

# TIAKI IN KIRIKIROA

## Te Kaaroro Nature Precinct

### Beacon of conservation: become immersed in nature

The team at Te Kaaroro Nature Precinct in Kirikiriroa is working hand-in-paw with its human visitors and native and exotic zoological residents to fly the flag for conservation and embrace the values of New Zealand's Tiaki Promise.

Made up of Hamilton Zoo, the Waiwhakareke Natural Heritage Park, Hamilton Observatory and Everyday Eatery, the precinct has grown into one of the city's most popular visitor locations.

Te Kaaroro Nature Precinct Visitor Operations Manager Joe Henderson says the Tiaki Promise is a natural extension of the precinct's mission to connect people to its animal taonga (treasures) and inspire kaitiakitanga (guardianship) amongst the more than 180,000 visitors expected through its gates this year.

**"It's all about us looking after our people, our place and our animals. That has always been our aim and this strongly aligns with the Tiaki Promise kaupapa."**



Hamilton Zoo is a sanctuary for over 600 native and exotic animals, including 84 different species from around the world. Tigers, rhinoceroses, chimpanzees, giraffes and cheetahs make up its headline acts, accompanied by some unusual and rare stand-out animals like the resident caracal – an elf-eared wild cat native to Africa.

Joe says Hamilton Zoo's animals are ambassadors for the environment, helping people realise the real-world impact of not behaving in an environmentally conscious way.

"We can tell people why conservation is important, but me telling them that isn't as convincing as seeing the majesty of a tiger and learning about the negative effects we can have on their habitat and species survival."

The zoo also does some fantastic work caring for native species and has been successful in rehabilitating birds; including the kākā, reptile species and even some native bats.

The pekapeka (long tail bat) is one of only two native mammals in New Zealand and is significant to Kirikiriroa. Hamilton Zoo's work with these bats marks the first successful rehabilitation and release of its kind in the country.

The Zoo's 25-hectare expanse gives it the largest footprint of any zoo in the North Island, providing people with the opportunity to walk around and be "out in nature, observing nature," Joe says.

Joe says the Zoo's ground team are active with planting and a lot of thought goes into which new plants to introduce and where to plant them.



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"Planting is a testament to the spirit of kaitiakitanga. There's been a real push, where practical and appropriate, to stick to native planting."

Pest control across the entire Te Kaaroro Nature Precinct has made the Zoo a sought-after destination for native birds, with visiting flocks of kākā occasionally swooping in to stay for a while.

Joe says another way the Zoo channels the Tiaki Promise is looking at practical ways to be more sustainable. There is composting on-site for green waste and a fleet of electric bikes for staff to use, allowing them to reduce their use of diesel vehicles.

"As a conservation organisation we're very practical - electric bikes are available for everyone. Unless they need to haul a bale of hay to the rhinos, staff can jump on a bike."

**"Composting and turning waste into reusable materials and removing little things like plastic bin liner are small changes that can help make a big impact over time."**

He says all these visible measures enable the Zoo to create a 'living classroom' that harnesses the inspiration of the animals to educate people on functional steps they can take in their own journey towards kaitiakitanga.

"For us it's about trying to put the experience first and use that to encourage learning and conservation. We get the school groups coming through and they can learn the theory, but then going out and seeing it adds an emotional driver to what they have learnt which means they become even more invested."

The Zoo boasts New Zealand's only ferret enclosure, containing three ferrets caught on-site.

In the spirit of conservation, and after permission was granted by the Ministry for Primary Industries as ferrets are illegal to house, it was decided that the best option was to create an enclosure to teach visitors that predators are not inherently bad, but they can do significant damage to sensitive local ecosystems if they find themselves in new environments.

Nestled alongside Hamilton Zoo in Te Kaaroro is the 65-hectare Waiwhakareke Natural Heritage Park, Aotearoa's largest urban restoration project. Here, community-led native planting has transformed bare grassy paddocks back into a pre-colonial paradise for local wildlife, now strongly established and sustaining itself through self-seeding.

Signage highlights the history of the park to visitors, detailing when certain sections were planted and the 20th anniversary of the start of the Waiwhakareke's ecological revitalisation has recently been celebrated.

Joe says having the community involved in guardianship of the land is a key part of the Tiaki Promise.

"Community is important to us. One of the main ways we do this is through our planting events at Waiwhakareke. We're always looking for opportunities to make our site more accessible to our community."

Joe says the long-term vision for the park is to build a predator-exclusion fence to create a haven for native biodiversity and allow it to flourish.



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