

# Tōtara's social importance recounted on walkabout



Philip Simpson and the group before leaving to explore the ancient forest. Photo: Anita Peters.

Renowned botanist Dr Philip Simpson was invited by Project De-Vine to give a public talk about the special values of tōtara during a break in the group's recent working bee at the Harwood farm.

Dr Simpson led a farm "walkabout" to visit its ancient tōtara stand.

Tōtara was prolific in East and Upper Takaka during the time of early settlement, and it was used to construct homes, farms and implements.

"The tōtara waterwheel and shingle roof of Harwoods' old shed retain particular historic features," Dr Simpson explained. "The whole farm was originally created from the tōtara tree. There was a time in New Zealand's history when every house in the entire country had a tōtara shingle roof, apart from those people in Auckland who had kauri. I was just reading today that a huge tōtara would produce enough shingles for about four houses."

For that reason, Dr Simpson believes the Harwood shed is worthy of restoration, as is the huge waterwheel that has now fallen into disrepair.

In the past, a tōtara grove on such an active flood plain would have been under great threat, with its rivers regularly delivering trees to the beaches. It is also unusual for conifers to grow in such fertile soils, as they usually prefer high altitude and cold, sandy pakihī. Tōtara, however, is a modern conifer that has been able to adapt to the open air as well as the forest environment. The seed and attached pod produced by the female tree are perfectly adapted to distribution by birds, making tōtara part of the most successful conifer group in the world.



Kids encircling one of the giant tōtara trees. Photo: Anita Peters.

fold up into a container. A manuka stick or other hardwood handle would then have been tied across the top. The hunters would have cooked their harvested birds and then packed them into the poha for storage.

In 1870, under the Vogel Government, the Public Works Act encouraged use of tōtara for building the entire telegraph system, railways, wharves, lighthouses, bridges and public buildings. The East Takaka tramway was built around 1890 to transport tōtara logs out from the densely wooded valley. Trees that had undergone bark removal, described as "mutilated", were left out of the logging operations, a decision that has preserved these oldest surviving specimens.

Even though thousands of trees were milled, tōtara continues to thrive due to its particular ecology. In a modern commercial enterprise, the antibacterial resin is harvested for use in the cosmetic industry.

Very few virgin stands of tōtara are left in New Zealand. The government milled native trees until 1984, when this practice was abolished after the Pureora Forest protest. The use of native trees in dams, for building in parks and reserves and in logging operations came to an end. The departments responsible for logging were then replaced by the Department of Conservation which, along with other concerned groups like Forest and Bird, has continued to focus on preservation and protection.

Anita Peters

Before European settlement, tōtara played a prominent role in Māori ethical development. From many tribal legends we know that tōtara was of fundamental importance in Māori custom and the foundation of their culture. tōtara was the first big forest tree that Tane created, which was then felled by Rata to make a waka without first seeking permission from the forest god. This action angered the forest spirits who repeatedly put the tree together again, until Rata was suitably chastised by Tane, and this tapu (or taboo) was lifted when he finally offered prayers and gave thanks for this bountiful gift.

In everyday life it was used for building dwellings and waka, pa stockades, household items, tools, weapons and for carvings, giving us a rich figurative profile of Māori history. The wood was very durable and preserved well, due to its very concentrated resin, so finished objects buried in swamps to be hidden or stored could be recovered at a later date with no decay.

Tōtara is also the only tree to have such a dense and fibrous bark. Dr Simpson believes that around 150 years ago, Māori came up the Takaka River to hunt birds. Scars on the trunk of one huge tōtara, estimated to be around 400 years of age, suggest early hunters cut the leather-like parchment layer under the bark to make a poha, or waterproof storage basket, to wrap and store their catch. There is clear evidence of two different-shaped cuts, one for the basket and the other on the opposite side of the trunk for the lid. A completely flat piece about two metres long was adzed out from under the bark, then heated for more pliability, scored with lines to assist folding, and pleated at each end to shape the sides and

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