

The Wild Child, Noel Peterson, aka Tauranga's Green Wizard

"Noel, Noel, where are you?"

Sometimes eight-year old Noel smiled to himself as he listened to his mother calling out for him. He knew he would be safe from discovery, hidden in one of his secret caves. Whenever he got sick of being told off or strapped for not going to school, he would run away and hole up in the cave for a while.

By the time he was seven, he had discovered two caves in the area during his wanderings; one at the bottom of the cliffs below Tutarawananga, (Yatton Park) the other on a hillside near the top of Oropi Road.

His mates were the cave wetas, with body's one-inch long (2.5cm) and long, long legs, four-five inches long (about 10cm). Harmless creatures, they stimulated his first interest in insects.

Noel always had the wander bug. As a little boy on a trike, he would ride away from his Greerton home and be puzzled when people stopped their cars, bundled him in and took him home. He did not know that his mother had pinned a note to the back of his shirt; 'If found more than one mile from 9 May St, please return'.

Noel preferred wandering to school. The wide world of nature was both his classroom and teacher, introducing him to the fascinating world of science. He would ride his bike to Mauao, (Mt Maunganui) and then walk to the Pines at Papamoa and back. He did this every day for three years, rain, hail or shine; the persecution at school by pupils and teachers was too much for him.

On his own, he studied all the geology, plant & invertebrate life, insects, birds, botany, and his favorite, conchology (shells) including native land snails. He developed his own collections. He wanted to learn Latin to decipher the classified names of the species, so one teacher taught him the basics. A science teacher from the correspondence school introduced him to scientists in Wellington, particularly Dr. R K Dell, the Director of the National Museum, which is now Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand. Dr. Dell and the young, brilliant but erratic Noel Peterson corresponded for some years.

Noel would visit the fishing wharves on his way home and see what strange creatures or shells the fishermen had brought up in their nets, many of which the scientists in Wellington had never seen.

In 1963, when Noel was aged 10, the wetland below his Oropi cave (now the industrial area in the vicinity of Maleme Street) was teeming with wild life. A nesting ground for a shared colony of hundreds of pukeko and pied stilt, the pukeko would allow Noel to go up to them and lift them gently up to inspect their eggs. The pied stilts would fly up at the last minute and

hover until he left. Beneath a patch of manuka grew sphagnum moss, deep enough for Noel to dig in it. On another part, wetland plants grew on pools of mud. Walking on them was like walking on a trampoline, but gently or he would sink through into the mud up to his waist. When the nearby hillside was bulldozed into the wetland to develop an industrial area, Noel was terribly upset at man and machine destroying Mother Nature.

Noel always felt an affinity with the tangata whenua. He found that the area used for the reclamation had been part of an old Pa site. The government had a policy of driving roads through Maori pa sites. Later the remaining part of the Pa site was destroyed to develop a housing subdivision. Noel felt the injustice of it all and rebelliousness surfaced.

As he grew up the Mt Maunganui wharf complex was built along the pristine white sand beach. 'You can't stop progress,' Noel continually heard as he watched the beach being destroyed and the unique habitat home of many rare marine creatures between Pilot Bay & Waipu Bay being dredged up and used as wharf reclamation.

The destruction continued. As the Tauranga wharfs and marinas and industrial parks were built, the pollution levels reached a tipping point. Mass marine die offs occurred, the sea lettuce flourished and wetlands became housing subdivisions. The eels and pukeko became homeless and flocks of stilts reduced to a few individuals. Mother Nature again had been dealt a fatal blow. Progress, men and their machines became her enemy.

And Noel became a rebel with a cause; caring for the environment.

The lack of environmental protection for Tauranga provided by the authorities, and the continued destruction of critical ecosystems by developers and industry with impunity became the last straw for Noel.

After many years of standing up for Tauranga's environment, the Green Wizard is to weigh anchor and move to greener pastures, his time done here. Southern climes are calling. On leaving, he utters a warning; Care for Mother Nature!

Take heed citizens of Tauranga, he says, or your land will become lifeless, joining the thousands of eels, pukekos, pied stilts, and many other life forms which not so long ago shared this place with you.