

# All we wanted was to plant trees

An initially humble children's restoration project brought about a major shift in local and regional body attitudes along with national conservation spin-offs. Prior to 1990 Dunedin's Tomahawk Lagoons were held in low regard being seen more as a problem rather than as the valued asset they are regarded today.

Tomahawk Lagoons have always held my interest. As a 15 year old I was doing regular bird counts. In my twenties I represented Dunedin Forest and Bird on a group trying to counter lagoon siltation.



This fenced-off access-way leads through bush to the head of the No. 2 Lagoon

In 1990 I designed and fenced off, on behalf of the Otago Peninsula Walkers, a public access strip inside Paul and Sue Clark's farm boundary, from Peg 41 Road to the head of the No. 2 Lagoon. This was part of an agreement whereby the OPW undertook not to direct people down the lower end of this old road and through the centre of the farm. Prior to this there was no public access to the lagoons' wildlife management reserve which was confined to the water only. The locals treated the place with little respect.

Brett helping  
with track formation



A pleasant amenity area  
now exists around the head of the  
lagoon. Now heavy flax. The OPW  
built the bridge.





Sue, Calum and Paul Clark at the newly opened public access over their property. After the OPW's agreement with the Clarks, the DCC followed with signage. KDM

At the time I was co-ordinating on behalf of Forest and Bird what became the most active and adventurous children's Kiwi Conservation Club in the country. I could see a win-win; a winning project for the environment at Tomahawk, for public access, especially the local community, the land owners, and a restoration project for the KCC kids. The Clarks had failed to get QEII Trust interest in protection back in 1989; as wetland did not fit within their then criteria.

We now had a safe place to plant, or so we thought. The late Fergus Mathieson, the landowner adjoining the Clark's land at the head of the No. 2 Lagoon, threw into doubt our 'safe place'.

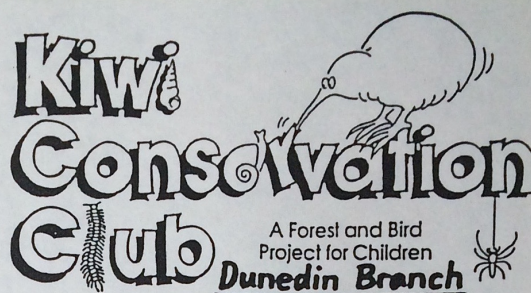
Sixty KCC children and adults attended the first planting day on 14 April 1991. Patsy and our two sons, Brett (10) and Mark (8) were there. In June 1992 Mathieson's cattle were wading around Paul Clark's internal fences and eating the plantings. Forest and Bird had to apply considerable pressure on the Department of Conservation to fix the damaged fence on their section of land. Unfortunately some of the fence was rebuilt on Mathieson's land which led to later problems.

*The Dunedin Kiwi Conservation Club's Tomahawk Lagoons Vegetation and Wildlife Habitat Restoration project received the Best Voluntary Group Award at the Otago Regional Council's 1995 Environment Awards.*

The Clarks reported that they found their neighbour reluctant to do anything about 2.5 metre high gorse on his side of the boundary. In June 1992 a fire swept across. The new access track allowed the Dunedin Fire Service access to save a considerable area of the Clarks' bush. However sheep were able to get through the fire-damaged fence which had to be repaired without any input from Mathieson. Cattle then forced the fence. Mathieson's reported reaction when asked to assist was, "You prove that my cattle are eating your trees." On Guy Faulks night 1994 gorse fires again broke out, being well away from any public festivities that night.

## KCC Tales

### From Tomahawk



Brett and Mark went wading and playing in the water and reeds in January. We're safe. No sharks and big nasties here. However on getting out of the lagoon they discovered that they were being 'decorated' by 30 leeches between them! (horror but no harm)

On our April trip to the lagoon, guess who put too much marking dye in the poison for the gorse and barberry stumps? At the end of the day the slopes were flashing bright pink spots.

Oliver S and his Dad can handle or arrange anything. Dad was up a pine tree with a chain-saw. Oliver lowered the branches with a rope. Later they were working as a team to launch their two boats for the KCC'ers to use.(in the lagoon) Yes they can arrange anything. Out came the yacht. Still no wind. Up went the sail... and...along came the wind!

It's not only oldies that do absent minded things. My family was painting the (vehicle) barrier fence. On being given a well earned glass of drink, one of the boys must have thought he was still holding his paint pot. Guess where the brush went.

Several boys were nearly flattened by huge chunks of gorse rolling down the slope. And who were accidentally sending them off? A couple of keen girls with power packed sawing arms! Hey go easy on us mere males, girls.

Some real muddy, roughed up KCC'ers burst out of the scrub and onto the bottom of the Tomahawk Track. When asked if the track was really that muddy they replied, "No it isn't. But we found this really neat short cut."

One of the boys found a wounded duck that had flown into the safety of the (Tomahawk) Wildlife Refuge. It was taken to the RSPCA to see if it could be helped.

Electric fences can be fun. The kids found that by touching the wire with a long bit of fresh grass you could get a fun tingle. Even better you could grab someone else and pass it on. Eventually even the mums tried it. It was the dads that were the "scaredy-cats!"

All the KCC planters had gone. It was dusk and I (Ken M) was relaxing amongst our new plantings near the water edge. Suddenly a little 'football' with short fluttering wings flew past me only a metre above the ground. On reaching some raupo it just stopped in mid air and dropped into the rushes. It was a rarely seen swamp bird called a crake. Very few people have ever actually seen one flying. What a thrill for me! I could just imagine the crake saying, "Thanks for improving my habitat today, KCC'ers."

As a result of Dunedin Forest and Bird financial support the Clarks gained a QEII Trust protective bush covenant over their No.2 Lagoon shores. The Conservation Corps, under stalwart David Blair, put in 1.5 km of new fencing.

Through the QEII representative Forest and Bird offered to cover fencing costs if Mathieson clears his side of the boundary for ten metres. After initial discussion Mathieson avoids further contact. Five fires are lit over four days with no attempt to put in a firebreak. I find that DoC's Fire and Emergency phone lines and back-ups are unattended. (7.15-8pm 16/11/1995). As I was concerned that more fires would occur, before it rains the next day, I stated at 8pm most firmly to DoC that, "I have to be out of town the next day and do not expect to come back to a burnt out ruin." Next day DoC are stunned that Principal Rural Fire Officer Ross Hamilton had issued Fergus Mathieson with a fire permit without ensuring that a boundary firebreak was in place. The fire permit was revoked. A series of three vandalistic attacks occurred on older plantings.

In January 1996 I asked a local DoC officer for information regarding stoat control. The reply was a blunt, "You'd just be wasting your time." On sounding out the same officer over possible reintroductions of native bush birds to the lagoons his retort was, "It'll be over my dead body. I'll do everything I can to oppose that."

In 1997 while running a restoration seminar in Christchurch a participant told me that he was put onto the same Dunedin DoC officer as a way of contacting me. He had heard of my work on Quarantine Island. Apparently the reply was, "It's hardly worth contacting him. He's just wasting his time." As a consequence there was an eleven month delay before the Christchurch people made contact and came to meet me in Dunedin. This meeting was a major factor in the formation of the New Zealand Ecological Restoration Network to which I became a trustee and adviser.

In June the National Forest and Bird Conservation Director met with the Dunedin Branch prior to him meeting the Otago Regional Conservator. I raised the national problem of DoC's inability to handle community based initiatives, especially fauna reintroductions. Lack of support by Waikato DOC killed widely supported community based initiatives as apparently they didn't know how to deal with them.

Four months later in Dunedin we had a productive meeting with the local conservancy who said they would support us in our efforts to restore non-threatened invertebrates, reptiles and birds to suitable community based projects. I then visited Wellington to knock rather firmly on top-level DOC doors. The boss DOC man snapped at me as he scuttled away down the corridor, "Go talk to your local conservator." However I soon got a personal permit to translocate rifleman to Quarantine Island. This was probably a first for a NGO individual or group and would make the passage much easier for others.

Dunedin Teen Conservation Club assembled and installed rifleman nesting boxes at one of its donor site populations. See the 'Quarantine Island Journey' chapter. *KDM*



The DCC Principal Rural Fire Officer admitted that he often didn't know where conservation area, QEII covenant and Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust boundaries were. I told him that it was part of his job to compile a land status folio or map especially when he issued fire permits. Only DoC can issue permits within one kilometre of protected land. The fire officer had just issued another fire permit to Mathieson. The officer admitted that he saw Mathieson about once a week through their common interest in horse racing. Locals informed me that members of the Rural Fire Service were grazing their horses on Mathieson land. Paul Clark later told me that the Officer said some 'unsavoury' things about me and that, "If he (Clark) is so concerned over boundary gorse, why doesn't he buy the land from Mathieson."

Great news came in August 1997. Paul rang to say that two other covenants at the bigger No.1 Lagoon had come through. My Dunedin Teen Conservation (DTC) group had been working there.

Paul lodged a complaint with the Otago Regional Council regards their Noxious Weed Officer's non-performance over the boundary clearances. Apparently there had been 'lots of duck shoving and passing the buck.' The Dunedin City Council CEO replies that, "Mr Mathieson has been instructed on numerous occasions that he must obtain fire permits from the Department of Conservation."

In September DoC notifies me that they will take responsibility for fire boundary security and enforcement at the Tomahawk Lagoons. They had this legislative power all along.



Sue Clark and me releasing peripatus into newly covenanted bush at No. 1 Lagoon. Dunedin Teen Conservation had prepared the site in advance. They had located this new species of peripatus at the No. 2 Lagoon. QEII Trust

In October Mathieson does limited boundary clearance. Then, in a secluded area, a dozen recently planted trees on the Clark property were discovered to have been thrown well out into the lagoon. I notify the South Dunedin Community Police Constable as I felt that actions were going to escalate. After making enquires he goes cool on doing anything.

Paul and I got the distinct impression that the noxious weed people had no real interest in fire risk and that the fire risk people have no real interest in noxious weeds. There was a general lack of co-operation and communication.

From the Otago Daily Times 15/12/97

“The New Zealand Fire Service answered the following calls at the weekend. Saturday: 12.19am, Oregon St, Dunedin.”

This midnight fire was right on the covenant boundary on the steep section where there had been no clearing of gorse. This was two weeks after the ORC's final boundary clearance notification. At 2pm on Monday the fire flared up again as temperatures soared into the 30s with a wind shift to the north. We could have lost the lot.

Thus began a week of making myself most unpopular by hounding DoC, ORC, DCC and others into doing their previously-agreed jobs. The ORC claimed they didn't realise that the area concerned was part of the covenant despite an earlier all-party site inspection. DoC had issued a fire permit for further up the gully despite the continuous gorse to the covenant boundary.