as the Hearings Panel (Panel); to hear submissions and make recommendations to the Environment and Community Committee on the draft variation to the Regional Parks Management Plan to incorporate land at Piha into the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park.

The hearing was held on the 2 November 2017. Submitters who presented at the hearing were:

- Sandra Coney - adjoining landowner.
- Piha Coastcare Trust (Pat La Roche and Jeff McCauley). and
- Friends of Regional Parks Auckland (Kitt Howden).

The Waitakere Ranges Local Board (WRLB) also presented its views to the Panel (represented by Greg Presland).

The Panel undertook a site visit on the 6 November 2017.

On 9 November the Panel publicly deliberated on its findings in relation to the submissions, the evidence we heard, the council staffs' comments and recommendations, and on the draft variation itself. This report addresses our deliberations. It also provides our recommendations, including that the Environment and Community Committee incorporate the attached Variation into the Regional Parks Management Plan 2010 for land at Piha into the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park. We also recommend that the Committee accept the

submissions to the extent that we recommend changes to the notified draft variation to the Regional Parks Management Plan.

For efficiency reasons this report has been 'built on' the Council Staff report. We found that that report was very helpful in terms of its content, coverage and layout - and observed that it had to a significant extent addressed many of the issues raised by submitters.

The recommended changes we have made are not fundamentally different to the staff recommendations; and are mainly matters of emphasis and refinement, especially in terms of ecological restoration, better recognition of iwi and cultural heritage issues, as well as engagement with iwi, special interest groups and adjoining landowners. These were all matters largely supported by and essentially agreed to by those submitters who appeared before us.

3. Background

The Council acquired 78 hectares of land (formerly known as the Byers Block) in June 2014 at Piha for addition to the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park.

One of the main reasons for its purchase was the opportunity it offered to provide a link on the Hillary Trail between the Mercer Bay Loop Track (Takatu Head) and Piha without the need for walkers to use Piha Road. The land also contains the unique features such as a coastal blowhole, a unique herb field known as the 'tennis court' and offers panoramic vistas from the elevated coastal cliffs.

Public consultation on the management of this land was initiated in December 2016 in the form of a draft concept plan showing the development of tracks and related visitor infrastructure on the park.

75 individual responses were received to the questionnaire which accompanied the draft concept plan which was presented at a public open day held at Piha on the 10th December 2016. Nine written submissions were also received from local individuals, community groups and the Waitakere Ranges Local Board.

Many of the submissions on the draft concept plan sought a fuller policy framework for the management of the land because of the unique nature of the land and its known fire risks. It was therefore recommended that the formal variation to the Regional Parks Management Plan 2010 be undertaken outlining management policies to accompany the concept plan. Feedback from this first phase of consultation was used to develop the draft variation to the Regional Parks Management Plan 2010 which was notified in April 2017.

The Environment and Community Committee resolved that the land be zoned for open space purposes and designated for regional park purposes within the Auckland Unitary Plan, (which will require a plan change) and resolved that the land be protected in perpetuity as regional parkland by Order in Council under section 139 of the Local Government Act 2002. The Panel finds that an Order in Council is necessary to ensure the land is protected in perpetuity as regional parkland, and have accordingly recommended this become the first policy

We acknowledge that the land is not held under the Reserves Act 1977. However, we find that the Council's approach to the variation - namely that it has followed the Reserves Act process with two formal public consultation stages -was appropriate and has clearly fulfilled its obligations to the Auckland ratepayers in relation to how it should manage public land, as well as being open and transparent about the management options. The first stage was fulfilled by the publication of the draft concept plan in December 2016, and then by the notification of the proposed Variation in April.

4. Amendments to the Draft Concept Plan

The draft concept plan focused on the development of tracks, visitor safety and public information features. A number of the submissions on the draft concept plan raised concerns relating that the land consists of low scrubland infested with gorse and other weed species that are vulnerable to fire and called for stronger policy direction on the management priorities, especially around vegetation management and enhancement and visitor management. For these reasons the Council recommended that the Regional Parks Management Plan 2010 be formally amended to include the appropriate policies to deal with these issues.

The RPMP sets out the general policies for managing the regional parks network. It also contains specific policies for each park and in some cases, special management zones where it is necessary to apply specific management approaches to protect sensitive environments or retain special visitor experiences, such as the feeling on remoteness and wilderness. It was recommended that the land at Piha be managed as a special management zone, as set out in the draft variation, consistent with other locations within the Waitakere Regional Park. The Panel supports this approach.

As well as setting the concept plan within a policy framework of the RPMP, a number of amendments were made to the content of the draft concept plan. These are described in some detail below. In relation to this, the Panel received an analysis of the submissions to the draft concept plan, together with staff recommendations on matters that needed to be covered in the proposed draft variation which we have been asked to make recommendations on.

5. The Panel's Report

This report contains an analysis of the submissions received on the draft variation and our recommendations on these. A summary of the responses and comments offered on an online questionnaire that accompanied the draft variation was also provided to us (as Appendix B to the staff report).

This report also incorporates and addresses the evidence, comments and recommendations we received from those parties who presented to us at the hearing. These can largely be summarised as:

- Strong support for a primary management focus on the protection and enhancement (restoration) of the land's wilderness qualities and natural features, while recognising and providing for the ancestral relationship that Maori have with this area.

- The need to address fire risk, including the control of gorse which assists in the rapid spread of fires.
- Enabling visitors to experience the wild nature of this park with its unique heritage features in a dramatic natural landscape while undertaking informal recreation, including a limitation on organised events.
- Acknowledging that, while visitor safety needs to be a priority, visitors will need to recognise that this land contains features such as coastal cliffs, steep slopes, narrow tracks and waahi tapu that pose a considerable level of risk to them, and a high degree of personal responsibility will be required so as not to 'clutter' the park with a plethora of signage and safety barriers.
- Supporting visitor infrastructure to be kept to a minimum to protect the area's natural and cultural qualities and designed to have a low impact on the environment.
- More actively involving adjoining landowners, iwi, special interest / community /NGOs groups and other agencies such as Department of Conservation and Fire and Emergency New Zealand in the “management” of the area.

In relation to the above a number of changes have been recommended to the policies to 'give effect' to this management focus.

6. Name of the reserve

While the mainland has strong cultural significance for the people of Te Kawerau a Maki, other iwi may also claim to have an ancestral relationship. However Taitomo Island which lies off the coast, is solely administered by them and they have indicated that they would prefer the mainland adjacent be known as Taitomo as well. This name is also registered on early survey plans. Section 15.1 of the RPMP sets out the policy for the naming of new parks. The Council has the authority to set that name for new parkland but can take into consideration public and iwi input. It is therefore accepted that Te Kaweraua Maki has along enduring relationship with the land, making “Taitomo” worthy of consideration. (It is not appropriate for Parks to state “appropriate” in this situation.)

No additional submissions have been received on this point.

Recommendation:

That “Taitomo” be put forward as the preferred name for the land covered by the Special Management Zone policies for the consideration by the council.

7. Overall approach

The submissions on the draft concept plan, and to the variation, highlighted the unique and special intrinsic qualities of Taitomo. Many argued that the concept plan did not give due recognition to these.

A number of submitters also commented that the concept plan and variation did not give sufficient emphasis to or adequately covered a number of management issues such as

- ecological restoration,

- Visitor experience - being one of wild nature of Taitomo with its unique heritage features in a dramatic natural landscape
- Visitor safety,
- fire risk management, and
- parking.

Many submitters, including Ms Coney as the adjoining landowner who has been restoring native bush on her family property for over 25 years, the Piha Coastcare Trust and Friends of Regional Parks, considered that the control of weeds, especially gorse, and the restoration of native vegetation should be given priority for resources and budgets over the building of tracks and visitor facilities on the land. We agree.

However, many submitters, pointed out that the extension of the Hillary trail was one of the reasons why this land was purchased by the Council, and for this reason they argued for the construction of the trail should be a priority. It is our finding that this can be undertaken, but that the overall priority be restoration as set out above, at least initially until the restoration is 'established' and the area becomes more 'robust'.

In response to the submissions we recommended the inclusion of a Management Focus section which sets out, in summary, that :

- The primary management focus of Taitomo will be the protection and enhancement of its wilderness qualities and natural features, while recognising and providing for the ancestral relationship that Maori have with this area.
- Visitors are enabled to experience the wild nature of Taitomo with its unique heritage features in a dramatic natural landscape while undertaking informal recreation.
- Visitor safety must be a priority, but within the context of the area containing features such as coastal cliffs, steep slopes, narrow tracks and waahi tapu that pose a considerable level of risk to visitors.
- Supporting visitor infrastructure will be kept to a minimum to protect the area's natural and cultural qualities and is designed to have a low impact on the environment.

The evidence we received from some submitters sought that the staff's recommended focus on restoration (as the primary management focus) be supported; but that greater specificity be provided by referring to a "restoration plan" rather than a "programme". Staff supported this, and so do we.

Recommended policy 3 now states that, "as a priority, develop a vegetation management plan in consultation with the Waitakere Ranges Local Board, adjoining landowners, iwi, Fire and Emergency New Zealand, and special interest groups, and implement a vegetation management and enhancement programme". This was strongly supported by Piha Coastcare Trust (Pat La Roche and Jeff McCauley).

The restoration plan policy also incorporates that an immediate priority is to focus on the control of fire-prone species (such as gorse) along track edges and property boundaries, with consideration given to fire resistant plants. This was in response to need to address fire

as a significant threat. Ms Coney and others outlined the devastating effects from fire on this and adjoining land, and provided some ideas of the policy needed to address it.

The quality and level of development on the park was also raised by many submitters. They set out that Taitomo is a wilderness area with a number of unique and special characteristics that are highly treasured by residents and visitors. They did not want to see the area over-developed with tracks, sign, fences, viewing platforms and the like. A number pointed to the fact that there are inherent dangers on the land, such as the coastal cliffs, and rather than fence and corral visitors, Taitomo should be managed as a place of discovery and its wild elements kept intact. They point to the fact that much of the Hillary Trail already passes through areas with “dangerous” elements without the need for excessive safety features.

Other submitters saw the need to manage the visitor access to and through the land and that access needs to be made safe and/or visitors should, at least, be made aware of safety issues. However, they also argued that the visitor infrastructure should be kept the minimum necessary to facilitate appropriate and safe access and that it should be subservient to the natural setting.

As noted above, we have recommended a section entitled "Management Focus" be included to cover the range of comments we support.

A number of submitters requested that studies or surveys be undertaken before works commence on the land. We note that the following studies have been undertaken;

- Archaeological Assessment, Auckland Council Heritage Unit, July 2013,
- Report Tennis Courts and Blowhole areas at Piha, Auckland Museum Botanist, October 2014,
- Wild Fire Risk Assessment 2015, Auckland Rural Fire Service
- Coastal Risk Assessment, Coastal Research Ltd., May 2015
- Byers Coastal Turf Report, Auckland Council Biodiversity Unit, May 2015
- Vegetation Classification Byers Herb Field, 2016, Auckland Council Biodiversity Unit
- Byers Property Plant List, Auckland Botanic Society, Sept 2016.

Recommendation

That the Variation be amended in general accordance with the commentary set out above, and as set out in the Variation - including those relating to the management focus on ecological and heritage restoration, and recognition of visitor safety that enables people to experience Taitomo's wild nature and cultural heritage in a dramatic natural landscape while undertaking informal recreation.

8. Statutory framework

A number of submitters questioned the relationship between the concept plan and the Regional Parks Management Plan 2010 (RPMP). They argued that the policies for Taitomo need to sit within the framework of the Waitakere Ranges section of the RPMP. They argued that because of Taitomo's special qualities that it deserves greater clarity around the management direction and priorities than can be covered by a concept plan alone. They therefore sought that policies be developed for Taitomo within the framework of a 'special management zone' similar to those that cover similar sensitive locations within the Waitakere

Ranges. A number of submitters also argued that there was a need for wider public consultation and sought the opportunity to speak to their submissions.

The submitters argued that any development of new regional park land needs to balance protection and enhancement of the natural environment with recreational access, safety, and the desire for adequate visitor infrastructure. This balance is particularly critical in the Waitakere Ranges Regional Parks, which is classed as a 'natural wilderness' area (Class 1) under the RPMP. This means the focus should be on a wilderness experience and scenic landscapes with recreational activities that require little infrastructure. This should be accompanied by an emphasis on protection of natural and cultural environments while providing recreational opportunities where appropriate. The policies need to be consistent with the vision for the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park under the RPMP. They argued that the balance between environmental stewardship and recreation in the concept plan is not consistent with the RPMP and greater emphasis on how the environment will be protected and enhanced needs to be considered.

They also argued that only minimal work on tracks should be undertaken before an extensive ecological survey and vegetation replanting program has been established. This will necessarily take some years to be fully implemented and development of the land might then be staged as re-vegetation is completed.

The development of reserve management policy normally involves a two phase consultation programme; the first phase calls for ideas on what the management plan needs to cover, followed by public submissions on the draft policies developed using that initial input. Hearings can then be held that give submitters the opportunity to speak to their submissions.

The concept plan for Taitomo was in effect equivalent to the first stage of this process. It was recommended that draft policies be developed using the feedback on the concept plan for notification as a further round of public consultation, with the input being considered by independent commissioners and offering submitters to opportunity to speak to their submissions.

We agree that the process that has been followed is an appropriate one. We also agree that a set of policies be developed within the framework of a 'special management zone'. The Variation therefore set out management policies in the format of a 'special management zone', including policy on the following;

- a) the relationship of the management of Taitomo with the RPMP and the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Protection Act 2008
- b) recognition of the role of and relationship with the vision for the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park
- c) a management focus and priorities for Taitomo
- d) the development of appropriate visitor infrastructure
- e) the conservation strategies
- f) the management strategies for fire risk, and
- g) the management of key relationships.

We also find that the Tasman and Gap Lookouts are currently managed as a separate zone in the RPMP (page 407, policies 225 – 229 RPMP). The main access to Taitomo from Piha

beach is, however, via the Tasman Lookout track and would be seen by visitors as a logical part of the Taitomo experience. They are also part of the same coastal ecosystem and cultural context, and share the same challenges relating to pest weed control and fire risk management, as we have addressed above. There is logic in the management of these areas as an integrated whole, and we have recommended this.

Recommendation

That the general approach of the Variation proposing that Taitomo be managed as a 'special management zone' - incorporating the specific amendments recommended elsewhere in this report, and as set out in the Variation itself.

That the map accompanying the draft variation be amended to include Tasman and Gap Lookout Special Management Zone polices into the Taitomo Special Management Zone and they be managed as an integrated unit.

9. Vision for the park

Friends of Regional Parks suggested that the statement "...limited and controlled access... in" the management focus for the park sounded negative and suggested a more positive statement such as "Visitors will access the area on foot. The Hillary Trail and tracks creating a low impact on the environment will provide visitors with walking access to the beach at the Gap, the blowhole, 'tennis court' and key lookout points for the spectacular coastal views. Visitor infrastructure will be kept to a minimum to protect the area's wilderness qualities....."

Waitakere Ranges Local Board (WRLB) requested stronger statements describing the natural, cultural and historic values of Taitomo and made specific reference to the vision statement for the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park.

"A regional conservation and scenic park that is managed to protect and enhance its unique, natural, cultural and historic values and wilderness qualities, to provide a place of respite for the people of Auckland, to provide for a range of compatible recreational activities in natural settings, and to cultivate an ethic of stewardship" (Section 17.19.2 of the RPMP 2010).

The draft variation makes it clear that Taitomo will be managed within the overall intentions for the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park. However, specific reference to the way Taitomo contributes to this vision is be appropriate, and we have recommended this accordingly .

Recommendations

That the following paragraphs be added to the "Management Framework" to the Taitomo variation:

"Taitomo forms part of the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park and contributes to the vision for the Waitakere Ranges as a regional conservation and scenic park that is managed to protect and enhance its unique, natural, cultural and historic values and wilderness qualities, to provide a place of respite for the people of Auckland, to provide for a range of compatible recreational activities in natural settings, and to cultivate an ethic of stewardship.

“The management of Taitomo will place emphasis on the protection and enhancement of its wilderness qualities and its natural features with limited and controlled visitor access to the ‘gap’, the blowhole, the ‘tennis court’ and the Hillary Trail which offers spectacular coastal vistas for key lookout points. Visitor infrastructure will be kept to the minimum necessary to facilitate safe access to key points of interest to visitors on the site and will be low key and constructed using natural materials, where practicable.”

10. Ecological restoration

We have largely addressed this issue above; that the focus of the management of this park, for an initial period at least, needs to be on restoration of its natural and cultural values. Given this was a particular focus of the submissions and evidence we heard, we have addressed it in more detail below.

A number of submitters argued that plant and animal pest management and restorations was missing and that it must be a priority at Taitomo - and that it be properly resourced and funded. Many argued, and again a focus of Ms Coney, that the land is extensively infested with weeds, such as gorse, especially along the northern boundaries adjacent to private properties. Some submitters also stated that this poses a serious fire hazard in an area which has a history of fires, and stressed the need to give priority to the removal of fire-prone weed species and the restoration of fire-resistant native vegetation over the installation of visitor infrastructure

Some submitters also pointed to a concern that new tracks are proposed in areas with high fire risk which would add to the risk of inadvertent fires caused by visitor activity. Many therefore sought that the control of weeds and restoration of native vegetation should be a priority ahead of putting visitor infrastructure in place. They requested that an ecological plan and a long-term restoration and vegetation management plan should accompany the concept plan. As stated earlier, we agree with this and have recommended that priority be given to restoration, which includes plant and pest control.

In terms of track creation, a number of submitters, while endorsing the need to progress the reinstatement of the Gentle Annie Track as part of the continuation of the Hillary Trail and the upgrade of existing tracks, requested that new tracks either be deferred or not proceeded with. The primary reasons for this were that this would divert resources from the more critical task of reducing the fire risk and could exacerbate the fire risk and the possible spread of Kauri dieback disease.

Several submitters have suggested that the management of fire prone pest plant species should not just occur along track edges, as implied by the draft policies, but should apply across the entire block. We understand this was the intention of the draft variation with priority being placed on the edges of the most vulnerable tracks. However, we have recommended that the policy be amended to clarify this intention. We also provide further comment on the fire risk management and the need for new tracks below.

The WRLB requested that the variation include a statement that Taitomo be made ‘pest-free’ within a specified time period. While this is a laudable long-term ambition it is debatable whether this is practicable given the proximity of private properties along two boundaries

unless it is seen as part of wider community efforts to make Piha pest plant free as outlined by the Protect Piha Heritage Society in their submission.

Some submitters questioned the need to retain the herb field but the majority of submitters supported the management of the herb field because it has ecological and historical value. It is a unique biological habitat and is one of the last remaining examples in the Auckland Region, and possibly the upper North Island. Some considered it as an “iconic’ feature of Piha that serves as a recognition of the history of the Byers family who managed the herb field in the past. Some also saw it as an opportunity to tell some of the history of Piha along the Hillary trail.

Recommendations

That the Variation be amended in general accordance with the commentary set out above, and as set out in the Variation - including those relating to:

- the management focus on ecological and heritage restoration/recognition, including the herb field /tennis-court;
- the need to manage fire risk including as part of the ecological restoration and the use of 'fire resistance plants'
- Supporting visitor infrastructure will be kept to a minimum to protect the area's natural and cultural qualities and is designed to have a low impact on the environment.
- undertake staged track development in the context of the bullet points above.

11. Kauri dieback

Kauri dieback is an ongoing issue in the parks that contain kauri trees. Tracks and increasing foot traffic, especially where trampers deviate off the tracks, increase the risk of infection to kauri trees. Section 10.4.4 of the RPMP sets out policy for the management of pathogens, such as Kauri Dieback disease, in the regional parks. The intention is that these policies will apply to the management of Taitomo as outlined in purposed policies.

The recent release of the Kauri Dieback Report 2017 has highlighted the critical state of kauri in the Waitakere Ranges and the need for stronger intervention.

A number of submitters questioned the wisdom of encouraging visitors into areas of the park that are not currently accessible given the Kauri dieback issue. In particular they questioned the need for a track along the Lovett Stream (Track 2). The purpose of this track was seen as giving visitors the opportunity to experience some of the mature native bush on the park while keeping them away from the areas further up the valley that contain kauri.

Recommendation

That in addition to the specific policy in the notified variation for the management of Kauri dieback disease, with its reference to Section 10.4.4 in the RPMP, add the following to the Management Framework:

Special note will also be taken of polices 10.4.4.1-2 relating to the prevention of the spread of Kauri-dieback disease and the findings of the Kauri Dieback Report 2017.

12. Fire Risk- management

A number of submitters to the draft concept plan and the Variation raised the fact that the land has a history of fires and that the extensive areas of low scrub and gorse represent a continuing fire risk. Many argued that weed control and ecological restoration with fire-resistant native plants should be a priority ahead of installing further visitor infrastructure.

Submitters suggested that there was a need for a long term plan that the eradication of invasive and noxious exotic weeds and that restorative planting of fire resistant native flora must be a precursor to developing any additional tracks. Some have argued for the installation (re-instatement) of a water supply and storage tanks for fire-fighting purposes.

There was a high level of support for the fire risk reduction strategy in the draft variation coupled with the revegetation programme but concerns were raised about the need to ensure that the revegetation programme was adequately resourced and that management of fire prone pest plant species should not just occur along track edges, but across the entire block. We have addressed some of these issue earlier in relation to the ecological restoration of the area.

One submitter made reference to a “former waterway” that was dammed in the past. The submitter has asked that council investigate and implement the restoration of this waterway.

We understand the intention was that the fire risk management will apply to the entire block, as far as this is possible given the steep terrain and lack of vehicular access. Several submitters also sought the removal of loop track 3, where it extends beyond the first lookout, which they saw as bringing visitors into a potentially high fire risk area.

Council Staff consulted Fire and Emergency New Zealand on this issue and will continue to take their advice of appropriate fire risk management strategies for Taitomo. The coupling of fire risk management with ecological restoration is logical, and is addressed earlier. However, in reference to the control of weeds and re-vegetation strategies, wholesale weed eradication through spraying out extensive areas would not be advisable. We were advised that a better approach would be to undertake weed clearance followed quickly by revegetation progressively over smaller areas so that fire spread was kept to a minimum. Fire and Emergency New Zealand has recommended the installation of fire resistant water storage tanks on the site.

The draft concept plan was amended by removing some tracks from fire prone areas and made the construction of new tracks subject to the completion of the revegetation programme in the area they traverse. Also a specific policy is included that the loop track on the northern ridge-line will not be developed beyond the first lookout until significant ecological restoration has been undertaken in the area it traverses and a fire risk assessment has been undertaken

Recommendation

That Fire Risk Management be specifically addressed in the Variation in general accordance with the commentary above.

11. Wildlife protection and dogs

Many submitters raised the fact that draft concept plan did not address the issue of dog control. They argued that dog control policies should be consistent with the dog control regimes operating within Piha. The draft variation included the following policy:

Prohibit dogs and mountain bikes in order to maintain the wilderness qualities and protect native wildlife species, such as little blue penguins.

The WRLB supported the prohibition of dogs from the park and sought the greater effort in the enforcement of the existing bylaws.

The coastal areas adjoining Taitomo are habitat and breeding areas for little blue penguin and grey faced petrels and the scrublands are frequented by fern birds. These species are vulnerable to dog attack. Dogs are currently banned from Tasman View Track for this reason. As most visitor traffic will come via the Tasman View Track, it is logical that the same control apply at Taitomo.

It should be noted however that the dog control bylaws are set under the Dog Control Act 1996 by a separate consultation process and may change from time to time. The variation can however contain policy that promotes a position on dog control.

Recommendation

That the policy recommending the prohibition of dogs on Taitomo be retained without amendment.

12 Archaeological and cultural sites

The WRLB expressed a need to see stronger policies around the protection of archaeological and cultural site and the need to work with Te Kawerau a Maki on the management and protection of Taitomo Island. One of the critical issues is discouraging people from venturing onto Taitomo Island which is not part of the park. Te Kawerau a Maki has been approached as to whether they want to install signage to inform people of the situation.

Sections 9 and 11 (respectively) of the RPMP set out the general policies for the engagement with tangata whenua and the management of cultural heritage on regional parks. These general policies apply at Taitomo but it is appropriate to reflect these requirements as they apply to Taitomo in the variation.

Recommendation

That the proposed policy be:

Manage archaeological and cultural sites in accordance with Section 11 of the Regional Parks Management Plan by;

- a) *Undertaking further surveys to determine the extent of archaeological and cultural sites.*

- b) *Exercising the Accidental Discovery Protocols with respect to all development projects*

- c) *In collaboration with Te Kawerau a Maki develop strategies and actions that prevent visitors gaining access to Taitomo Island.*

13. Visitor management

Many submitters to the draft concept plan and the variation expressed a clear desire to retain the natural wilderness qualities of Taitomo.

A number of submissions, evidence we received, as well as comments from the WRLB, pointed out the significant increase in visitor activity at Piha over recent years, and the fact that Taitomo and the extension of the Hillary Trail will further increase the level of activity at Piha. Submitters said that due to this, very careful management of this land was very important so that its natural and cultural values were at least maintained, but really needed to be enhanced.

Submitters considered that, in particular, visitor infrastructure such as signs, seats, barriers, boardwalks and viewing platforms should be kept to a minimum and made subservient to the natural setting. Many also considered that interpretative and safety signage should be at the carparks before entering the area rather than onsite.

While a number supported interpretative signs or features, such as pou whenua, they sought that these did not spoil the wilderness qualities, the scenic landscape and views, and that they be of a form and colour that blends with the natural environment. Moreover, many pointed to the need for infrastructure to be consistent with the Piha Design Guidelines.

We accept that park signage is important for a number of reasons, including way-finding, conveying safety messages and information on park features and history. However, the proliferation of signs can lead to clutter and confusion and can detract from the natural and “wilderness” experiences offered on the park. For these reasons we have recommended that signs should be kept to a minimum and located so as not to detract from the quality of the visitor experience.

The draft concept plan was amended by removing a number of signs and viewing platforms, and the extent of boardwalks was reduced. The draft variation contains policy that directs signage to key locations and recognises the Piha Design Guidelines. It also directed that visitor infrastructure be constructed of natural materials that are appropriate to and do not detract from the natural settings of Taitomo. The Panel supports this approach.

The WRLB, and others, also commented that there is a need to place caps on the level of organised activities, such as weddings, filming and sports events, to maintain the quality of experience for informal park users.

The size of permitted informal groups within the Waitakere ranges is set at 50 persons in order to maintain the sense of natural wilderness and quiet enjoyment for casual park users. Organised events, especially sports events, with numbers greater than this requires specific

approval from the Council. Areas similar to Taitomo, such as Whatipu and Piha Valley, have limits of no more than three organised sporting events per year.

In this respect Ms Coney requested that only one sport even be permitted per annum, with 2 filming events and no wedding, parties and concerts. Council Staff recommended that a similar limit is imposed at Taitomo as applies for Whatipu and Piha Valley; and that the limit be:

- 3 organised sports events over 50 persons per year
- 2 filming events
- No weddings, parties and concerts.

Our recommendation is to agree with the Council Staff, and largely with Ms Coney. However, we find that only enabling one sport event per year is too strict and some flexibility is appropriate. Council staff can manage the acceptability of the event, and we were advised that these are almost always running events which use the existing tracks.

All submitters (except one) opposed the provision of mountain bike tracks at Taitomo. Mountain biking is prohibited from the Waitakere Ranges because the steep terrain, clay soils and high rain fall make such an activity inappropriate in this type of environment and inconsistent with the “wilderness” qualities of the Ranges. The draft variation maintained this prohibition at Taitomo. We support this and have recommended accordingly.

Recommendations

That the Variation be amended in general accordance with the commentary set out above, and as set out in the Variation - including those relating to limiting parks infrastructure, limiting and/or preventing the number and types of events, and prohibiting the use of mountain bikes.

14 Tracks

The proposed tracks are largely on the alignment of former service roads or tracks with the exception of Track 2 (Lovett Stream Track) and the proposed Track 1 (Hillary Trail). The Hillary Track trail was supported by all submitters, and does not follow the alignment of the former track known as ‘Gentle Annie’. This is because the new alignment will need to take the vistas, vegetation, landform and contour and the visual impact of the track into consideration.

Several submitters challenged the need for Lovett Stream track (Track 2) on the basis that it represents increased fire risk and a risk to the spread of Kauri Dieback disease. Te Kawerau a Maki have stated they would not support the creation of new tracks if that involved further removal of native vegetation (even regenerating vegetation).

Several submitters sought that new tracks should not be developed until such time as the areas they traverse have been fully restored and the fire risk reduced. This intention is expressed in the notified Variation.

A number of submitters stressed the need to keep the design of the tracks low-key and fitting into the environment. Some submitters drew attention to the need to ensure that tracks and other visitor infrastructure is developed in accordance with the Piha Design Guidelines.

Protect Piha Heritage Society requested that the loop track (Track 3) be removed from beyond the first lookout as it is unnecessary and creates further fire risk by introducing people into the area.

The Lovett Stream track (Track 2) was designed to give visitors the opportunity to experience some of the mature forest on the park while keep them away from vulnerable species such as Kauri that occur further up the valley (there is no Kauri on the proposed alignment). It also offers an alternative route around the herb field and could help reduce traffic through this area.

The loop track (Track 3) is on the alignment of a bulldozed track for most of its length. Fire and Emergency New Zealand commented that the overall benefit of this track is that it would facilitate fire fighters into the area and provides an alternative escape route for the public. They comment that the fire risk can be mitigated by regular maintenance of the track and by the planting of low fire-risk native plants and the track could act as a 'fire-break' to slow the spread of fire through the area.

Recommendations

Include the following policy:

The loop track on the northern ridge-line will not be developed beyond the first lookout until significant ecological restoration has been undertaken in the area it traverses and a fire risk assessment has been undertaken.

Amend a number of policies to add in:

".....Piha Design Guidelines and the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Design Guidelines".

15. Visitor Infrastructure

Boardwalks

The boardwalks are proposed at the herb field. The majority of submitters to the draft concept plan and the draft variation endorsed the retention of the herb field (tennis- court). A number of submitters considered that the boardwalk is both "sensible and appropriate" for the protection of the herb field. Other submitters questioned the need for it and see the boardwalks as intrusive in the natural setting.

The herb field is located on an elevated cliff edge that is a natural vantage point for people wanting to enjoy the sea vistas offered at Taitomo. It is in effect a 'manicured' natural feature of historic and ecological interest. The herb field is already visited by members of the public and many do not realise what it is or its vulnerability to foot traffic.

It is also an inevitable outcome of extending the Hillary Trail across Taitomo that more visitors will be attracted to the herb field. We accept that its retention will require a level of

protection. Council staff consider that the creation of a boardwalk is the most appropriate mechanism to provide access across the herb field so they can it, while also protecting it, while directing visitors to a point where they can safely enjoy the sea vistas. The design of the boardwalk will ensure that it has minimal impact of the herb field and its long term viability. We agree with the Staff position.

Lookouts and seats

Submitters had mixed views on the need for lookout structures. The draft concept plan was modified by removing a lookout structure at position 7 and making this a simple resting point with a seat. This is a natural stopping point on the steep climb up the new track. The Waitakere Ranges Protection Society sought clarification that the other 'informal viewing locations' might be supported with a seat but no other infrastructure. Seats have been limited to a six locations at the key vantage points and rest stop on the steep ascent on the Hillary Trail. The seats will be wooden and be screened by vegetation.

The only major lookout containing a structure is located on the coastal cliffs near the herb field. This location will attract visitors seeking access to the coastal vistas.

The intention is that the informal lookout points will not contain any infrastructure, except possibly seats. The vegetation at these points will also be selected and managed to ensure that the vistas are maintained.

The purpose of the lookout structure near the herb field is to direct visitors to safe point to access the views and avoid visitors accessing the cliffs at random and unsafe points. The intention is that this will be designed to have minimal visual impact using materials that blend with the natural setting. The Piha Design Guidelines and the soon to be released Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Guidelines will be used in the design of these structures.

Fences and safety barriers

Similar concerns were raised by submitters to the over-use of fences and safety barriers. Fences are proposed only at two locations; the coastal cliff lookout and an area above the blowhole where the most logical track alignment passes close to deep drop-offs that may not be obvious to passing visitors, especially children. Fences will be designed with a discrete and visually permeable profile, namely post and wires, as expressed in the proposed policies.

The WRLB questioned the need for rock chicanes and fences at the entrance to the Blowhole. They see these as introducing an intrusive built element in a rugged natural setting. The Waitakere Ranges Protection Society 'encourages' the Council to undertake consultation on the actual design and placement of signage and infrastructure (e.g. barriers and seats). We were advised that the Council will involve mana whenua in the design process for visitor infrastructure, especially signs. Council will also be guided by the Piha Design Guidelines and the soon to be released Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Guidelines in the design of these structures.

As set out in the Staff Report to us, "the charm and attraction of the Blowhole is the sense of awe it invokes but there are latent safety issues posed by the deep drop offs within and around the Blowhole". The objective of the safety features, such as the rock chicane, is to

forewarn visitor that they are entering an area with safety issues. The placement and design of the safety features is critical to ensure they do not detract from the dramatic experience of the Blowhole. It is recommended that the design and location of the safety features at the Blowhole be undertaken in consultation with Te Kawerau a Maki, other iwi who have association interests and the Waitakere Ranges Local Board.

We have not made any specific recommendation on this matter, but whether the Council decides to create it, it will need to consider the overall management focus, which is the area's naturalness, that infrastructure will be minimal, and people will need to be aware of the inherent dangers associated with this park and the blowhole in particular.

Signs

General

A number of submitters questioned what they saw as a proliferation of information, interpretation and safety signs at Taitomo. Others accept the need for some signs but request they be kept to a minimum and sited so they do not spoil or dominate the natural settings and views. Some submitters suggest that signs should be limited to the entry points to the park. Signs also need to be culturally appropriate including matters such as Kia tupato – waahi tapu (please take care when visiting this location as this is a culturally sensitive site).

The draft variation proposes three key locations for signage (refer to draft concept plan). These are key interpretation points. Where practicable, and visitor information and safety signage will be grouped with interpretation signage so that there is not a proliferation of signs across the park. We support this.

Culturally Appropriate Signage

As part of the hearings process we were provided with the draft interpretation panels for Taitomo. One of those panels showed an image of a warrior wrestling with a dragon monster with the words (and a story) - "Kaiwhare - restless Taniwha." The Hearings Panel has major concerns with the draft interpretation panel depicting Kaiwhare for the reasons below.

The origin of Kaiwhare began at the time of the great waka migration where Hape was left on the shores of Hawaiiiki until his powerful karakia materialised into the form of a "Sea God" a large whai (stingray) Kawea Kawea ki te whenua a Kupe. When Hape arrived in the Manukau on the back of this taniwha and it was time to farewell his friend, he once again recited karakia and the taniwha dived into the depths of the Manukau and became 'Kaiwhare' keeper of the Manukau.

The depicted image looks nothing like a whai, and it is misleading and potentially offensive to other iwi who have a closer relationship with Kaiwhare. It also tends to contradict the earlier historical account regarding the legend of Kaiwhare and his lair Te Rua o Kaiwhare.

What needs to be understood is that the people of that time inhabited the lands from south Kaipara across to Mahurangi and back to the Waitemata. So when Te Waiohua, which

consists of four iwi, see the picture depicting Kaiwhare, it is likely that great offence could be taken.

We strongly advise the Council to ensure that any signage is culturally appropriate, and it develops any signage in collaboration with the relevant iwi.

Recommendations

Amend a number of policies to add in:

".....Piha Design Guidelines and the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Design Guidelines".

Include the following policy (amended from the notified variation)

"Install visitor information, safety signage and interpretation of the natural and cultural features of the area, at the main entrance points, at the entrance to the blowhole and at the 'tennis court' herb field (such as Kia tupato – waahi tapu (please take care when visiting this location as this is a culturally sensitive site))."

That prior to adopting any signage, especially as it relates to Maori, the Council ensures that any signage is culturally appropriate, and developed in collaboration with the relevant iwi.

16. Toilets

Submitters to the draft concept plan and variation raised some concerns about the need for additional toilets. Some pointed to the fact that toilets already existed at Piha and the end of Log Race Road but that these need better directional signage. While a number supported the installation of additional toilets they have sought that the toilets are discreetly located and designed to blend into the natural setting. A number have opposed toilets being located at the 'Gap' and argue they are better located at the car parks or entry points. Others have opposed the erection of toilets on the basis that this is seen as a wilderness area and that toilets will attract more visitors and could encourage illegal camping at the 'Gap'.

We were advised that Parks experience has shown that the lack of toilets within easy reach can lead to the fouling of areas with human waste. However, there are facilities at Piha and at the end of Log Race Road. The Panel's view is that the provision of toilet facilities should be minimised and a need very definitely proven before committing to the development of additional toilets.

Recommendation

That the notified policy be retained, with a few minor amendments as set out below:

"Ensure Taitomo is conveniently served by toilet facilities by ensuring;

- a) the location of existing toilets are clearly signposted at carparks and main track entrances;*

- b) *the need for any additional toilet facilities is kept under review and that toilets will be constructed if a need is demonstrated; and*
- c) *any additional toilet facilities are located in a discrete location and are designed and constructed of materials which blend into the natural setting consistent with the Piha Design Guidelines and the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area Design Guidelines.*

17. Parking

Many submitters raised concern that as the attractions at Taitomo become better known, the number of visitors to Piha will increase placing additional pressure on already heavily used facilities, such as car parking areas. Many pointed to the limited capacity and dangers associated with parking at the Lookout on Piha Road and opposed the provision of pedestrian access from Piha Road for this reason. Others argued that additional parking would be necessary at this location.

Submitters pointed to the need for additional parking at locations such as south and at the end of Log Race Road to serve the increased use Taitomo will generate. The WRLB has also suggested that additional parking near the Piha Road lookout at the top of the existing service road on Taitomo should be considered.

One submitter raised the need to consider improving public transport to Piha. This would however require input from public transport authorities and the private sector and is outside the scope of the park management plan to directly influence.

It is our view that the extension of the Hillary Trail through Taitomo and the creation of track systems will result in increased visitor activity. This will have impacts on car parking capacity at Karekare, Log Race Road and at Piha.

We do not think it possible to anticipate the level or distribution of visitor activity at this stage. There is a need, however, to keep the situation under review. Additional parking is highly problematic as access off Piha Road on a corner near the Lookout will be difficult to engineer safely.

The need for additional parking to serve Taitomo must also be seen in this wider context. Some possible solutions are outside the scope of the park management plan to influence. But scope exists to investigate the provision of addition parking on Taitomo near the Piha Road lookout and at the end of Log Race Road on council owned land.

It is recommended vehicle and pedestrian monitoring be undertaken at the key parking locations and on the Taitomo tracks to determine the level of activity being generated by activities on Taitomo. Once these patterns are known, and given the interrelationship with other parking needs at Piha, it is recommended that a development plan be prepared for further public consultation on possible solutions.

Recommendations

Include the following policy:

Monitor the need for additional parking to serve visitor activity at Taitomo and prepare a development plan for public consultation if a need is proved, giving consideration to additional vehicle parking at the end of Log Race Road and/or off Piha Road on the central service road on Taitomo.

18. Honorary Ranger and Volunteers

The Titirangi Residents and Ratepayers Association and the Friends of Regional Parks (in their submission and evidence before the Panel) have suggested that the Council appoint an honorary ranger to look after pest control and the tracks on the land to be directed by the park rangers and supported financially by Auckland Council.

We accept that volunteer programmes are a long established role on regional parks and are well supported by those seeking to contribute to the park, enjoy the opportunity to get active and associate with people of like-mind. A policy of the notified draft variation made provision for such programmes on Taitomo. The provision of paid honorary rangers is a matter that, if adopted, would have application on many parks and has pecuniary and employment implications for the council, and is therefore outside the scope of this variation.

Recommendation

That the volunteer policy be retained without modification.

19. Resourcing implementation

Many submitters sought that the control of weeds and the restoration of native vegetation should be given priority for resources and budgets over the building of tracks and visitor facilities on the land. Others have sought the allocation of an honorary ranger for the park and the adequate resourcing of dog control.

The allocation of funding and resources to implement the park management plan is outside the scope of the plan itself. These matters have pecuniary implications for the Council and are more appropriately addressed through the annual plan processes. However, the Panel accepts that if the Council wishes to undertake the necessary work to 'give effect' to this "Special Management Area" it will need to commit sufficient funds to enable this to occur.

Recommendation

That the Committee, when it adopts the Variation, also make a recommendation that the Council appropriately funds and resources this park to enable the "Special Management Area" policies to be implemented.



Greg Hill - Chair of the Hearings Panel

27 November 2017