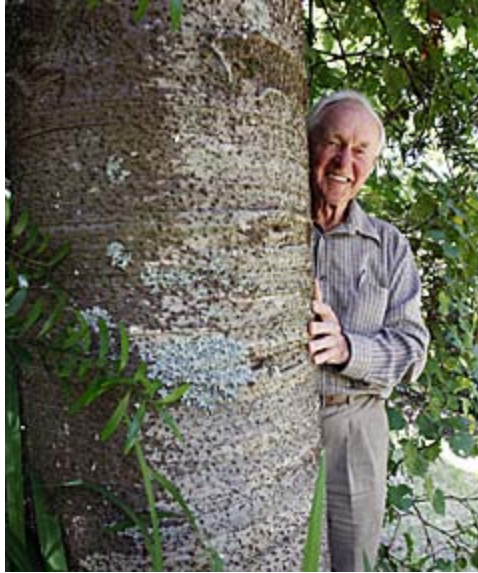


George Fuller is Taranaki Daily News Person of the Year

By PETER BINGHAM - Taranaki Daily News
Last updated 05:00 01/01/2010



BELOVED KAURI: George Fuller can no longer stretch his arms around the kauri he planted which was once destined for removal.

The mouse that roared has won again.

George Fuller, the man who beat bureaucracy in 2009, is the Taranaki Daily News Person of the Year.

"Goodness me, that's overwhelming," the 80-year-old said when told of his award win yesterday.

"I hadn't thought much more about it after seeing the calibre of the other candidates. This is very humbling."

Mr Fuller received the award ahead of retiring TSB Bank managing director Kevin Rimmington, pro surfer Paige Hareb, orthodontist aid founder Julian Haszard, ultra-distance runner Lisa Tamati and Rhodes Scholar Thomas Hills.

It capped a memorable year for Mr Fuller which included the campaign, the naming of Fuller Lane in Henderson as recognition of the part his parents' orchard business played in the area in the early 1900s and success in developing a pure yellow Disa orchid after years of trial.

"And now this. What can I say."

Mr Fuller hit the headlines in June when he stood his ground over a stand of 25 native trees in New Plymouth's Pukekura Park. The trees, many of which he planted in the 1960s, were in the way of a planned revamp of the racecourse entrance to the TSB Bowl of Brooklands.

The former park curator was having none of it and for eight weeks, including a week-long vigil at the proposed site, mounted a campaign that eventually convinced the New Plymouth District Council to change tack.

As he soaked in his win, Mr Fuller heaped praise on key developers of the park whose names rolled off his tongue - Robert Clinton Hughes, who orchestrated the setting up of the reserve; W.W. Smith from 1908-24, who was a world authority on birds and also had an immense knowledge of trees; Thomas Horton from 1924-49, who was responsible for the grove of trees

alongside Brooklands Rd; John Goodwin, who was internationally famous as a parks administrator; and Alan Jellyman who, like Mr Goodwin, was recognised nationally for outstanding knowledge of plants. "We are so fortunate to have had people who were thinking 100 years ahead."

The bounty of Pukekura Park never ceases to amaze him but any notion that he knows everything there is to know about the park was quickly dispelled during a visit by a group of American arborists early last year.

"They were travelling the world studying the canopy of trees. They not only studied, photographed and measured our trees but climbed them as well. They claim we have the biggest *pinus radiata* in the world in Brooklands. None of us realised that."

They were blown away by its size, which was remarkable given they were from California, where pines are common. The group was stunned at the expanse of the park and the uniqueness of a primeval podocarp forest within the city limits.

"They have studied the canopy of trees in tropical countries and never anywhere seen the density and diversity of this type of growth in any forest. They were so enraptured they are coming back.

"If you stand anywhere in the Bowl of Brooklands and admire the surroundings it's a total 360 tree skyline. By whatever means you have got there you have walked under a canopy of trees, you can't do that in many places in the world so close to a city. It's uncanny, wonderful.

"As curator I was so lucky and have always said I was living and working in paradise."

He started planting trees almost straight away. "It was very personal. I planted them and now can't get my arms around their trunk."

In New Zealand it was possible to plant a tree in your youth and stand under it during your lifetime. In England you plant an oak for future generations.

"Here in New Plymouth it is a combination of equitable rainfall and temperature. There are no extremes of temperatures and there is a spread of rain. The third factor is the soil which is about 100ft of a volcanic ash. There is little clay in it so it doesn't contract and expand with different moisture levels. It's stable and that's why we've got the ferneries, you couldn't do that anywhere else."

He casts an eye out through the lounge window of his Torbay St home and points to a walnut tree.

"See that. I planted it in 1982 and got 70kg of walnuts from it last year."

His final word is a tribute to the council.

"I am impressed in every sense that the councillors and staff finally accepted that [the final entrance option] was the right thing to do. Thanks to the engineers and designers or whoever have made it such a successful venture. I'm sure everyone will be thrilled and proud of it and all that was done to protect a wonderful stand of trees. They will be here for a long, long time."