

Hill climb part of council's plan to save Maungawhau

Auckland City Council has created a new Mt Eden management plan in the aim of preserving the historic site. AMY CAMPBELL, CHARLOTTE COYLE, JOMINE NEETHLING and GERALDINE ROPER take a closer look.

It is the second most visited site in New Zealand – enjoyed by 1.2 million people every year.

It has been described by tourist operators as having the best panoramic view of the Auckland region.

But if you plan on reaching Mt Eden's summit in the near future, you may have to get your walking shoes on.

After a lengthy consultation process with advisory groups, local iwi and the public, the Auckland City Council has created a new Maungawhau-Mt Eden management plan.

The plan could mean that vehicles will be banned from the mountain, in an attempt to restore and protect the land.

A visitor centre halfway up Mt Eden is also planned, with the aim of educating people about the mountain's historical and cultural value.

Maungawhau Advisory Group community representative Bob Demler says: "The plan is centred on the protection of this archaeological site and its heritage."

Until the 1700s the mountain was a densely populated pa, with terraces, store pits and garden plots.

It was gifted by Ngati Whatua chief Te Kawau to the Crown in 1840 and kept unoccupied ever since.

Now Mt Eden is a highly popular tourist destination and has one main access road to the summit.

Department of Conservation representative Warwick Murray, who signed off the management plan in its final stage, says: "Vehicles are skewing the balance between archaeological preservation and enjoyment purposes too far toward the people side.

"This is at the expense and integrity of its archaeological features."

Concern over treatment of the mountain was first voiced by the Maungawhau Advisory Group seven years ago.

Chair Wendy Davies says they felt too many people are using Mt Eden, and not appreciating its significance.

"All these pairs of feet are just too damaging. There's all this wear and tear for no reason because no one learns anything about the mountain while they're up there."

Davies says the battle between buses and pedestrians has also been an issue due to the narrow roads and lack of space at the summit.

The advisory group has been a key player in working with the council to develop the new management plan.

Demler says the group still wants to preserve public access to the mountain but is working on ways it can control this access.

One idea is to turn the current tearooms, half way up the mountain, into a visitor and education centre.

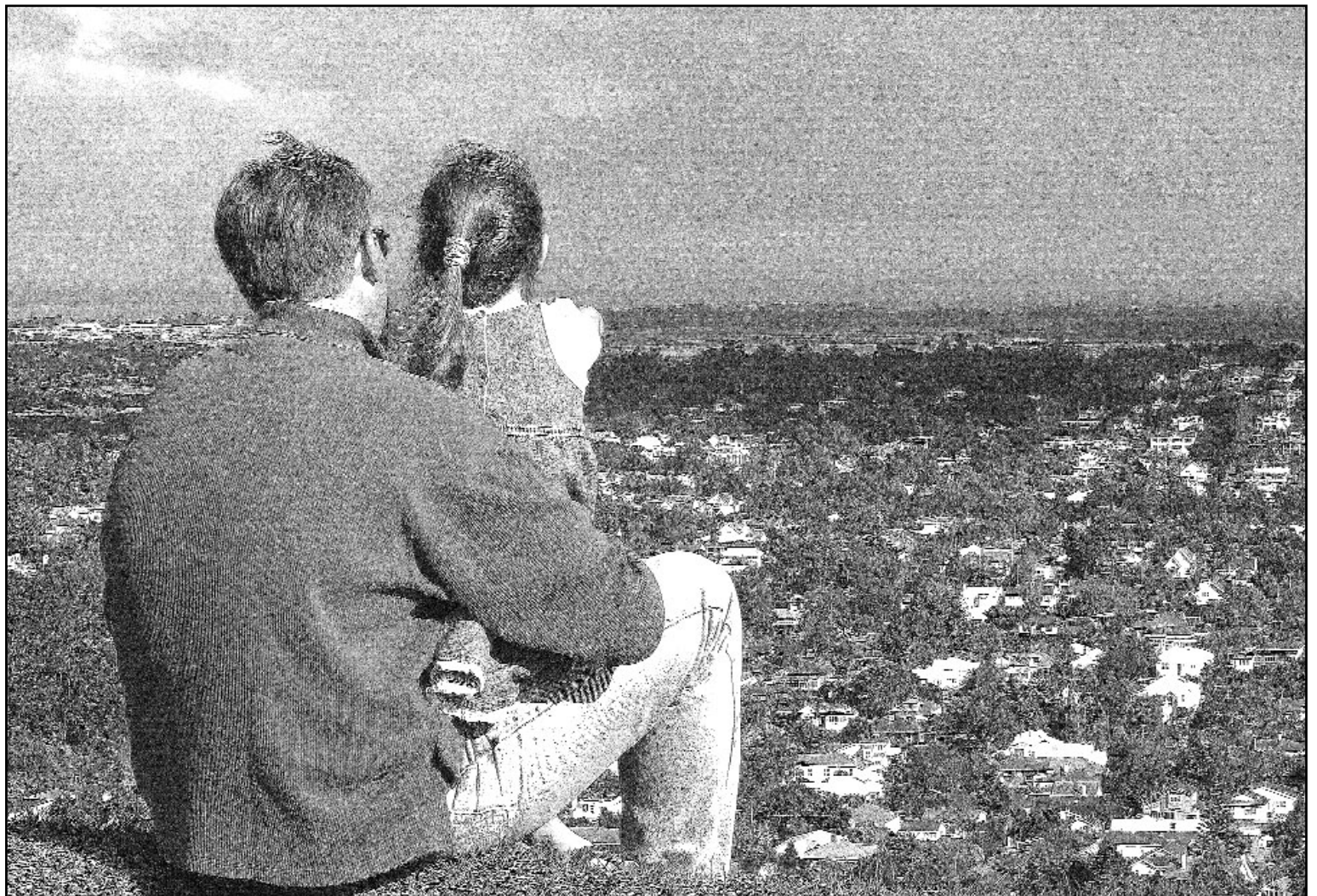
From here people could learn about the mountain and then either walk or catch an alternative form of transport to the top, says Demler.

The alternative form – possibly a shuttle or rubber-wheeled train – would transport the disabled, the elderly, people with young children and the "lazy" to the top.

Davies says: "We need some form of alternative transport, because we still want people to go up there."

The council has also looked into creating a dedicated pedestrian route because the many random walking paths have contributed further to the toll on the land, says Davies.

"We would like to see the existing road made narrower – still allowing emergency vehicle access – and also altered to allow for a permanent walking path.



MT EDEN: A father and daughter enjoy the view from the summit.

The Auckland City Council has been receiving public submissions on the mountain's management since January 2005.

These submissions have helped to shape the new plan for Mt Eden.

Eden-Albert councillor Neil Abel says he is pleased with its development.

"The key element here is that Auckland's volcanic cones are unique. We need to respect these mountains as part of our heritage."

Abel says the current situation on top of Mt Eden is unacceptable.

He says there can be 10 to 12 buses up there at a time "all pumping

out diesel fumes".

"There is so much junk left up there, like cigarettes and bottle caps - most of which comes from the tourist buses.

"It's an abuse of what I perceive to be a sacred place and it can't carry on."

Abel says he does not think the vehicle ban will cause a decline in visitors.

"This is about restoration of the mountain," he says. "I expect people to grasp the whole thing."

But some tourists are not so sure they will visit Mt Eden's summit if they are made to walk.

"We were talking about it when we drove up here, and we definitely wouldn't walk," says Slovakian tourist Lukas Sojka, sitting with his partner, Martina Apalovicova, at the top of Mt Eden.

"You just wouldn't enjoy it as much because you would be tired," says Apalovicova.

Some central Auckland residents also say they would not walk up Mt Eden, and that they want it to stay open to vehicles.

"If I have to walk up the mountain I just won't go there any more," says Mt Eden local Kesha Robertson.

Tourism Auckland chief executive Graham Osborne agrees with the council that the development of Mt Eden is a positive step in the right direction.

"It's absolutely to Auckland city's credit to invest in the infrastructure of Mangawhau, because in Auckland we don't place sufficient value on the key heritage sites," he says.

Osborne says Tourism Auckland "fully supports" the council's thinking on vehicle access to the summit.

Stray Travel tour guide Nathan Williams says even though the decision will do damage to his business, he understands the council's reasoning for the change.

He says that because the crater has not been consistently policed a lot of damage has occurred.

"There are probably eight signs around the rim of the crater telling people to stay out, but people just completely ignore them."

Williams says Ngati Whatua told him that it would take 30 years for the soil to heal from the lines caused by people going down in to the crater.

"At the end of the day, no one respects the volcano," Williams says.

"People have no consideration for the place's archaeological importance and the fact that it's sacred to Maori."

Williams says the council's plan will help to educate people about the mountain's significance.

Ngati Whatua o Orakei is the mana whenua of Auckland, and Mt Eden is one of its ancestral mountains.

Ngati Whatua o Orakei Maori Trust Board chairperson Grant Hawke says the board was pleased to be consulted by the council on the plan, because Maori have not always been included in similar decisions.

"Before 1990, there was no playing field for Maori to negotiate cultural issues. But we have a relationship to the land and iconic places through

ancestral ties," says Hawke.

"Ngati Whatua entirely supports the maintenance as we have been at the coal-face of the development plan – we know it yard by yard, metre by metre – from quite a few years back."

He says the mountain has not been respected in the past because tourism has made it too commercial and many visitors ignore the Maori history of the mountain.

Hawke points to the way the crater rocks are frequently moved to form all kinds of unnatural signage as an example of this.

"But these rocks are sacred – certain Maori rites took place there.

"It's just like at the sea. When you go looking for crabs or crustations under a rock, you put the rock back where you found it. These are not all Maori ideas – a lot of it is common sense."

He also feels that if things are to change, people need to be educated on the significance of the mountain.

DOC representative Warwick Murray says the plan for preservation of Mt Eden is similar to that used on Mt Ruapehu.

"Ruapehu was done on a much larger scale but it addresses similar issues to those being faced on Mt Eden."

As it is a unique site to Maori, Mt Ruapehu also has spiritual significance, says Murray.

So it was decided ski slopes, toe ropes and vehicle access would not be permitted in the tapu summit area.

Even earlier, Maori understood the importance of preserving the land for future generations, Hawke says.

The management plan highlights that after 1720 Ngati Whatua decided to leave Mt Eden unoccupied – the soil had been depleted and over-used.

The tribe felt that time would be the best way for the mountain to heal after years of being drawn from.

Perhaps this is as true today as it was then.