

# Residents angry after bid to save Rotorua lakes is delayed yet again

by Charlotte Winstone

Action to save the Rotorua lakes affected by algal bloom are too slow, say residents and absentee landowners.

At a meeting in Auckland in September, residents and bach owners were told by Environment Bay of Plenty (EBOP) the action plan to detoxify Lake Rotoiti, which is badly affected by algal growth, would not start until 2005.

Research by Waikato University's Professor David Hamilton indicates Rotorua lakes have been overfed with nutrients for decades, and this has resulted in oxygen being lost from the bottom of the lakes. Because the lakes have been deteriorating for a number of decades it could take as long for them to improve.

Rotoiti bach owner Derek Nolan says residents did not know how bad things were. "Our main grizzle at Lake Rotoiti is that we never knew this was a problem. Residents are upset that it has got this bad."

Mr Nolan says the lake is now in such a bad state it will be more difficult and expensive to remedy.

He says Lake Rotoiti was closed from Anniversary weekend to March this year and, although it was open in Easter, they could not swim or water-ski. Another Rotoiti bach owner says he cannot take a shower because the water is yellow.

Mr Nolan says the regional and district councils did not adequately advise residents and landowners about the extent of the problem. He says authorities were aware of problems with lake water quality for many years, but no action was taken.

Rotoiti property owner Bob Smith says despite the Rotorua district council's significant investment in a \$31 million sewage plant, it was "caught short" and the lakes continue to be polluted because of more than 40 years of sewage seeping into groundwater in the area.

In 2000 EBOP formulated an action plan to save the five lakes in the Rotorua district with the worst lake water quality: Lakes Rotorua, Rotoiti, Rotoehu, Okaro and Okareka. Spokesperson Paul Dell says there



SUFFOCATING: Lake Okareka is one of the smaller at-risk lakes.

is work being done to bring about long-term improvement of lake water quality. The action plan aims to reduce levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in the lakes.

"We haven't sat on our hands."

Mr Dell says EBOP is well aware people want an "immediate cure", but there is no quick fix.

"You have to be careful you are not going to cause an even greater environmental catastrophe."

Mr Dell says "major engineering options" may be the best option for the affected lakes. This may include diverting the flow of water from Lake Rotorua.

But he warns EBOP must adhere

to proper process for the job to be done properly and for resource management requirements to be satisfied.

More scientific research will need to be undertaken and interested parties must be consulted.

"If I did a consent tomorrow, there would be insufficient information to pass scrutiny."

"The government won't fast-track something just for the sake

of a fast-track if there isn't sufficient information."

This means consulting with iwi, the Department of Conservation and fishing groups, which may take some time. Residents worry the lakes will get progressively worse before they get better.

"Everyone is screaming for action. It's taken a hell of a long time for them to do something."

# Demand for cataract surgery may burden health system

by Sarah Stevens

A potential cataract epidemic threatens the New Zealand health system as our population ages, says a leading biomedical researcher.

As life expectancy increases and the population ages, the burden on the health system will increase, says Dr Paul Donaldson from the University of Auckland Molecular Vision Laboratory.

The chances of developing cataracts increase dramatically with age. At age 75, 50% of the population will have cataract disease. By 90, 100% will suffer from it, he says.

His concerns are echoed by Dr Andrew Riley, an ophthalmology registrar at Wellington Hospital, who says there will be a doubling of the population over the age of 65 in the next 20 years. "That means there will be a doubling of the need for surgery."

A team of researchers at the University of Auckland hope to develop drugs that will delay the need for surgery and cut the cost to the public health system.

Cataract surgery, which involves replacing the damaged lens with a plastic one, is the most frequently performed operation in the world.

In 2000 more than 8500 cataract operations were publicly funded.

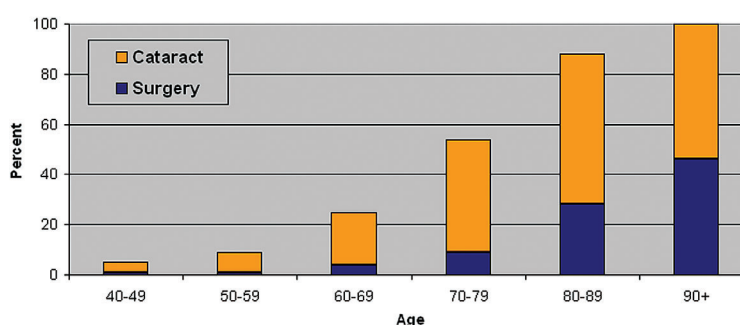
Cataract is a disease of the lens that causes light to scatter rather than focus on the retina. It leads to blurry vision and, left untreated, it results in blindness.

To develop the drug therapies, the researchers are working to better understand how the healthy lens functions.

Until recently it was believed that the lens, the largest tissue in the body without blood vessels, had no circulation system and received nutrients through passive diffusion. But researchers in the Molecular Vision Laboratory, funded by the Health Research Council, have found evidence of an internal microcirculation system that delivers nutrients and removes wastes, maintaining lens structure and transparency.

Dr Donaldson says a better understanding of the healthy function of the

## Chances of developing cataracts increase with age



lens can help researchers establish how the failure of certain parts of the system leads to cataracts.

Research has shown that giving antioxidants to patients with cataracts can prevent or slow down the development of the disease.

"By understanding how the lens works you can work out how to use the drugs. If they can't get to where they are supposed to be, it is not good to deliver antioxidants," says Dr Donaldson.

The Auckland researchers are now hoping to develop drugs that will target specific proteins in the lens and

up-regulate the circulation process. This will help to maintain the flow of antioxidants and lens transparency.

"Most people who have cataract surgery die of natural causes within two or three years of the surgery," says Dr Donaldson.

Professor Charles McGee, director of Clinical Ophthalmology at Auckland University, says any drug to treat cataracts is about 10 years away. "However, if it could delay the progress of cataract development, this would be very significant indeed, both in benefits to patients and financial savings to the public health service."

# Controversy over plans to preserve west coast marine life

by Gordon Gillan

Controversial plans for Auckland's west coast will reach a new stage when the University of Auckland completes a six-week review of public submissions this month.

The shores of the west coast host organisms such as green-lipped mussels, anemones, whelks and giant bull kelp.

Many inter-tidal areas are the habitat of a variety of bird life, some of which are endangered, for example, the New Zealand dotterel and the New Zealand fairy tern.

The sub-tidal areas host crayfish, numerous finfish species and marine mammals, like whales and seals, as well as the critically endangered Maui's dolphin.

With such a range of mammals and wildlife, clearly some conservation of the area is needed. All the environmental groups studying the west coast are unanimous that better conservation of the west coast is required. However, they differ vastly on what action they feel is appropriate.

The West Coast Working Group first released a draft proposal for the area in April and immediately invited the public to submit their views on proposals for the coastal area.

The group's suggestion of a marine park between South Kaipara Head and Port Waikato has annoyed some of the community, who feel that public use of the vast area will be restricted.

Much of the controversy surrounds possible restrictions on recreational and commercial fishing in the proposed marine park.

Sand and Sea is one of the groups against a marine park for the area. The group was formed in May to promote the responsible and sustainable use of coastal resources.

Sand and Sea spokesperson John van der Haas says instituting new laws is neither necessary nor indeed the solution to any problems.

"We realise there are spots on the west coast that are under pressure, but user education and the enforcement of existing laws are the answer."

Sand and Sea chairman John Horsfall says time and money would be better spent employing people to help prevent pollution in the region and stop fish poaching.

"We also have to deal with the pollution. Fish are sick, especially the dolphins. That is far more important than locking people out of small areas of the west coast."

Option 4 is another group that represent fishers. The group is concerned about the West coast group's proposals to further restrict all fishing. Spokesperson Trish Rea says the group will defend the right of people to fish for food.

"We are looking at re-writing fishing legislation. We have got involved with the marine park issue as it was getting to the stage that we couldn't stand by and watch access rights disappear while we are fighting for fishing rights."

The West coast group says some of the groups are confused with the difference between marine parks and marine reserves.

The University of Auckland review will provide the working group with an idea of how some of the community feel about the project.

Interested parties have had six months to comment on what action they feel should be taken.