

INQUIRY



THE MATHESON PROPERTY
OVERLOOKS GOAT ISLAND
FILE PHOTOS NZ HERALD

GETTING THEIR GOAT

Trouble is brewing at New Zealand's oldest marine reserve, a coastal playground for generations of Aucklanders. John Landrigan reports

Minimal impact" sounds like a Tom Cruise blockbuster. But, for the people embroiled in a bitter battle over the future of the small pocket of land around the Goat Island Marine Reserve, those two words are the core of the issue.

They are being used to describe the possible effects of Auckland University's international-scale, \$14 million, marine biology centre.

Controversially, the university has begun alterations and additions to its existing marine research lab and accommodation at Leigh. It intends building an interactive visitor centre plus 40 new carparks on Department of Conservation land.

In its bid to build the institute overlooking Goat Island, the university and Rodney District Council have been accused of not informing the public about the size of the development, and the future of the reserve.

Some of the concerns are:

- Resource consent infringements, including the removal of 18 protected trees, buildings exceeding height restrictions and being visible from the reserve, as well as unknown traffic growth
- Neighbours losing coastal views and being forced to share a right-of-way that could lead hundreds of people a day past their front doors
- The health of the marine reserve, one of the district's most-visited coastal attractions.

It is claimed Rodney District Council staff have failed to inform neighbours, ratepayers or even elected councillors, of the exact plans because the development was deemed to have "minimal impact".

In the 1960s, the Matheson family was forced, under threat of the Ministry of Works Act (now the Public Works Act), to sell the majority of its farm overlooking Goat Island to the Uni-

RESIDENTS' CLAIMS

- Sixteen protected trees felled, six pruned, 13 at risk
- 12.6m-high science building exceeds height restrictions by 4.6m
- 10.4m-high interpretive/visitor centre exceeds maximum height by 2.4m
- New science building height-to-boundary control exceeded by 3m
- Interpretative centre height-to-boundary control exceeded by 2.6m
- Earthworks required exceeds 200cu m limit by 495cu m
- The proposal is to be considered



a non-complying activity but is passed by council staff without the public needing to know and without going to elected councillors for them to debate.

versity of Auckland. Now the family says it is being crowded out from what remains of their property by the new development.

Scott Pennington, a family spokesman, says people were discouraged from swimming when the reserve opened so that marine life could be accurately measured. Now, he says, an estimated 350,000 people visit every year.

"No one knows what is going on at Goat Island," says Mr Pennington. "We will be seeking an injunction to halt the process. It should be stopped. We're fighting to preserve Goat Island."

It is not just the marine reserve that people flock to see, but the rural backdrop, he says.

"Now you see rural farmland, one house, 20 acres, beautiful stream. We want to be told what is going on. You will see this monstrosity from the water.

"They have said 400 people walking past our door every day is a minor effect. And we will lose coastal views.

"The second generation is being squeezed out just like the first time

around. Council staff have said it will have minimal impact on the family but have yet to ask us."

DR FLOOR Anthoni runs Seafriends, a privately owned, 16-year-old, marine interpretation centre near Goat Island. It has a conservation centre, classroom, marine aquariums, a public environmental library, dive rental and a restaurant.

He says nutrients released into the water as treated effluent from a growing number of visitors will subject the marine reserve to further harm.

When Dr Anthoni tried to subdivide his coastal property in 2005, "the council was concerned with the visual impact of a further dwelling and associated buildings within the sensitive coastal area."

Surely, he says, the council is applying double standards now that the university has gained consent for several buildings and 40 carparks on DOC land.

Local Maori are aware of the development and hope to have their opinions considered.

Mook Hohneck, chief executive of Moko Trust and spokesman for the Ngati Manuhiri hapu, says the area is sensitive to Maori and they are still talking with the university.

"We are still in consultation. Nothing is signed off and complete."

He, too, is concerned that encroachments into the area will continue.

ONE MEMBER of the university planning team is a well-known property developer.

Richard Didsbury is director of the development at Sylvia Park and The Plaza in Palmerston North. He was also responsible for the transformation of nearby Matakana township.

He says the marine biology centre is purely an educational matter.

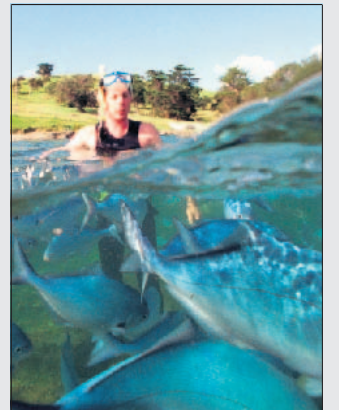
"There is no commercial development planned. I am involved for altruistic reasons only."

Asked for information on the development, Auckland University's Professor John Montgomerie sent *The Aucklander* watercolour paintings of part of the proposed building and a statement about the positive effects of the institute.

Rodney Mayor Penny Webster says it is a great development for Rodney but she would normally expect affected neighbours to be notified and she is looking at why that was not done.

"Staff decided not to fully notify it. I would have thought the planner would have visited. I would have thought that [the university] would have gone to get permission from the neighbours."

Mrs Webster — who did not know the Mathesons' views would be affected — says it is not a development that needed to go before the council. She's certain her staff made the right call.



GOAT ISLAND: WHAT IS IT?

New Zealand's first marine reserve was established in 1975 and opened officially in 1997.

It is on the north-eastern coast near Leigh, about 90 minutes' drive from Auckland City. It protects 547ha of shore and sea stretching from Cape Rodney to Okakari Point, and includes the waters around Goat Island.

The University of Auckland's marine laboratory is based at the reserve.

Before protection, the area was a near marine desert", decimated by overfishing. In less than a decade, the seas were teeming with fish and other sea life, free from exploitation.

Studies are made into the way a marine ecosystem functions in its natural state.

As well as scientific research, the reserve has helped as a training ground for diving and has inspired many people who come to this magical place to enjoy seeing the friendly fishes.

Source: www.doc.govt.nz/