

KAIMAI RANGES 20 YEARS OR MORE ON - SOME IMPRESSIONS

Graeme Jane

During 1979/80 I supervised an animal/vegetation survey in the Kaimai Ranges, including a vegetation survey on slip areas. During 1980-83 I studied the vegetation processes on the higher parts of the ranges, particularly Mt Te Aroha, the clearings at Te Rereatukahia (Te Rere for short) and Te Hunga (the high plateau area to the south). First some history.

Goats originating from releases during the mining days and later farm management practices, were widespread and numerous by the late 1940's. Deer were released at Mt Te Aroha about 1920 but perhaps because of goat competition remained uncommon. An illegal liberation in the 1940's in the Aongatete area was more successful and by 1979 the population was locally well established and old logging roads were regularly used for spotlighting.

Vegetation damage, mainly from goats, was very severe by the 1940's especially on the slips and along the range top. Aerial photos taken in 1943 show the Te Rere area covered in forest or scrub but by 1960 it was bare (now locally known as Baldy). Aerial photos also show slips increased dramatically after 1946 and further between 1960 and 1973 in response to periods of severe storms and the goat impact.

In 1948 goat control began. By 1979 the area was subject to intensive aerial and ground based goat control which by the mid 1980's resulted in the goats being restricted to two or three small areas adjacent to properties where goats continued to be used for "weed control".

During the 1979 survey, little goat or deer sign was seen along the higher parts of the ranges and in many areas faecal pellets were not seen. Regeneration was recent, evident and well underway at low altitudes. Photopoints which were retaken at the time showed

spectacular changes. On the highest slips it was obviously progressing more slowly and most slips were still covered by well browsed vegetation.

At the same time the main North-South track was cut across the Te Hunga Plateau and each day the impact of travel over recently cut sections was very evident. Areas of moss and peat rapidly turned to mud-holes knee to waist deep. Needless to say the track was closed and relocated within a few years.

In 2000 I moved to Tauranga. In the subsequent years I have made several trips to old haunts, noticing many changes. Perhaps the most visible change has been the disappearance of the Te Rere bald which used to be so obvious from places such as Katikati.

The purchase of digital camera in 2003 prompted me to load the camera with a copy of a photo taken on Te Rere in 1982 and attempt to rephotograph the site. The place was easily relocated, thanks to the slow decay of cedar spars (a factor well known from a Hokitika survey in 1969). Retaking the photo was more of a problem, partly because of slightly different camera formats but more because of regrowth near where the earlier shot was taken. The changes are far less spectacular than expected (Figs 1 &2) but still considerable. Wind impact on the most exposed areas appears to be slowing the invasion of the *Hierochloa* grassland by shrubs. The scrub has not spectacularly extended but rather plants established in 1982 have greatly increased in height.

Another feature was the slips. Now slips that were very prominent in 1980 are not as evident from a distance and the few I have visited show substantial regrowth. Also, there appear to be few new slips, apparently related to a quiet period of few severe storms and the rapid recolonisation of those that do occur because goats are now absent.

Many tracks put in for goat control that I used in 1980-83 have now been abandoned and one from Gordon Base to Kauritahi Hut that I regularly used is now impossible

to follow in its last ascent to the Te Hunga plateau. On the plateau though, the areas of low scrub less than 1 m tall are being severely browsed by deer. The old North-South Te Hunga plateau track can still be followed easily, although regeneration presses in in many places. Surprisingly the peaty bogs of 1982 are now often quite firm, held together by a dense mat of *Juncus effusus*. On traversing another track from Buck Rock to Te Aroha summit, the last tens of metres was a steep uphill scramble taking half an hour, through dense *Astelia grandis* and dense short kamahi and silver beech scrub after the track was finally lost.

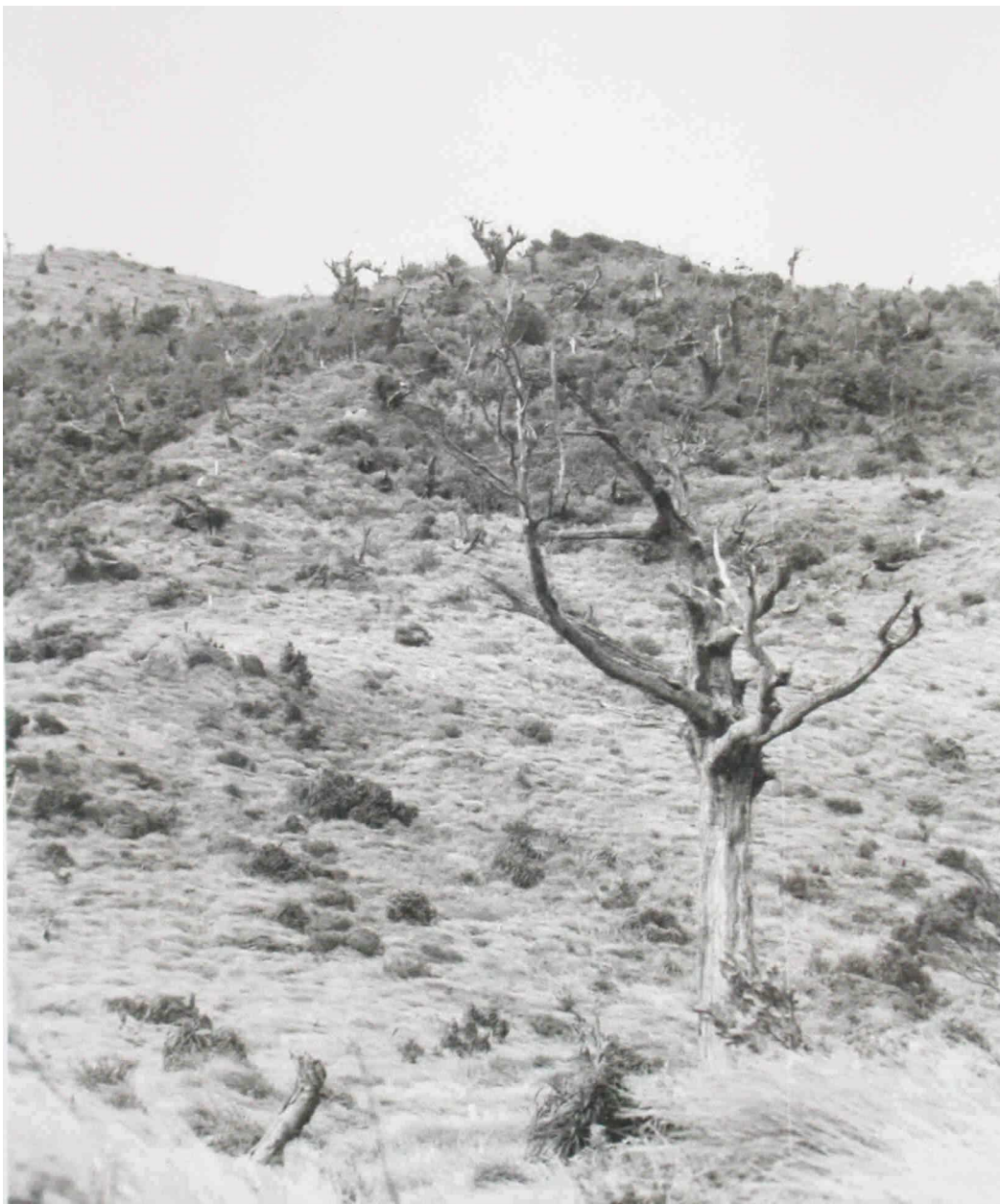


Figure 1: Te Rere bald, north-side in 1980.



Figure 2: Te Rere bald, north-side in 2004.

In lowland areas most of the tracks show no sign of past or present ungulate damage. So much so that it is often easy to believe that the forest has never carried high goat numbers let alone been logged. The one exception was where goats were seen around Buck Rock, a favoured habitat. On the other hand quite local deer sign is occasionally seen throughout.

As in many areas of New Zealand, recovery after sharp reductions in deer numbers has led to spectacular vegetation recovery but the warning is there: that continued vigilance is essential to keep browsing animals at a low level and retain the gains of the last few decades.