

RISING — to the — CHALLENGE

Stories from the Covid-19 crisis



Elliot Bay in the Bay of Islands has been saved from development, despite the challenges of Covid-19.

IPIPIRI NATURE CONSERVANCY TRUST: NEGOTIATING A DEAL IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19

Ipipiri Nature Conservancy Trust Chair Geoff Ricketts has driven the road from Auckland to Rawhiti in the Bay of Islands for the past twenty-four years. One of the highlights of the trip is ten minutes out of Rawhiti, driving up the East Coast road over the brow of a hill to reveal a spectacular view of one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most iconic surf beaches and surrounding native forest, Elliot Bay.

Elliot Bay has been owned by the Elliot family for 90 years. It's a property rich in Māori history, 500 hectares of centuries old native forest like kauri, totara and rimu, and 200 hectares of farmland. It's home to endangered birds like kiwi and dotterel, and is the summer holiday destination of multi generations of New Zealand families who camp on the farmland and enjoy the recreational playground of the South Pacific Ocean.

But a few years ago on the road trip north Geoff's scenic pleasure of Elliot Bay was somewhat disturbed by a real estate sign. Elliot Bay was for sale.

"When it didn't sell I was worried by indications that it could be split up and developed – and lost forever," Geoff says. "That would have been a tragedy. My wife Fran pressed me – and said 'if you are so concerned why don't you do something about it then.'"

And that he did. With Fran they set up the Ipipiri Nature Conservancy Trust and embarked on a massive fundraising drive to raise \$9.3m to buy the property from the Elliot Family. NEXT Foundation pledged support as a founding donor as did Geoff and Fran Ricketts, who set about seeking other trusts and individuals to financially support the project. As well as protecting the Maori culture, the ecological biodiversity and the camping ground, the Ipipiri trust has a wider vision of developing walking tracks through Elliot Bay and connecting to two other walkways to make a Bay of Islands Great Walk, in the world class league of the Milford and Routeburn Tracks.

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Geoff Ricketts, Chair Ipipiri Nature Conservancy Trust

Cups of tea were had, phonecalls were made, funding applications were submitted, media interviews were conducted, videos were produced, iwi, hapus, government and conservation groups were consulted. Support to Save Elliot Bay was steady – and the Trust was on track to deliver on its goal to go unconditional on the deal of \$9.3million in April 2020.

Then Covid-19 hit. Like many parts of the world New Zealand went into lockdown in March. The economic uncertainty gave some of the supporters the jitters, and Geoff started fielding the sort of phone calls a fundraiser does not like to receive.

“We were practically over the line – but the pandemic threw up too much financial uncertainty for some of our supporters, who withdrew. They were difficult conversations and I have to admit it was heartbreaking. We had put in so much effort, but within a couple of weeks of lockdown we had lost about \$2.75million of our indicated and pledged support. With the deadline approaching, the outlook was grim.”

Anyone who knows Geoff and Fran and their passion for this project knows the biggest global challenge in a century would not derail their determination to find a way to make it happen. A fresh approach was required and lockdown gave them and the Trustees the time to rethink and renegotiate how it may still come together.

“Whilst the pandemic meant it was harder to get people to commit to the funding we felt the conservation project was more important than ever,” says Geoff. “Protecting the biodiversity and developing a walkway will create much needed jobs, and in the future when overseas tourists are allowed to return there will be huge economic benefits to the far North.”

Negotiations were back on the table with the Elliot Family.

“It is testimony to their generosity and their commitment to preserve this area that they were happy to renegotiate,” Geoff says. “We agreed to carve off some sections of land that were nice-to-have to reduce the price. And they agreed to an interest free loan for three years to give us more time to raise the remaining \$2million.”

So, with new post lockdown funders coming in, and some of those who withdrew returning, the Ipipiri Nature Conservancy Trust went unconditional on the Elliot Bay property in June 2020, with a \$6million deposit. Its revised target is \$8million and it already has \$500,000 of the final \$2million, due in April 2023, committed.

“We are relieved and overjoyed with the outcome and hugely appreciative of the support from the Elliot family, philanthropists, local hapu, government, local body and the community to save this iconic piece of Northland in the most challenging of times,” Geoff says.

“It’s a wonderful story of collaboration. We have three trusts – NEXT, Joyce Fisher Charitable Trust and Awhero Nui Charitable Trust supporting the project – plus 150 individuals, that range from big to small donations.

“Our task now begins to work alongside local hapu, the community and the government to protect this most special part of Aotearoa New Zealand.”

NEXT environmental director Jan Hania says the Ipipiri Trust led by Geoff Ricketts has shown the strength of collaboration, bringing together individual donors, iwi, hapu, government, conservation groups and the community for a common purpose. “This is all for the benefit of Northland, and securing an iconic piece of Aotearoa New Zealand’s landscape,” he says, “The future prospects are exciting”.

The highlight of Geoff and Fran’s road trips from Auckland to Rawhiti will still be the vista of Elliot Bay, ten minutes from their destination. And thanks to their determination, foresight, and the generosity of them and others – and despite a global pandemic - it will be a taonga, a treasure for future generations of New Zealanders to enjoy.

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