

Nīkau within Wellington City – new observations 2012

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The observations of Horne & Mitcalfe (2012) extend the distribution recorded by Anderson (2011) of nīkau around Wellington City to both the south and west, and closer to Cook Strait. The plants reported by Horne & Mitcalfe (2012) included three adult nīkau in Wilton's Bush. These are at NZTopo50-BQ31 467306 (9–10 m trunk, with numerous seedlings in the immediate area although none is much above knee high), BQ31 467305 (5–6 m trunk, with no evidence of past flowering), and BQ31 467302 (5.5–6 m trunk, with over 100 seedlings up to about one metre tall). Based on a study of nīkau growth in the wild (Enright & Watson 1992), it is possible the tallest of these nīkau started to grow before the European founding of Wellington in 1840. I think these are the first evidence of wild nīkau in the City Forests (see Anderson 2011), and they lend weight to the idea that nīkau were a component of these forests close to the urban areas of the city.

It is significant that none of the seedlings in Wilton's Bush and few of the seedlings elsewhere in the city are higher than one metre. I now think the likely explanation is the widespread control of possums. Brockie (1992) described the possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) as a significant predator of nīkau buds, flowers and fruit. He indicated that ripe fruit was very rarely seen in the Orongorongo Valley for several decades. The relatively recent growth of seedlings in numbers fits with the systematic control of possums in Wellington City by the City Council and Greater Wellington. It started with poisoning in Otari-Wilton's Bush in 1993 (Wellington City Council 2007) and was progressively rolled out to other forests over the next few years.

Finally, a cautionary tale of coming to conclusions about nīkau in gardens. In Anderson (2011), I described a group of four mature palms in a garden in Torwood Road, Khandallah. The group was located between two small remnants, mapped by Park (1999), and appeared to be part of the original vegetation of these remnants. I have subsequently learned their origin from Gary James (pers. comm.). Gary was told by previous owners of an older nīkau planted in their garden. The house was built just prior to World War 1 and the nīkau was collected in the Hutt Valley. It was lost when a new house was built on the lower part of the property in the 1970s. The surviving nīkau

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are descendants of that palm.

There are a number of tall and impressive nikau in gardens in the older areas of Wellington City. It is tempting to say they are lone survivors or descended from wild nikau in nearby forest. However, it is quite possible that they have been grown from seed or are transplants collected elsewhere.

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