

Chapter Sixteen

Quarantine Island adventure

This island in the middle of Otago Harbour served as a quarantine station from 1863 until 1924. It is currently a recreation reserve administered by DOC and partly leased to the St Martins Island Community.

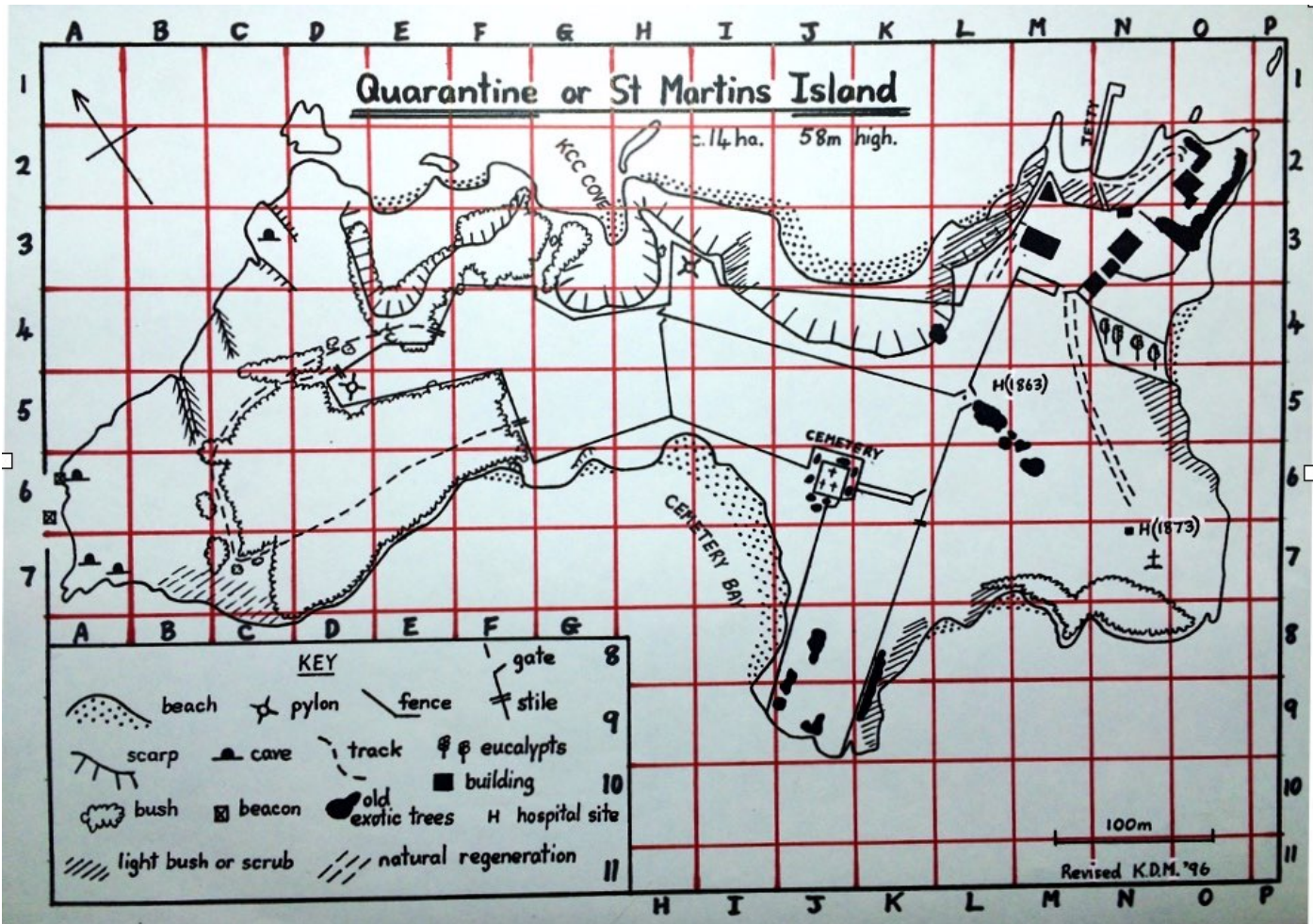
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Abandon hope
all ye who
enter here

If you don't care for the environment

If you don't care for the environment





KEN MASON

Dunedin Forest and Bird members excavate the site for a penguin nesting box on Quarantine Island in Otago Harbour.

The importance of regular watering for newly planted trees is a trial when replanting offshore islands which frequently lack easily accessible supplies. Dunedin Forest and Bird learnt this lesson early when it began work on a small island in Otago Harbour, known variously as Quarantine Island, Kamautaurua, or St Martin's Island. The 14-hectare island is exposed to both the cold winds of the south and to very drying northerlies. As part of their solution, members of Forest and Bird's Teen Conservation group from Dunedin built a rainwater collection system to supply a pond where birds and native animals can get access to much needed water. Overflows are stored in barrels for watering trees in summer.

A major effort has gone into creating protected places where a micro-climate allows the original forest-type to be replanted — these species include totara, miro, matai, pokako, kowhai, ribbonwood, coprosmas and fierce lancewood. Generally, the idea is to establish the full sequence of the island's former environment, from forest grasses, to tree ferns, and coastal canopy trees.

Quarantine Island is a recreation reserve with half of it leased since 1958 by the St Martins Island Community which not only uses it as a retreat for religious groups but encourages stays by schools and other groups. Ken Mason of Dunedin Forest and Bird, with his group of teenage conservation volunteers and Kiwi Conservation Club members, have worked here since 1989, extending revegetation out from a the original fenced-off block of 1.5 hectares which has forest in very good condition. Today, just over

seven hectares is being revegetated. A vision of reintroducing birds, reptiles and insects is taking shape this summer with the introduction of the rifleman. Nesting boxes to help the birds have already been installed. The St Martins Island Community have been so pleased with the success of the revegetation that it has released more of the island for restoration and formed a joint committee with Dunedin Forest and Bird to further develop the project.

Techniques to help trees during times of drought have also forged a Forest and Bird link with Moturata, an island at the mouth of the Taieri River in Otago. You can walk the kilometre there, carefully, at low tide, yet the island has colonies of petrels (muttonbirds or titi), and little blue penguins. Much of the island is Maori-owned, with the balance in conservation estate. The local Maori whanau has been working on a replanting programme.

The barest patches of the island's surface, where the underlying peat is exposed, have been covered in seeding manuka brush helicoptered to the island and tied down to establish new shrubland. The recovery has been striking with even the worst-exposed patches now having a covering at least of grass. The whanau has further established plantings of ngaio, broadleaf, cabbage tree and southern rata.

In February 1999 these plantings were under severe stress as drought gripped the whole east coast of Otago. The teenage conservation group of Dunedin Forest and Bird approached the whanau to see if techniques developed on Quarantine Island could help save the plantings. Eighty litres of water were carried to Moturata by teenagers and, with a water penetrant agent, applied to the trees. With the penetrant, every subsequent drop of

rain, or applied water, finds its way to the roots of the young trees.

'The experience of working with the whanau has been very valuable to us,' says Ken Mason of Dunedin Forest and Bird. 'This project has been a great opportunity to share restoration techniques and views of conservation.'

Generally, island initiatives such as these provide a practical outlet for people who join Forest and Bird so they can do something, personally, for nature. They also attract and involve a much wider community to work for conservation.

Not surprisingly, the schools and community groups which join in restoring islands soon begin to take a proprietorial interest in their special piece of New Zealand. Often the result is the formation of a dedicated trust to work in a specific place, raising plants and funds, and liaising with the Department of Conservation which so often manages these lands and their threatened species. In some places, local restoration groups have completely taken over the care of an offshore island. Yet, often, Forest and Bird involvement has been critical in initiating, and advancing the restoration programme.

Without such help, the Department of Conservation would be hard pressed to keep its restoration work up to present levels. Volunteer work on our islands is really making a difference in improving habitats and the chances for survival for many threatened species.

GORDON ELL is editor of *Forest & Bird*.

Young members of Forest and Bird in Dunedin have led the programme to revegetate Quarantine Island. Shelter and water have been special concerns in establishing new forest.



KEN MASON

Revised K.D.M. '96

Quarantine or St Martins Island

c.14 ha. 58m high.

