

Okareka Mistletoe Restoration Project reaches a milestone

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On Saturday 19 March 2022 the Rotorua Botanical Society (RBS) held another workday at Okareka. It has been a while since I have reported on progress at our restoration site, so I thought it was time not only for an update but also to note that this year marks a significant milestone for the project as a whole. One which could have easily been overlooked.

On the 16 November 2002 RBS held its first ever workday at Okareka in the Lake Okareka Marginal Strip – the first time that RBS had got involved in a ‘hands on’ restoration project on the ground. It was at the same time as this that our joint partner, Rotorua branch of Forest and Bird were busy cutting and preparing bait station lines for their inaugural animal pest control operation (Cashmore 2003). The good news is that today, almost 20 years later, our project with Forest and Bird is still going strong with ongoing support from Bay of Plenty Regional Council and DOC over the entire life of the project to date. Reading the article I wrote in the RBS Newsletter (Cashmore 2003) from our inaugural workday, several common themes struck me. Firstly, the list of weed species we were tackling back then is almost the same as the list we are tackling today. The second point was the low turnout of volunteers, still a significant issue today.

In the first few years with funding from Bay of Plenty Regional Council’s Environmental Enhancement Fund, RBS was able to purchase plants and start our revegetation programme. With the core area largely completed, the last 15 or so years have focused on releasing those plantings from an ongoing weed threat, and treating current and emerging weed issues across the wider mistletoe area within both Tikitapu Scenic Reserve and the Lake Okareka Marginal Strip where we work.

Since planting was completed RBS have generally been holding two workdays per year – one in autumn and one in spring – focusing on plant releasing and broader weed control. Overall turnout has generally been relatively low since the project started, with only a handful of regular volunteers coming to assist. However, the good news is that as we have gradually managed to contain and reduce the larger weed infestations we are now largely down to a ‘maintenance regime’. This mostly entails rechecking known sites and areas of the reserve where we know new weed infestations are likely to establish and treating them.

As we have been in a maintenance phase for a long time now, this means that we can easily cover the key areas we need to check with a relatively small number of

volunteers over two mornings of workdays per year. To be fair, there is a bit of additional weed work undertaken by Landcare Okareka volunteers, in particular Mike Goodwin and Brian Law, as required from time-to-time, which does greatly help, and DOC annually treats the Old Man's Beard infestations in the reserve, which is a bigger, more focused job.

As with most animal or plant pest control programmes, if we stopped the project tomorrow, the plant and animal pests that RBS and Forest and Bird have been targeting, would rapidly reinvade and in just a few years we would rapidly see a decline in the ecosystem health of the reserve, particularly for the *Tupeia antarctica* mistletoe species that is the focus of the project, as well as the wider ecosystems. We realise that we have created an area now with a relatively low density of weed species, surrounded entirely by a semi-urban neighbourhood with generally a moderate- to high-density of significant ecological weed species, many of them bird-dispersed. This means that reinvasion of some species is relatively quick and rapid with fast growth and reproductive rates. The most persistent weed species which constantly reinvade would include ivy, cherries, jasmine, montbretia and wandering willie.

Getting back to our most recent workday in March 2022, we achieved something that we have struggled with the whole of the past 20 years as I noted above – to get a good turnout of volunteers. This year we have joined forces with Landcare Okareka which also work in Tikitapu and elsewhere around the village and wider catchment. By having a combined workday, we had 14 people in attendance with a strong number of locals who are members of Landcare Okareka. With that number of people all focused on weed control for a morning, we were able to more thoroughly cover the area and push further into areas that we seldom have time to check. This has substantially boosted our weed-busting efforts which we hope to emulate again with our second planned workday for 2022 on Saturday 15 October – once again combined with Landcare Okareka. Look forward to seeing you there!!

References

Cashmore, P.B. 2003. Update on Okareka mistletoe restoration project inaugural weed control workday. *Rotorua Botanical Society Newsletter* No. 39: 12-14.