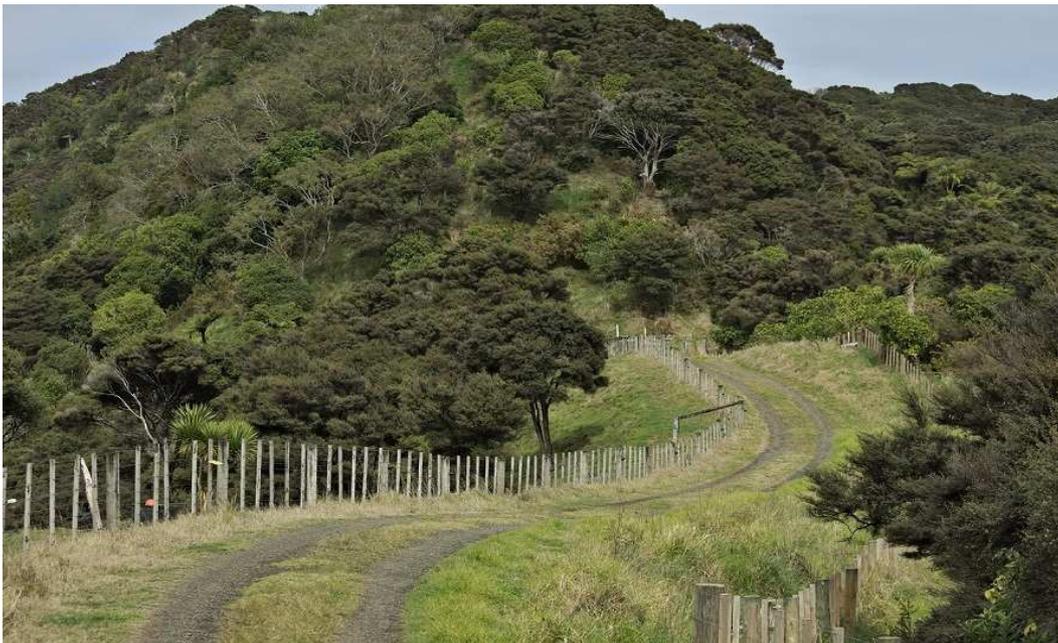


Internship Report



Ark in the Park

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1. What is the Ark?

The Ark in the Park is a cooperation between Auckland Council and Forest & Bird. The Ark area is located in the Waitakere Ranges and currently covers about 2,100 ha of mostly native bush. This area is not protected by a fence so new predators can get in any time. In order to protect the native plants and animals living there a lot of work goes into keeping the predator numbers as low as possible. The operation is run by two employees who organize dozens of active volunteers. Usually there are two volunteer sessions every week where volunteers can come and do baiting. However, that is only one main task and there are numerous other jobs for volunteers to help, e.g. trapping, data entry or monitoring. On top of that the Ark is involved in seed collection and invertebrate monitoring projects by Landcare Research and translocation schemes for kokako, whitehead and other bird species.

2. Why I chose the Ark

First of all I should probably explain why I went to New Zealand when I could have gone anywhere in the world. I knew that I'd go to a different university in January 2017 to study there and that meant that my internship would be between August and December 2016. As I like birds and plants I wanted to experience a time of growth and nesting and that meant going to the southern hemisphere. The only foreign language I speak well is English. That - aligned with a few other personal reasons - left me with an easily manageable number of choices including New Zealand. The Ark had an explanatory homepage that made it clear that new volunteers are always welcome. It offered active work outside in the bush as part of a big team of people who are all interested in saving their environment. This would also allow me to get to know a different approach to conservation including trapping and poisoning invasive mammalian species and the well-known concept of predator-free islands and mainland sanctuaries.

3. Work at the Ark

Outside

I regularly helped with the volunteer sessions which usually take place every Thursday and Saturday. All volunteers who have time meet at the ranger station in the morning, pack the things needed to go on a baitline and put their name, contact number, baitline and approximate return time into the logbook. After being assigned a partner for the day the volunteers make their way to the baitlines. Sometimes this alone might take an hour as some access tracks cannot be used by car. Every station along the baitline is checked to see how much of the old bait has been eaten and a new bag is put into the station if necessary. These observations as well as rare bird sightings are written down on the baitcard. The terrain is rather hilly and sometimes we had to negotiate slippery slopes, cross bubbling brooks or fight our way through supplejack, bush lawyer or gorse. Sometimes doing a baitline takes only 2 hours and sometimes more than 5. This depends mostly on the length and difficulty of the line and on its distance to the ranger station or carpark. After the volunteers have finished their baitline they return to the ranger station, sign themselves off in the logbook and clean their gear and tools. On Saturdays there usually is a sausage sizzle and a relaxed lunch together.

Apart from the baitlines there are about 30 traplines that need to be checked either weekly or fortnightly. Along these are traps which are mostly for possums and stoats. As they are done more frequently than the baitlines they are not part of the volunteer sessions but of small independent groups of volunteers who work according to a roster. During the greater part of my internship I had a small trapline to take care of. It consisted of 9 stoat traps and caught one weasel as well as a few rats.

Inside

There was also a lot to do apart from the weekly field work. In the office I mostly worked with MS Excel and QGIS to help with data entry and making maps. Luckily I did not have to start from scratch because there is a big data base already.

One of my first tasks was to create a map showing all baitlines as they appear in the field by connecting the baitstation points. Another assignment for QGIS was to make an overview map showing the tracks taken by the volunteers for the 2016 whitehead survey.

I also enjoyed taking care of simple yet important maintenance tasks in the store. The tools and repair kits used for the volunteer sessions needed to be cleaned and topped up regularly. The baitcards filled in during field work had to be sorted and the lines marked on a big map to keep track of the baiting round process.

Main task: trapline maintenance

Apart from the volunteer sessions and day to day office work I had another big assignment to complete. As mentioned above the Ark is maintaining of more than 30 traplines. Usually groups of 3 or 4 volunteers are assigned up to 3 traplines to check at least every two weeks. With more than 400 traps to manage it is important to keep track of them all. That is why I was tasked with making or updating existing trapline maps and descriptions to match the situation out in the bush as closely as possible.

The old shapefile containing all traps was a great help for the maps. However, some traps had been moved, removed or replaced with a different kind of trap. In order to find out which ones weren't up to date anymore I contacted all the trappers who kindly helped me complete this work. The same was necessary for the descriptions. As most of the traps are somewhat hidden it is important to know more than their approximate location. The descriptions are supposed to offer detailed instructions on how to find the traps. Many of the experienced trappers do not need them but they are very helpful for new trappers or temporary helpers.

This intensive work with the traplines also offered the perfect opportunity to change the labels of many traps. Especially the traps on older lines were labelled in a slightly confusing way. In most of these cases it was necessary for me to do the trapline myself to change the labels both in the data file and in the field. At the same time I could check if the new descriptions would work for someone completely unfamiliar with the traplines and clean the traps as needed.

Special events

Apart from the working routine I described above there were quite a few days with a variety of other activities. First of all there were volunteer sessions when we helped with the seed collection by picking up the sacks of seeds from the seed collectors - big funnels set up close to the tracks into which seeds, leaves and branches fall.

On two occasions the Ark welcomed people from companies to help in a volunteer session and get to know the Ark project. Each of the more experienced Ark volunteers took one visitor to do a baitline and the days were concluded with a sausage sizzle.

Another chance to learn more about New Zealand nature conservation strategies presented itself in the form of the Waitakere Ranges Conservation Network seminar. The programme provided interesting presentations about predator control innovations, wasps and the opportunity to exchange experiences and get to know new people working in the same field. A personal highlight was my little trip to Tiritiri Matangi Island. Strictly speaking it was not directly connected to my internship but I went there with the help of the Ark and two kind

volunteers who work for both projects. As Tiri is a predator free island sanctuary I could at last see all the bird species that are missing in the Ark area due to predation pressure. I was especially happy to see a kiwi and the little blue penguins when they returned to the island upon nightfall.

4. Skills and knowledge

What you need

Basically anyone can join the Ark as a volunteer and help with various tasks including baiting, trapping or data entry. However, if you want to do field work having a reasonable level of fitness would be very advisable. The baitlines have different levels of difficulty but it still is physically demanding work.

It is also worth noting that trudging through the bush will almost certainly result in you getting dirty. That should be taken into account when choosing your clothes. Especially during winter and early spring it often rains, the tracks and forest ground will be muddy and slippery. I would also recommend wearing sturdy, waterproof shoes or boots as well as long clothes to avoid cuts. The most important thing you need is an interest in conservation and the environment.

What you can get

The most obvious thing is probably that whenever you go into the bush it's like a workout in the fresh air - and it is completely free.

But that is not the only thing I gained when I volunteered. In addition to the weekly fitness training I appreciated learning a lot about identifying native birds and plants. Especially when I went on a baitline with volunteers who were interested in a particular group of species themselves. Of course you can learn about them by reading books but it is always completely different and more memorable if you see the animal or plant out in the wild in its natural surroundings. Knowing about the trees, ferns, flowers and birds I see around me also allows me to appreciate being out in a natural habitat a lot more as compared to a beautiful but artificial park. The knowledge that I get to see places that less than 1% of Earth's current human population - probably a lot less - have ever seen makes me feel very privileged.

On top of that it was fun to gain a bit of knowledge and hands-on experience of how conservation work can look like. So far I had only known about conservation problems and strategies common in Central Europe. Working in a New Zealand conservation projects gave me an insight about different actions, particularly for single species conservation and a more radical approach to invasive species.

5. Conclusion and thanks

When I came to the Ark to do my internship I did not know exactly what to expect apart from a friendly working environment and a unique kind of nature. This I definitely got but these were not the only things by far. I learned many new things that can help me with my future career, e.g. working with GIS, working with a big group of people and how an active, open conservation project can look like. As a foreigner and non-native speaker I also managed to improve my English and got to know a fascinating country and people with a different mentality.

All in all I enjoyed my time in New Zealand and the internship immensely and I am deeply grateful to all the people I met at the Ark. First and foremost my thanks go to Laurence and Gillian who made this internship possible, let me be part of the office team and helped me whenever I needed something. But I also want to thank Mike and Yvonne, Ken, Jo, Phil, Graham and all the other volunteers for welcoming me into the group and supporting me and my work. I hope I can return to the Ark sometime!

