

A Northland retreat is in harmony with nature, writes **Lindy Davis**

Standing at the peak of Ohuatahi looking across a valley blanketed in native bush, the air is filled with the soothing sound of nature at work.

The rhythmic drone of cicadas is interspersed with birdsong. It is a far cry from the run-down cattle farm that once dominated the valley.

This unique piece of Northland began its transformation 14 years ago when the McDonald family farm was sold.

An altruistic vision to give back to nature saw Dr John Craig and his family transform a depleted piece of land into an extraordinary ecological sanctuary.

After a decade of hard work their dream has been realised and you can't help but sense its profound spiritual importance.

"Tahi" takes its name from the maunga (mountain) and Maori pa "Ohua Tahi", meaning "First place of plenty".

The reincarnation of the 280ha Pataua North farm to a fully sustainable eco-retreat, supporting habitat restoration, community partnerships and wildlife protection is at the core of the Craigs' philosophy.

In an attempt to encourage biodiversity, they planted 300,000 native seedlings, introduced a pest control programme and recreated wetlands that are now home to a variety of native birds, paradise ducks, herons and bitterns.

Owner Suzan Craig spent years observing her father, conservation biologist and landscape ecologist Dr John Craig, as he advised on the landscape design for Tiritiri Matangi sanctuary.

Reserve manager Evan Karaka joined the Tahi sanctuary seven years ago, largely to manage pest control. He says it's a privilege to be part of Tahi's transformation.

"I take my lead from what nature teaches me and I've really learnt who I am here."

The concept of ecological conservation was completely foreign to him, having come from a background working dry stock units and dairy farming in the Waikato.

"It takes real vision to create something like this. People talk a lot about conservation, but when you come across a family like the Craigs — they really walk the walk. Every plant we put in the ground is a stitch in the fabric of that korowai [cloak]."

When the Craigs started the pest control programme there were initially around 14 species of native birds and now there are more than 70, with piwakawaka (fantail), toutouwai (North Island robin) and tauhou (silveryeye or wax eyes) feeding or perched in trees across the property.

There are four unique walks at Tahi. The Forest trail meanders under a vast canopy of nikau, puriri, griselinias, kahikatea and karaka.

Bicycles are available for exploring the sanctuary and private horse-riding, kayaking, fishing and surf lessons can be arranged.

The concept of Tahi is one of guardianship, not ownership. Suzan Craig attributes its growth to the drive and passion of those involved.

"My father John . . . and many others, have spent enormous amounts of time creating this sanctuary. I look at Tahi as a collaborative project, with many contributing to its success."

She is aware that in order to preserve Tahi they must diversify commercially, but will not allow anything that comes at the expense of the land.

"Tahi stands for what it is. We don't wait for government hand-outs and we fund any conservation and community projects ourselves."

Her father was a hobby bee-keeper and ran a few hives when they initially acquired the



Lowdown

PUBLIC OPEN DAY

Saturday March 24.
Tahi cafe open. Guided walking tours available.
Beekeeping/honey house and pa site tours.

INFORMATION

Retreat accommodation cottages — Hiwi, Mara and Tara.

Tahi, 1824 Pataua North Rd,

Whangarei

Ph: 09 4360082

info@tahihoney.co.nz

tahinz.co.nz



From top: Lindy Davis at Tahi resort; Hiwi cottage; Tahi beekeepers; Tahi resort.

Pictures / Lindy Davis, Jackie Meiring, Gatherum Collectif, supplied

property. Tahi's manuka honey business has developed into a success story.

"I grew up with bees outside my bedroom window and remember the honey being so delicious," Suzan says.

Jon and Lesley Vincent joined the company in 2012 to help widen the project and include a comprehensive honey extraction and processing plant. Tahi is affiliated with several local schools, offering a "Bee friends" and "Hives-in-schools" programme.

Craig says the honey business provides a large proportion of funding for the sanctuary, with profits going back into conservation and community projects. It was also recently singled out by the United Nations in recognition of a small business with a strong ethical message and progress toward sustainable development goals.

"The award acknowledges that although we are a small community in New Zealand, we are creating a sustainable honey business and footing it with the best in eco-tourism. It's rewarding to know we can inspire others well beyond our boundaries."

Tahi's commitment doesn't stop at the land. The original farm buildings, constructed from weatherboard and sandstone, have been

faithfully restored and the cottages' renovated interiors have a feeling of relaxed comfort.

Handmade cabinetry, a wood burning fireplace and an assortment of Polynesian art and driftwood line the walls. There is a barbecue and comfortable outdoor furniture on the terrace.

The cafe is open for breakfast and lunch, but guests are required to self-cater for evening meals.

A grove of nikau palms and punga ferns line the pathway to Hiwi cottage, perched on the hill overlooking Pataua Beach and the Poor Knights. Deep purple hebe creeps up a concrete wall where a piwakawaka scopes for insects.

The property uses bore and tank water, composts organic material and recently established an integrated recycling centre — and the properties are carbon neutral.

Tahi is proof that economic necessity doesn't need to be at odds with the environmental imperative, says Suzan.

"My overall feeling is that New Zealand can be a leader in biodiversity," she says.

"It's something to be celebrated, that we can create something so unique in a small beach community north of Whangarei, and leave behind a positive footprint."