

# Heritage at stake

## Working party ponders Kaupokonui weir's future

Old dams and weirs on rivers can create problems for fish and, as Taranaki Regional Council works to eliminate such obstacles, **Janelle Kirkland** looks at one unique case that was once a vital part of South Taranaki's dairying history.



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**N**ATIVE fish needing to travel between salt and fresh water for breeding and feeding have been having a hard time of it since the industrial age. As humans introduced dams, weirs, culverts and fords into rivers, the natural path to the sea and back again has been blocked, interfering with fish life cycles and sometimes affecting populations.

Taranaki Regional Council began removing obstacles to fish passage in 1995. It identified 33 of Taranaki's rivers and streams of priority importance for the region's native and introduced freshwater fish. Of that total, 20 had dams or weirs somewhere along their length.

The largest such structure was the 65-metre high Patea Dam, but this problem was largely addressed by the installation of a pass that helps eels migrate upriver.

There are now 63 approved structures, 27 requiring further action and 10 unapproved structures in Taranaki.

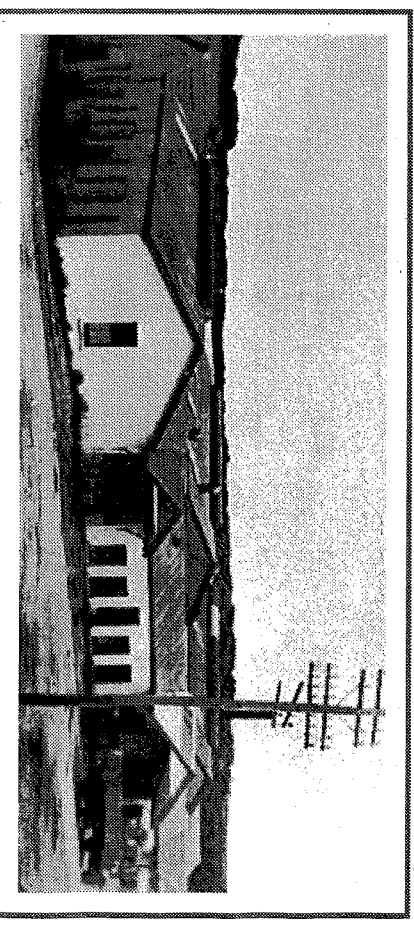
But still remaining is what Department of Conservation refers to as "one of the most significant remaining barriers to fish passage in Taranaki", built in the 1890s at Glen Rd in Kaupokonui.

It was part of the hydro-electric scheme that generated the power used to run what was once the country's largest cheese factory, as well as the store and company dwellings nearby. The two-metre high weir is now used to help measure water flow. But whether it is doing more harm than good is debatable.

"Fish are not able to move freely within the catchment," says DOC freshwater technical support officer Logan Brown.

"Many of the diadromous native fish species (travelling between salt and fresh water) are poor climbers and cannot swim at any great speed for long distances. Even the smallest weir can present a total barrier to poor climbers, and culverts may prove to be impassable to many native fish species because of the speed of the water," he says.

Of the 18 native freshwater fish found in Taranaki, 15 need to migrate between fresh and salt water to complete their lifecycle.



LOOKING BACK: The old Kaupokonui dairy plant once supplied by the hydro-electric scheme.

Mr Brown says the weir needs to either be removed or modified to allow fish to migrate properly.

One of the most likely options is to install a newer "fish pass", also known as a "fish ladder" or "fish steps".

There's a trick to getting it right. The velocity of water falling over the steps has to be great enough to attract the fish to the ladder, but not so great it washes them back downstream or exhausts them to the point they can't continue upriver.

The design has been successful worldwide, and relies on the concept that fish leap up a series of relatively low steps into waters on the other side. However, a fish pass will not completely provide 100% passage. One installed there in the 1940s is ineffective, says Fish and Game field officer, Allen Stanchiff.

"Kaupokonui is a good trout fishery but if it was a free flowing river that would allow it to be that much better," he says.

The removal of two hydro structures previously on the river has already made it easier for fish to get up and down stream.

"The movement of the fish population up and down river allows that population to be healthier and more resilient.

"Trout get flushed downstream over the weir and they can't get back upstream. In this case the Mangawhero Stream essentially becomes the main trout fishery."

Introduced brown and rainbow trout, were Fish and Game's greatest concern

under their statutory obligations to protect game fish for anglers. However, natives, including eel, bullies, whitebait, as well as torrent fish, lamprey, common smelt and mullet, will also be affected.

The TRC has been in discussions with the Historic Places Trust since 2001 to resolve the issue, but the situation has been complicated by the fact there is currently no party which owns or is willing to own the weir and apply for the resource consent needed to maintain it.

The trust says before any decision is made, the historical significance of the weir must be considered.

It is a relic of the heyday of the dairy industry, and an integral part of the factory's hydro-electric scheme.

Today there are few, if any, of Taranaki's many dairy factories remaining in such complete form that exhibit the development of the dairy industry over the 20th century, with the many additions and alterations made as the industry expanded.

Nigel Ogle at Tawhiti Museum says it would be criminal to get rid of the weir entirely, because of its importance to South Taranaki.

"Industrial heritage is becoming increasingly important, especially in the dairy industry.

"It's not just the weir. It's the fact that we have the factory there, as well as the water race which brought water to the factory, the turbine, the tunnel and all

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# History in the balance

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the valves and wheels that control the flow of the dam itself," he says. "Like any set, for instance wine glasses, you break it up and it never has the same value."

The weir is unique in that it comes as part of a complete industrial complex, something Nigel has not managed to find anywhere else in New Zealand.

"It is an absolutely prime example and some people want to smash it down."

"We won't be forgiven if a few years down the track it's gone or preserved in chunks in museums.

"I'm not anti-fish, don't get me wrong, but you can build a fish pass and both parties will be happy," he says.

"Most people I have spoken to have no problem with preserving it, so why get rid of it?"

A working group made up of the TRC, Fish and Game, Department of Conservation, Historic Places Trust, South Taranaki District Council and local iwi representatives has come together to decide what will happen.

The trust is seeking funding to research and establish the rarity and significance of the weir, information that will be used in any further decisions.

The cost of such research cannot be estimated at this stage, says Historic Places Trust central region



KEEP THE WEIR: Nigel Ogle says the weir is a unique part of South Taranaki's history.

area co-ordinator David Watt.

"It very much depends on what happens. This is something very special because of its importance as a historical site and value as a tourist attraction, particularly in terms of heritage trails.

"The more we can hold on to structures like that, contributes to the community economically as well as socially," he says.

"There is a time frame and we are looking to make these decisions by the end of the year."

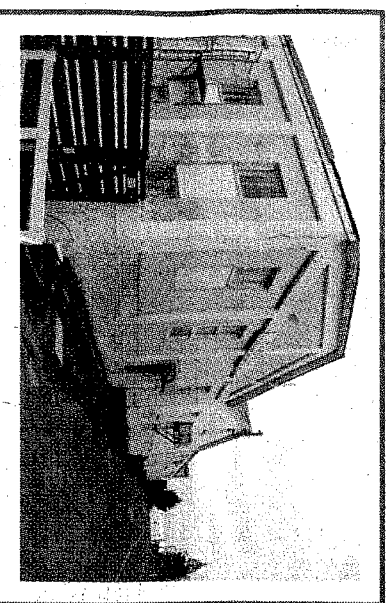
"They also plan to engage with the community on the issue.

The council would then need to decide if the historic significance of the weir outweighs the adverse impact of its staying with a fish pass installed.

TRC councillor Roger Maxwell suggests another option is that the weir be resurrected as a power generator again,

but says there are a lot of "ifs and buts" involved.

"There has been time given for the interested parties to rescue it as a historic facility and I think that as part of that process, we shouldn't rule out the potential for getting the plant going



PIECE OF HISTORY: The old Kaupokonui Dairy Co-op buildings, now Pacific Natural Gut Strings.

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## Amalgamation hits communities

DARVING is the area's main industry and has been so far at least the past 120 to 130 years.

During much of the 20th century, cheese factories were the economic and social heart of rural communities.

By the 1920s, the Waimate West County, based on Manaia, was the most densely populated rural area of New Zealand but, from the 1950s, many of these communities declined after factories amalgamated.

Of the first 14 publicly available electricity supplies in New Zealand, seven were in Taranaki. Most of these were hydro-electric schemes.

In 1900, the Kaupokonui Co-operative Dairy Co. scheme featured a 200 metre tunnel and open concrete race that brought water to two turbines and

generators under the factory engine room.

The co-op was established in 1897 and quickly built up a network of surrounding branches.

By the 1950s it had seven — Waiokura, Aurora, Oeo, Skeet Rd, Sutherland Rd, Katua and Kapuni.

In its first year it received milk from 600 cows, but at the end of the first seven years it had increased to 7000.

The weir was rebuilt in 1941 by Alois Butler of Inglewood, a well-known Taranaki bridge builder, engineer, entrepreneur and inventor.

The old dairy factory is now Pacific Natural Gut Strings, which manufactures tennis racquet strings from cow gut.

The strings are used commonly on the world pro-tennis tour. □

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