

TIAKI IN WAITOMO

Down to Earth

Cave tours helping fund forest regeneration on Waitomo family farm

On a fourth-generation family farm down a quiet country road deep in the Waitomo District, a native forest has been coming to life, rich in birdsong and the hum of busy insects.

The 33-acre property is home to Down to Earth – a highly rated tourism operator providing glowworm tours through part of an internationally significant and truly stunning cave system that runs beneath their land. The Mangarongapu Cave on their property is part of the 4 km long Mangapu Cave System which has been carved out over millions of years by the subterranean waters of the Mangapu Stream.

But while their location makes them stand out, it's their family-run approach and dedication to sustainability, kaitiakitanga (guardianship) and the New Zealand tourism industry's Tiaki Promise that makes them truly special.



“We’ve really embraced Tiaki here at Down to Earth by considering the environment in every decision we make,” says Down to Earth owner Michelle Boddie.

“To us, Tiaki means being kind to both people and place.”

Michelle and her husband Stefan run the business, Ash Waghorn guides groups through the caves, and all tours end with a cup of tea and a biscuit on the back deck of the family farmhouse.

“Customers come in small groups and their family meets our family,” Michelle says. “You get time to talk and we end up building a real connection – it’s not uncommon for people to suggest we come visit them when we are travelling and in their part of the world.”

As the years have gone by sustainability and the environment have become even more important to the Boddie family – so much so that forest restoration has become their number one goal, with the tours funding their work.

“We are fortunate to have other income streams so it’s not all about money for us. The tourism business for us is about doing good for the community and the environment, at this stage it really is just about generating enough money to fund the forest restoration and look after our amazing staff.

“The restoration is bringing us full circle from my husband’s family clearing the forest for farming in the early 1900s and then all of us working together to replant it with native trees for future generations.”



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The team at Down to Earth has planted more than 8,000 trees on the farm, replacing grassy paddocks and livestock with the native trees that came before. The result is a growing forest of glossy-leaved karamu, spindly mānuka and kānuka, bushy karamu and hardy harakeke flax, among many others.

Michelle says the difference in birdlife has been obvious and the family and tour guests routinely see and hear kereru (wood pigeons), pīwakawaka (fantails) and other native birds on their walk to and from the magical underground world they have come to explore.

The regenerating forest and work to fence off waterways around the property from stock has also led to an increase in insects and improved water quality, she says.

“By looking after the land and forest we’ve made sure there is healthy water down and more bugs for glowworms to eat. We think we have some pretty happy glowworms in our caves,” she laughs.

Keeping a healthy forest ecosystem means keeping the pests at bay, so Down to Earth have a trapping programme in place to keep possum and rat numbers down. Michelle says they go out of their way to do this humanely, using Good Nature traps that minimise any suffering, automatically re-setting, and sending digital alerts when a pest has been eradicated.

Down to Earth also works to reduce single use plastic by providing cups of tea and coffee in ceramic cups – which are then washed – rather than in plastic throwaway versions. They encourage people to fill up their own drink bottles at a tap in the farmhouse instead of selling guests plastic water bottles, and they provide recycle bins for guests to use while visiting.

Michelle says “just talking to people” can have a massive impact too.

“We have lots of conversations with our customers during and after the tours, just talking about how the land was cleared for farming and how we have brought the forest back. We have posters about the different birds and if people are interested we tell

them about other Waikato nature experiences, like Sanctuary Mountain Maungatautari predator-free forest.

“We also like to talk about the stalagmites and stalactites, letting people know about how long they take to form and how fragile they are.”

Michelle says they have some stalagmites that were broken and washed up in a past storm for people to touch when they arrive so they can “get it out of their system” before heading into the cave. Down there, touching stalagmites or taking anything else away is forbidden.

“When we started the tours years ago some people used to pick up rocks to take back home, but we talk to people about it now and we aren’t seeing that anymore.”

Michelle says Down to Earth is committed to the Tiaki Promise and she is pleased to see the environmental protection and sustainability being celebrated and supported, including by many regional authorities. Waikato Regional Council has been particularly helpful, providing advice on which species of native tree to plant and how to access funding to assist their forest restoration in future, she says.

“It’s important for our children and the next generation to leave the land in a better condition than we found it and it’s our aim to leave a healthy forest, healthy birds and healthy cave system.”



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