

Reflections on the 40th year of the Rotorua Botanical Society

Bruce Clarkson (Inaugural President)

It was a privilege to be asked to speak at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Rotorua Botanical Society held at Willie and Sarah's on 10 March 2024. As our first newsletter outlined, the goal of the group was to integrate activity of professional and amateur botanists to progress botanical knowledge of the central North Island. I had no script for my talk on the night and because I've largely forgotten what I said, I thought I would write something about the importance of botany and botanists, and what has been achieved over the 40 years of the society. Hopefully, it touches on some of the themes in that talk.

Like most botanists, I think plants are crucially important to our survival on planet Earth. They provide the biomass and habitat of our ecosystems; they convert carbon dioxide and water into sugars and starch, and as a by-product, produce the oxygen in the air that we breathe. Especially in these days of climate change they can provide shelter and shade to buffer climate extremes and to sequester carbon to offset carbon dioxide emissions. But more than that, they provide the landscapes and symbols that identify us as New Zealanders such as kauri or podocarp forests, blooms of golden kowhai and crimson pōhutukawa, the silver fern frond, or the koru of newly emerging fern fronds. Botanical Societies are knowledge holders and knowledge keepers of Aotearoa New Zealand's unique botanical heritage and botany is a cultural, social, and scientific pursuit. We need to ensure that Botanical Societies and botanists persist so that the vital role of plants, especially our native flora, continues to be appreciated and provided for regionally and nationally. When the society formed in February of 1984, I doubt that those involved in its establishment would have imagined it would have achieved as much as it has: a still thriving newsletter (82 issues as of June 2024), several significant book publications including the Botany of Rotorua and regional species lists, and field trips to all corners of the region.

The photographs I shared at our celebration showed several images of the enthusiastic members on the first annual field trip (from 25-28 January 1985) to



RBS trip to Waikaremoana area, 25-28 January 1985. Photo at Kaipo.

Back row, left to right: Maurice Graham, Bruce Clarkson, Beverley Clarkson, David King, Sarah Beadel, Willie Shaw, Mark Smale, Frank Gibbons.

Front row, left to right: Noelene Graham, Paula Broekhuizen, Maggie Bayfield, Marlene Benson, Lindsay Gibbons.

Urewera National Park (RBS Newsletter 4). Some of those present have passed and the remainder seem to have aged well and continue to be active botanists to the extent they can.

Anecdotally, botanists and others who frequent nature are destined for long lives. Despite the government science reorganisations of the early 1990s, which depleted professional botanist numbers in the region, and the smaller numbers of field-oriented botanists emerging from New Zealand universities, the society has continued to prosper with the gap filled by environmental consultants, DOC staff and amateur botanists.

The society's legacy remains to spread the word on the significance of plants, and particularly our native flora. I hope we can gather again to share our botanical stories and retain and strengthen our friendships; let's not leave the next event for another 40 years!