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# EARTH CONSCIOUS





Mark Meredith explores one of New Zealand's most-loved tourist attractions: The Waipoua forest in Northland, home of Tane Mahuta, the largest living kauri tree in New Zealand.

## Page 12

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### On our Cover

Endangered stitchbird singing at Tiritiri Matangi island bird sanctuary, a conservation success story.  
Photo by Mark Meredith

## CONTENTS

- 2 From the Editor
- 3 Caribbean economies of climate adaptation study results received
- 8 Young Voices
- 9 Guyana and Norway establish REDD + investment
- 10 Power to the people
- 12 A lost world
- 22 New UNFCCC Executive President lays out Cancun challenges
- 24 Caribbean Updates
- 30 Indigenous communities in Central America
- 34 Time to take adaptation seriously
- 36 Global Watch
- 40 Action on climate change will shape the future of poor countries
- 42 Family Values  
  Numbering out
- 44 Green Living  
  Greener pastures... are they?
- 46 Heavenly Himachal
- 48 Global trends in green energy 2009
- 50 Books
- 52 Letters

**Earth Conscious  
begins year 3 with the  
9th issue this month.**



# Power to the People

by Mark Meredith

**Editor's note: The following two articles are written by Mark Meredith, a writer and photographer who lives on Auckland's North Shore.**

**P**eople power has triumphed in two countries very dear to me.

In the Caribbean republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the “rainbow” coalition of the People’s Partnership swept to power in May with a thumping majority. Kamla Persad-Bissessar became the country’s first female Prime Minister, ending the 10-year reign of Patrick Manning’s People’s National Movement and, it must be hoped, the assault on the environment.

Manning’s administration oversaw a ruinous downwards spiral in the condition of the country’s environment, displaying no understanding whatsoever that it was entwined with the fortune of the nation’s future. Sustainability was sacrificed on the altar of industrialisation – whatever it cost, in gas dollars or hectares of scorched earth.

Rainforest was flattened for industrial estates, the Northern Range ecosystem opened to a free-for-all for quarry operators to supply the raw materials to feed the frenzy

of ostentatious development in downtown Port of Spain and heavy industry in south Trinidad. Fires raged in the dry season; flooding reached new heights in the wet. The institutions that might have mitigated the worst excesses were emasculated. The Environmental Management Authority (EMA) became a rubber stamp in all but name, while the Environment Ministry morphed into an insignificant rump within the ironically titled Ministry of Planning. Ironic because there was no planning; the National Physical Development Plan long tossed in the garbage.

Reversing decades of indifference to the environment is a hard ask, for any government. But in T&T’s case it’s now or never. Carrying on as before is simply not an option. Yale University’s 2010 Environmental Performance Index shows that in the Caribbean only Haiti is in a worse state. Right now the country’s most urgent environmental priority, by some distance, is reversing the destruction of the Northern Range forests, and those of

Charlotteville and Main Ridge in Tobago where siltation is damaging coral reefs. Quarrying must stop now; tree planting start, and protection of these areas funded and enforced.

Strike now, while the nation is still excited by change: the People’s Partnership also swept the local government elections in July. There’s a genuine opportunity for change, and hopeful noises are emerging. The coalition indicated in its manifesto that it understood the need for a national physical plan, and promised to review the National Environmental Policy while reintroducing the Planning and Development of Land Bill. It seems – fingers crossed – they also understand that, with the need to diversify the economy away from oil and gas industries, tourism could have a role to play.

The new government has set the right tone. One of Kamla Persad-Bissessar’s first acts was to launch a “Clean Up and Beautify” Trinidad and Tobago campaign. How long it will last is anyone’s guess, given the ingrained and persistent Trinidadian trait of littering.

But pride in your surroundings is the first step on the green road to salvation. Ideally, the next step would be the implementation of a household recycling industry. This would generate employment, a less wasteful attitude, and a better quality of life derived from living somewhere that's appreciated, looked after and respected.

Here in Auckland, where the council supplied over 370,000 plastic wheelie bins to ratepayers for recycling plastic, glass and tin, you will find signs in its parks and reserves, saying *Tiakina tenei takiwaa. Haria au para ki te kainga*. "Look after this environment. Take your rubbish home."

You'd be simply too ashamed to hurl your KFC box out of a car window in most of Aotearoa. And, ultimately, that's the level of guilt, or personal responsibility, that the People's Partnership needs to instill within the people of T&T. So that, one day, it will be natural for Trinbagonians to take to the streets for the cause of conservation and their unique environment.

And unique is how many Kiwis would regard *their* environment. In July they showed it. People power, as practised in New Zealand, saw another significant victory for conservation. The demonstration in May against plans to mine conservation land, which we reported on in our last issue, scared off John Key's Government. Rattled by the numbers of marchers



*Trinidad's Northern Range forests are in danger of being wiped out.*

in Auckland, and more than 37,000 public submissions and 50,000 signatures against mining, along with the political risk involved being deemed as "too great", Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee beat a complete retreat.

Not only would the proposed Schedule 4 land (the most valuable conservation land, afforded the highest level of protection) be exempt from mining, but another 12,400ha of land would be added to the Schedule 4 pile. And any future national parks and marine reserves would be untouchable, too. Environmental groups were ecstatic. Green Party co-leader Metiria Turei said "New Zealand's 100% Pure brand and our tourism markets are worth far more than mining in our National Parks could ever be."

Another environmental controversy is looming, though, also with Mr Brownlee's department: the government's invitation for exploration tenders for deep sea drilling off New Zealand. Greenpeace activists were filmed emerging from Auckland's Muriwai Beach apparently covered in oil – really sugar and cocoa powder – to promote a campaign against drilling in places they say are twice the depth of Deepwater Horizon.

Will this campaign against new oil, twinned with "no mining Pure NZ", succeed in driving New Zealand towards a clean energy future? People power can achieve surprising outcomes, especially here in Aotearoa where Kiwis' passion for what they have today stems from losing so much a long time ago.

# A LOST WORLD

By Mark Meredith



*Kauris are second in size only to the giant Californian redwoods*

“Evidence of wrong decisions made by those who have gone before us is so strongly apparent . . . it is up to our generation to try and put things back into balance again.”

— A caption at the Waipoua Kauri Forest Visitor Centre in Northland, New Zealand.

In July I went to explore an area of New Zealand that suffered the deforestation Trinidad and Tobago and other tropical countries face right now. Loss was the overwhelming feeling I left with. Something quite amazing had existed here, but it was taken away by the generations that came before us.

The Waipoua forest in Northland is famous as the home of Tane Mahuta (“Lord of the Forest”), the largest living kauri tree in New Zealand and one of the country’s most-loved tourist attractions. Tane Mahuta is estimated to have sprung from seed 2,000



*Tane Mahuta, Lord of The Forest, 2,000 years old and still going strong*

*Photographs by Mark Meredith*

years ago. Its massive trunk has a girth of 13.8 metres (45 feet) and its first branches start at a height of 18 metres (59 feet). With a trunk volume of 245 cubic metres, it dwarfs the 2.5–3 cubic metres of the average pine tree when felled at maturity.

Kauri are the most ancient of all of New Zealand's trees, and among the mightiest anywhere in the world. Standing next to Tane Mahuta is humbling enough, but compared to some of his long lost relatives he's a baby. The largest kauri ever accurately measured was the great "Kairaru" from the same region, three times the size of Tane Mahuta and believed to be 4,000 years old when it was destroyed by fire in the 1890s.

The Lord of the Forest has been lonely a long time. In the Waipoua Visitor Centre, and the excellent Kauri Museum near Dargaville, a distressing history is displayed. The demise of the mighty kauri forests that once covered the northern half of New Zealand's North Island is told in grainy old photos of men towing away trees the size of Nelson's Column.

The kauri's wide, straight, magnificent trunk, devoid of branches until the very top crown, was perfect and of unsurpassed quality. It was logged insatiably for spars and masts for ships; for railway sleepers; and to build Auckland's houses and Maori war canoes until... it was almost too late. In 1843 six sawmills existed. By 1868 there were 93 mills. Much of the wood was exported, with kauri becoming country's first export industry.

A display of maps in Waipoua is shocking in its indictment of exploitation and greed. The forest cover of New Zealand is shown before the arrival of Europeans, much of it swathed in beards of green. The map of post-European settlement to the present day is limited to stubby blotches and acne-like rashes. Vast tracts of forest were burned to clear land for pasture in an orgy of appalling waste; often no attempt being made to salvage the timber first. It was a pattern repeated over most of New Zealand. Today, kauri forest exists only in scattered pockets of



*A regenerating kauri forest at Warkworth near Auckland*

the northern North Island, such as Waipoua and nearby Trounson Kauri Park and other areas of Northland. Further south, significant areas include the Waitakere and Hunua Ranges near Auckland, and the Coromandel Peninsula.



The European settlers were accelerating a transformation of the country's landscape and biodiversity that had begun in earnest about 1,000 years previously with the arrival of the first Māori. At that time 85 per cent of Aotearoa was forest. Its trees were giants, and some of the birds that lived among them were giants, too. The moa, a huge flightless bird standing 6 feet above the ground from the base of the neck, was hunted to extinction within a few hundred years – all that meat, there for the taking; feathers for clothes, and bones for ornaments and weapons. Haast's Eagle, a giant and terrifying bird that preyed on the 11 species of moa, disappeared with them. Enormous areas of forest were burned by Māori to drive out moa and clear land for agriculture, and the fires would rage wildly out of control. By the time Europeans arrived, New Zealand's forest cover had declined to 50 per cent.

The moa and Haast's Eagle were just two of 57 bird species, or 42 per cent of all New Zealand's terrestrial birds, to have become extinct since human settlement. While habitat loss was a major factor, the real culprit was introduced predators. Eighty million years of

isolation meant life here had evolved along an entirely different path to the rest of the world. It had become a land of birds, with no predators to worry about except avian ones. Some birds lost the need to fly, or became too fat to do so, or nested on the ground, unconcerned.

About 2,000 years ago, the first Polynesians arrived, bringing with them the *kiore*, or Pacific rat, as a food source. The humans did not survive initial settlement, but the *kiore* did. Over the next 1,000 years, until the arrival of the Māori, it is believed these rats may have formed huge rampaging armies that swept through the forests, destroying the unique avifauna as they went.

Māori brought more rats and their dogs, known as *kurī*, which were used to hunt birds, and fire. The Europeans followed with cargoes of disasters that they unloaded upon the environment: possums, cats, goats, sheep, rabbits and deer. In an effort to contain the resulting rabbit plague, stoats and weasels were introduced, but instead they decimated defenceless native species like the kiwi.

Today, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually on pest control — especially on

the 30 million forest-devouring possums — and, as anyone who has passed through Auckland airport can testify, biosecurity procedure is an education in itself.

The Department of Conservation spends much money and resources on reintroducing threatened birds into environments that have been cleared of pests, like Tiritiri Matangi Island in the Hauraki Gulf near Auckland. There, among the regenerating forest areas where endangered birds have been reintroduced and are flourishing, you can hear a dawn chorus you won't hear anywhere else.

Sadly, that's because a walk in New Zealand's forests today, from the mountainous rainforests of Fiordland and Westland in the South Island, to the Coromandel Peninsula and Waipoua in the North Island, is one undertaken in an almost eerie silence, as unnatural as its cause. When James Cook sailed around New Zealand, his botanist on board, Joseph Banks, wrote of his astonishment at the "deafening" bird choruses he had experienced. Today's choirs whisper in the branches where once they rang with glorious harmonies.

The sounds that Tane Mahuta and his massive relatives nearby, the 2nd and 3rd-largest kauris, are more likely to hear are the exclamations of wonder from puny humans below, craning their necks in disbelief. But for how much longer?

A deadly new threat to the magnificent kauri has emerged. One of New Zealand's leading environmental NGOs, Forest & Bird, warn that "Kauri dieback" is having a "devastating effect on our giants of the forest". They say that once kauri trees are infected they will die, because there is no known treatment. Tane Mahuta himself is threatened.

Kauri dieback is a microscopic fungus-like plant pathogen (a disease-causing agent) that only affects kauri. Known as PTA, *Phytophthora* taxon Agathis, it causes yellowing of foliage, loss of leaves, canopy thinning, and dead branches. An insidious death, affected trees can also develop lesions that bleed resin, extending

to the major roots and sometimes girdling the trunk as a "collar rot". PTA can kill trees and seedlings of all ages. It first came to light in 2008 and is believed to be related to a chestnut pathogen from Korea.

PTA is spread through the soil, by water movement, by people and animals, and plant-to-plant transmission through underground root-to-root contact. Signs at the entrance to Tane Mahuta's domain warn you to stay on the paths — Kauri dieback is reported to have been detected in nearby trees.

Auckland Regional Council was so concerned about the potential threat to the iconic kauri that it has created a website to publicise the problem, and set up a response team so that members of the public can report sightings of infected trees. In the Waitakere Ranges near Auckland, walkers must disinfect their footwear before entering the forest. It seems a particularly apt 21st century threat to the ancient kauri, this creeping disease.



**Mark Meredith is a writer and photographer who lives on Auckland's North Shore. A former environmental journalist for the *Trinidad Express*, he also produced a Caribbean natural history and environmental magazine called *Samaan*. See (<http://issuu.com/meredith/docs/samaan2>)**

"If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the Earth before we ask them to save it."

David Sobel



The Blue Mountains National Park and World Heritage Site in Australia,  
viewed from The Three Sisters.

Photograph by Mark Meredith

***~ The poetry of the earth is never dead. ~  
John Keats***