

## Dr Philip Simpson



Writer and ecologist Dr Philip Simpson lives next to Abel Tasman National Park and is a Trustee for Project Janszoon. His previous books, on cabbage trees (tī kōuka), pōhutukawa, rātā and tōtara, all combine natural and cultural history, the latter including Māori and European values towards the trees

As you know my book on the Iron-hearted trees received accolade in the 2006 New Zealand Book Awards, indicating that the people of New Zealand are very aware and fond of pōhutukawa. It is of course a treasure (Rakau Rangatira, a chiefly tree) to Māori as well. I was for many years a trustee for Project Crimson.

I do not feel competent to comment on the quality of the proposed Erebus Memorial in terms of its physical impact on the tree. I will leave that to the expert arborists. My comments are of a more general nature about the tree, its status, its importance into the future, and the place.

My first thought is about the form of the tree itself and what this represents within pōhutukawa in general. Pōhutukawa is a genetically diverse species with variation in growth form, leaf size and shape, aerial root formation, flowering time and flower colour, and soil preferences. The Parnell tree is an example of the spreading sand dune form. This growth habit is likely to be an adaptation to the seasonally dry characteristics of sand, its unstable quality, its infertility, the extremes of temperature that sand dunes experience and the high wind of coastal environments. I do not know where this individual came from but there are fine examples of this growth form in widely scattered places. I am familiar with those at East Cape. That at Te Araroa is revered. Many are in isolated places and they are focal points for animals to feed and shelter and I have seen seriously damaged examples. I am not aware of any places that are entirely natural, and the spreading pōhutukawa trees are often few and scattered. Sand dune habitats generally have been poorly managed and attract weeds and recreational disturbance. Hence it is a growth form that is worthy of special attention. To have one within the city is a treat.

My second thought is about the status of this tree being defined as a Notable tree within the classification of the RNZIH. This is a very important status. Aotearoa New Zealand is a forest nation, given world renowned distinction because of its trees. We tend to have a rather inconsistent and reckless attitude to trees because so much of the national effort has gone into tree removal. Aspects of our past attitudes persist. However, the tree-scape of built New Zealand has important heritage character that shapes a sense of place among us. Notable trees sit at the pinnacle of this respect. I am dismayed that so many Notable trees have been lost simply to neglect, competition for space, unimaginative solutions to health and safety, and

simply a lack of recognition of cultural value. I presented the Tane Mahuta Public Lecture on “The native treelands of New Zealand” (published in the Journal of the RNZIH 18(2):20-27, 2015) lamenting a lack of concern among rural land owners for the wellbeing of the public landscape that they manage. The Notable status of the Parnell pōhutukawa means that it is a high level part of our national culture. It should not be exposed to any activities that compromise this status.

The age of this tree, approaching 200 years, is substantial in human terms, especially for a planted tree in a cultural setting. In terms of the tree itself, however, it is young. There are centuries of growth still to come. It might become one of the world’s most famous trees in the distant future. We need to be aware of this and not constrain its potential growth.

My third thought relates to the proposed memorial. This memorial serves to remind us of an extremely tragic act, one seemingly rooted in human error. For me the memorial will be a somber place, one of sadness, regret, empathy for those lost and for their surviving friends and relatives. It will be impossible not to feel a degree of blame and loss. The pōhutukawa, on the other hand, is a tree of celebration, of wonder and beauty, something to be thankful for.

The proximity of these opposing experiences reduces the importance and clarity of both. I think they are incompatible.

I hope these thoughts are of some value. Thank you once again for the opportunity. Philip