

A thousand lovers

Address to the Environmental Institute of Australia and New Zealand Symposium, Wellington, March 27, 2015 by Tim Higham, Executive Officer, Hauraki Gulf Forum

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Environmental Institute of Australia and New Zealand Symposium.

I feel a little like Stephen Donald running on to Eden Park in an ill-fitting jersey ...

You see the first invitation to address you was extended to Deputy Mayor Penny Hulse, who Dan Carter-like, can't be with us today to take a kick at how Auckland Council is working post amalgamation on environmental matters.

Similarly first reserve Environmental Services Manager Gael Ogilvie took a little slip with her calendar and is unable to take a shot at the topic.

So I am stepping up to the tee on "Achieving effective engagement across multiple agencies: the case of the Hauraki Gulf."

But I don't want to move the goal posts too much so I'm going to have a crack at aspects of the original question but obliquely, through the lens of my involvement with Auckland Council and the Hauraki Gulf Forum over the past seven years.

It is an exciting time to be working within Auckland Council. There is big thinking happening, about the potentials of exercising its mandate at scale. Economic development, public transport, social transformation ... but how might environmental dimensions work within this expression?

Here's a couple of slides from a recent presentation by the council's Chief Planning Officer Roger Blakeley to staff on vision, mission and priorities.

As Auckland creates the world's most liveable city, here, according to Roger, is some of the competition.



Vancouver, Copenhagen, Melbourne, Vienna,

What is Auckland's point of difference?

Simply put, it's beautiful and if you imagine the point of difference as a colour palette I'd suggest a dominance of blues, greens and browns.



Tamaki Makaurau – desired by many, a place of a thousand lovers.

Update the original name for the Auckland isthmus and we now have 1.5 million lovers in the place, 2 million projected by 2031.

When the council released Auckland Unleashed, the discussion document on the Auckland Plan, I conducted a self-interested scan and noted ¾ of its dozen double-page photographic spreads featured the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park.



Here's another slide from Roger's presentation. Among his priority projects is Sea Change Tai Timu Tai Pari, a project to prepare a marine spatial plan for the Hauraki Gulf.

We will be thought leaders on:



So I'm going to give you the back story, and in doing so I hope to throw some light on how Auckland Council is thinking about exercising its leadership role in the environmental domain.

When appointed to the inaugural position of executive officer to the Hauraki Gulf Forum seven years ago, I asked what this might mean.

The Forum is required under Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Act 2000 to promote a set of management objectives requiring integration between central and local government agencies, and protection, and where appropriate, enhancement of life supporting capacity ... of environmental quality ... of the Hauraki Gulf/ Tikapa Moana/ Te Moana Nui a Toi.

And every three years – every three short years! – produce a report of the state of the environment and an audit of the effectiveness of management agencies to the task of protection and enhancement.

Here's the front page of the Herald after our report in 2011: "Our Toxic Gulf Paradise."



Let me tell you the story in a different way - given we are in Wellington and it may be unfamiliar territory – let's go a journey out and around the Hauraki Gulf.

We will leave from Viaduct Harbour and we'll do a couple of circuits, spread a few years apart, roughly matching the appearance of the State of our Gulf reports.



We'll pass the Ports of Auckland which handles about half of the country's imports and about quarter of its exports and receives about 1400 container ship visits a year.

Let's imagine we are on board the Whale and Dolphin Explorer boat. Our chances of seeing a dolphin throughout the year is 90 percent and a whale 75 percent. Look there's one!



So it's a Bryde's whale, part of a resident population of about 50 whales, which live and breed in the Gulf. They are shallow divers spending more than 90 percent of their time in less than 12m, the draft of a container ship. They are hard to spot and randomly dispersed. Unfortunately we have lost 44 since 1989, mostly from ship strike. An average of two a year is not sustainable.

Look around at some of the seabirds. The storm petrel was thought to be extinct for a hundred years then turned up again in the last decade. We still don't know where it breeds. The black petrel, once widespread around the North Island, and breeds now only on Great Barrier and Little Barrier, we've recently found out is likely to be being killed fourteen times faster than its population can handle on the long lines of the snapper and bluenose fishing fleet.



We'll head around Rotoroa Island, once the Salvation Army drying out place for alcoholics and out in the middle of the Firth of Thames. Here NIWA is monitoring seasonal fluctuations in PH and oxygen in the water column, linked nutrients. Loadings are high (equivalent to 32 truck loads of urea fertiliser a week from rivers) with Nitrogen increasing a percent a year over the past 10 years, from the intensively dairy farmed Hauraki Plains.



As we come back through the Tamaki Strait we are passing over bare muds that were once carpeted with thick beds of soft sediment mussels. Covering much of the Firth of Thames and the strait mussels beds would have filtered the waters of the Firth in a day. Now they are gone, dredged and poached and unable to recover, as the settlement surfaces for spat reverted to muds. Close to Auckland and those muds will contain heavy metals washed out of urban areas that now exceed threshold levels that are harmful to marine organisms.

As we pull back in to the viaduct basin have a look at the trawl net on the wharf. Bottom trawling is still used to harvest about 30-40 percent the snapper caught in the Gulf. Imagine what 12,450 bottom trawls over three years does to any seafloor structure! Snapper stock is about half what is considered optimal, currently 20 percent of its original biomass.



Not surprisingly, the conclusion drawn in our 2011 State of our Gulf assessment was “the Hauraki Gulf has undergone an incredible transformation over two human life spans. That transformation is continuing in the sea and around the coast with most environmental indicators either showing negative trends or remaining at levels which are indicative of poor environmental condition. It is inevitable that further loss will occur unless bold, sustained and innovative steps are taken”

So you might need a drink in the viaduct before we head out on the Gulf again ...

Let’s go around the circuit today and refresh the view ...

As we pass Rangitoto and Little Barrier/Hauturu, there are places, around Rangitoto’s summit, and Hauturu’s boulder bank that are owned now by the mana whenua of the islands. Since our last voyage the islands have been included in treaty settlements, transferred to iwi or iwi collectives and then gifted back to the Crown to remain iconic nature or scenic reserves under new co-governance arrangements.

The storm petrel we saw earlier has been located nesting deep in one of the main forested valleys of Hauturu; somehow hanging on despite the presence of cats and rats for many years before eradication. Nature preservation and kaitiakitanga now have the storm petrels’ backs!

The container ship we are passing has slowed its average speed from 14.2 knots to 12 knots since September 2013 when a voluntary protocol was introduced by the port and industry. Once the precautionary speed zone area is marked on nautical charts and routing manuals, through notification to the International Maritime Organisation, speeds may well reach a safe target speed of 10 knots without laws and litigation.



Over the past few years fishers have become regular visitors to the black petrel colony of Great Barrier helping scientists tag and monitor the population and are now enthusiastically embracing and promoting seabird safe fishing practices throughout the fleet. Almost all the skippers of 75 boats longlining the gulf have completed seabird smart training.



The Salvation Army has provided the Rotoroa Island Trust a 99 year lease (backed by the Next Foundation). Its pine trees have passed through a shredder to mulch natives, mice have been removed, saddlebacks and stitchbirds released and Auckland Zoo is helping create a new conservation and education destination within a network of restored islands.



A marine focused community trust has seized the initiative and has begun recreating mussel reefs nearby – 3.5 million mussels deposited to date. The aquaculture industry has embraced the project; soon every mussel not destined for the supermarket could be put to restorative purpose.



Dairy farmers and fishers are part of the Sea Change Tai Timu Tai Pari Stakeholder Working Group, alongside mana whenua, environmental NGOs, industry and community advocates, tasked with preparing a spatial plan for the Hauraki Gulf. They have called for more evidence about the link between nutrients and the respiratory cycle of the Gulf, and of trawling and seabed habitat, and, in response, new research has been commissioned, and a shared enquiry generated.



Perhaps more importantly they are asking what can we do to create a healthy and productive Hauraki Gulf? What accommodations can we make? What part can we play in this shared and important endeavour?

The Hauraki Gulf Forum, Auckland Council, Waikato Regional Council, the Department of Conservation and Ministry of Primary industries and mana whenua are all sponsoring the independently-chaired process, committed to its breadth of enquiry and success. The emerging plan is just three months away.

As we cruise back in to our berth we a joined by a flotilla of boats and waterfront demonstrators protesting the extension of wharfs at the port.



So what is happening here?

Is the public telling us that filling in our harbours or felling century old kauri is not acceptable, whether it is legal or not. That plans and rules, or interpretations of them, are out of synch with Aucklanders feeling about place.

Are pockets of pragmatism emerging, recognising that regulation, while important, is unlikely to move fast enough to match the pressures exerted by growing populations or, stand up against those determined to exercise legal and lobbying power to exert their property rights in a market economy?

Are we seeing instead the co-creation of responsibility for the environment in remarkably quick time, emerging independently of plans and regulations?

What message does this send to those still geared to operate to meet the lowest acceptable target or standard allowed under the law – the conclusion in our 2014 report in relation to the performance of fisheries management?

If growing numbers of farmers and fishers recognise the need for a social licence to operate and are finding ways to stake their claims, what scale of benefit might arise? What if every marine park caught fish, and every marine park catchment product, was treated as if it possessed a quality and potential that deserves the greatest respect and value?

Can the Supercity activate the green growth agenda it strongly commits to in the Auckland Plan. What if it were to really exercise its procurement muscle? Would Wellington allow it to create a bespoke liveability solution?

I hear these questions a lot in the corridors of council.

The story of the Gulf that I have told has involved several tipping points.

Sadly, it includes the loss of whole ecosystems and their functionality. Conversely and encouragingly, it includes the restoration of some ecosystems and their functionality. It includes reconciliations between two peoples after injustices felt for more than a century.

Sea Change Tai Timu Tai Pari is an important prototype for the new Auckland Council. It is enabling a deep and inclusive conversation about nagging, complex, inter connected issues. It demonstrates the capacity within the new council to form alliances with central and other regional agencies, to evolve new governance, engagement and resourcing arrangements with tangata whenua, and to seek outcomes well beyond business as usual.

It reflects new leadership that says we can make this up as we go. That informal collaboration among those ready, willing and able is as good as it gets, and we are ready to start. That we will invest in quality conversations, provide resources necessary to dig deeply and widely. That we will listen, then act. It is creating a braid of influence where council, community leaders and stakeholders reinforce the behaviours necessary for success.

In this story, of an Auckland Unleashed, there is a sense of a new tipping point emerging ... of actors embracing the environment in which they operate: living as lovers – connected to thousands of others - in a special and achingly beautiful place.