

Nature and Wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Exploring the Connection

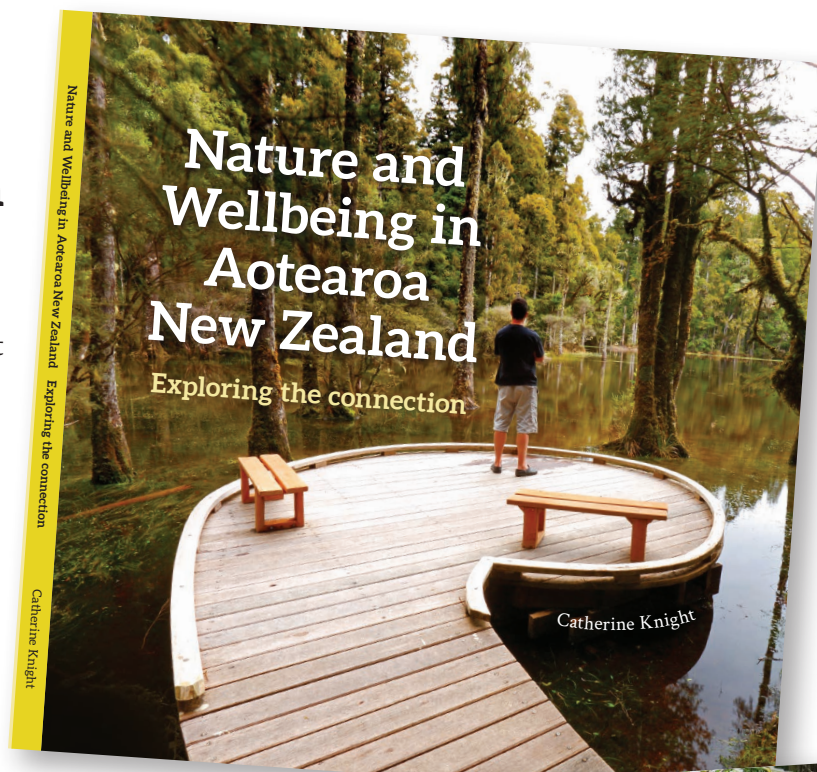
By Catherine Knight

We have never been more aware of the benefit of being out in nature, but how much quality time does the 'average' New Zealander spend enjoying the outdoors? While our national parks are places of spectacular wilderness, for many of us, these places are out of reach.

This ground-breaking book argues for the restoration of 'neighbourhood nature' – places that all New Zealanders can freely access, irrespective of socioeconomic or other factors. New Zealand's experience of the coronavirus pandemic underscores how important these local oases of nature are – and how vital they are to our wellbeing.

Richly illustrated throughout, this book tells the stories of a wide range of New Zealanders, who – either individually or through organised initiatives – have experienced the wellbeing benefits gained through connection with nature. Their stories are varied but each one is authentic, personal and moving.

Drawing on the latest scientific research and through these personal stories, Knight challenges us to contemplate a more nature-rich future.



Dr Catherine Knight is the award-winning author of four previous books: *Beyond Manapouri: 50 years of environmental politics in New Zealand* (Canterbury University Press, 2018), *Wildbore: A photographic legacy* (Totara Press, 2018), *New Zealand's Rivers: An environmental history* (Canterbury University

Press, 2016) and *Ravaged Beauty: An environmental history of the Manawatū* (Dunmore Press, 2014). In addition to her work as an environmental historian, Catherine is a policy and communications consultant and lives with her family on a farmlet in the Manawatū.

Marketing points:

- Timely focus on the benefits of being in nature – relevant to New Zealanders of all walks of life
- Attractive layout and design, richly illustrated throughout
- Engaging, easy-to-read narrative, suitable for intermediate school-age readers and older
- Likely to appeal to readers with an interest in health and wellbeing, nature and the outdoors, education and the environment.

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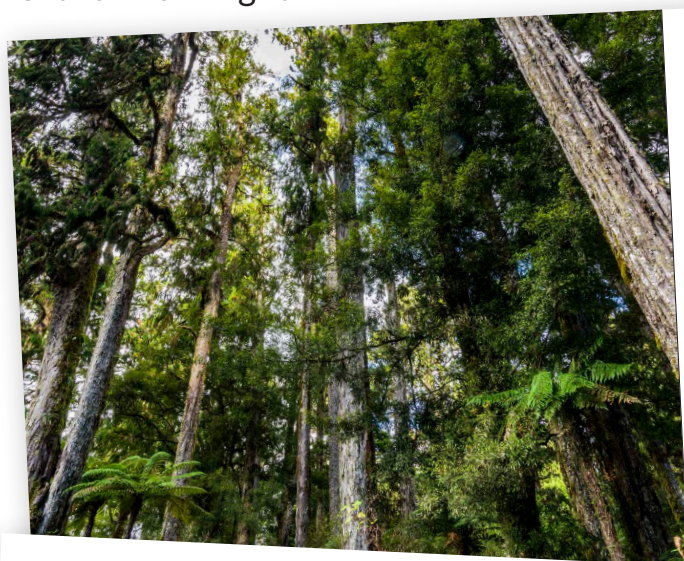


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By Catherine Knight



Totara Reserve in the Pohangina Valley, Manawatu, has become a special place for the author's daughter, Caitlyn – just as it was for the author herself as a youngster. (Catherine Knight)



Preface

I only remember visiting this place once but it left a deep impression on me. Over time, it slipped into the recesses of my memory, and I perhaps thought I had imagined it – so different was it from the landscape of my largely urbanised childhood. It was only many decades later, when I returned to the Manawatu as an adult, that I realised that this place did exist. It was known as Tōtara Reserve, located in the Pohangina

Valley, about 40 kilometres north-east of Palmerston North.

Other than this, the only other memory I have of being in 'real' forest as a child is a week-long tramp I took with my mother and her friends around Lake Waikaremoana in Urewera National Park, when I was perhaps 10 or 11 years old. No doubt there were other day walks as well, taken with family friends, but I have no memory of these.

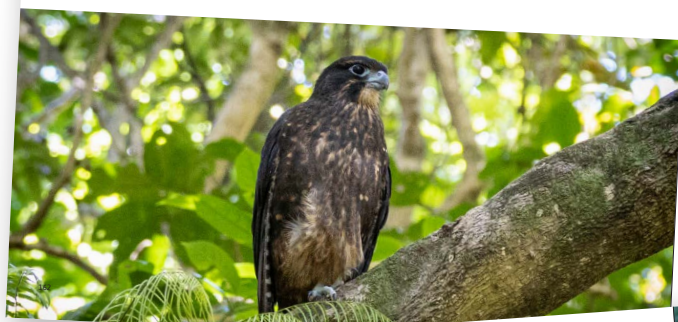
Facing page: A canopy of plenty. The canopy is mainly rimu, with a tree fern understorey. (Rob Suisted)

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Epilogue

On 28 February 2020, a woman who had recently returned from Iran became the first confirmed case of Covid-19 coronavirus in New Zealand. Most knew that it was only a matter of time before the virus, causing havoc throughout Asia and Europe, would reach New Zealand shores. Within days, more cases emerged and, although numbers were still relatively low, the government made the call to take an aggressive approach to combating the disease, instituting a four-stage Covid-19 alert system. On 26 March 2020, New Zealand

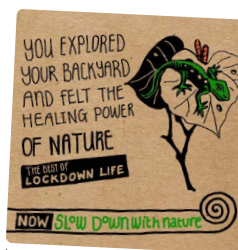
entered Level 4, the most restrictive of the four stages and widely referred to as 'lockdown'. The situation was unprecedented in recent history: all but those designated as 'essential workers', such as healthcare workers, supermarket staff and those providing essential services including waste collection and bus transport, were urged to stay at home and keep within small interpersonal 'bubbles'. Schools, universities, shops and restaurants closed, and flights – both international and domestic – were grounded.



For many New Zealanders, this was the beginning of a difficult and tumultuous time. Many people lost their jobs, businesses closed down and financial uncertainty ensued, with an unprecedented number of New Zealanders needing food parcels and other support. For others, however, after an initial adjustment period, the lockdown became an opportunity to spend time with family, to avoid long hours commuting on congested roads and instead work from home, to stay local and to enjoy neighbourhood nature.

Social media and mainstream media were brimming with stories of people enjoying nature in their neighbourhoods. While many of these reports of an upsurge of nature connection during lockdown were anecdotal, there is some limited data supporting it, too. iNaturalist, the international network supporting citizen science in the natural world, observed a surge in usage in New Zealand during lockdown: a 40 per cent increase compared to the same time the previous year.¹

Lockdown made many of us realise how important our neighbourhood green spaces are – for walking, cycling, meditating on the beauty of nature or just getting fresh air. And it also high-



In partnership with Envirohub Bay of Plenty, artist Liana Stupples created a series of visuals to represent 'the best of lockdown life'. (Liana Stupples)

Epilogue

lighted and accentuated inequities in our society. For those of us fortunate enough to live in the country or in the 'leafy suburbs', having more time to spend in local parks or walking along river or coastal walkways would have felt more like a gift than an imposition. But for those living in neighbourhoods with few places to enjoy nature or those who did not have the luxury of continuing their job at home (e.g. the country's

Facing page: During the coronavirus pandemic, reports of wildlife recovery proliferated, including wild goats in northern New Zealand. (Photo: Rob Suisted)

Nature and Wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand



Every good bush kindy should come with a well-appointed 'mud kitchen'. (Catherine Knight)

every day over four years, and Lucy followed the well-worn pathways to find clearings that would suit her needs perfectly.

The woodland area offers all the facilities required for a good bush school. There is a 'mud kitchen' area, which provides for the production of high-quality mud pies, cakes and biscuits; an 'indoor' area created with a tarpaulin hung, tent-like, on a rope; and a bush fire clearing, where a number of sawn logs form seats. This clearing has an adjoining 'ablutions' facility – a plastic bottle hanging from a tree branch, where children are able to wash their hands (learning at the same time how to use water sparingly).

On the day I visited, an unseasonably cold late-summer morning, Lucy presented to each of

the dozen or so preschool children, for many of whom forest school was a new experience, a leaf with eyes and a smiling mouth drawn with a black marker pen. (Lucy's regular weekly sessions are with the Waituna West Playcentre students, but the children at this session were from a visiting preschool.) The leaf became a companion as the children tentatively explored an unfamiliar environment. After morning tea, eaten on the sawn-log stools in the forest clearing, Lucy read the children the story 'Room on the Broom' by Julia Donaldson, with a truly impressive portrayal of the protagonist, the witch. After the story, Lucy suggested that the children make a broom like the witch's with sticks they could find in the forest. The sawhorse and child-size saws were also provided for stick-chopping purposes. As the children grew more comfortable in the bush environment, this structured activity gave way to more exploratory, child-led activities ranging from walks to 'cooking' in the mud kitchen to banging nails into tree stumps at the base clearing.

Lucy's only rule in her forest school sessions is 'to stay safe', emphasising that the only person who can ensure this is the individual child, through their own choices. Beyond that, the children have free range. She fully anticipated that there would be benefits for the children participating in the sessions. What came as more of a surprise was

Facing page: Children play in the stream at a bush kindy session, Waituna West. (Anthony Behrens)



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