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# Stage set for return of nature

**S**TOMACHS churn in unison as the chopper clears the ridge and the ground beneath us falls away to reveal a hillside cleared of the pine trees that seem to march forever through the rugged remoteness south of the vast Te Urewera.

To the west Taupo and the Central Plateau beckon, and to the north, south and east the cafes and vineyards of the coast seem a world away from this rugged hinterland with its sharp contours blanketed by imported pine.

"This is our latest section," a voice crackles in my headset. "Look down there and you can see where we've come from."

Looking down, I can see where the new growth juts into the forestry block — the lighter green and drab olive of young, regenerating native bush spearing the darker-coloured uniformity of imported pine. This is the Maungataniwha Pine Forest, a 4000ha logging concession now managed by the Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust.

The trust, established by businessman Simon Hall, helps restore threatened species of fauna and flora, and ngahere mauri (forest lifeforce), to native forests.

Just three decades ago this was mature native forest. It was logged progressively and then burned before being put under pine.

Now in the largest and most expensive project yet undertaken by the trust and the largest privately funded initiative of its kind in New Zealand, the entire area is being turned back into regenerating native forest. The wheel is turning full circle.

My host, trustee and estate manager Pete Shaw, says regenerating pine seedlings are a major challenge. "They're a bugger to get rid of. We try to rip them out manually but where the terrain is too difficult to get a ground team in, or where the regrowth is too dense, we have to spray them."

It's an expensive business — manual clearance costs about \$500 a hectare, while spraying it costs \$140

a hectare for the "brew", the chopper hire and other equipment. It takes two years to clear logged land of wilding pines, and a further eight to get it to full regeneration. During that time the land is nurtured, treated and monitored by Pete and his team to ensure the species they expect to appear do.

"We haven't had to seed any regenerating blocks yet," Pete said. "The native seed is in the soil, waiting. Given a chance to flourish, it does so."

Grasses are first — native species like hookgrass and toetoe; then shrubs or small trees like mahoe and wineberry. Those are followed by mountain cabbage tree, kanuka and native fuschia. Once those have established the stage is set for larger stuff such as red and silver beech.

Native birds such as kereru and silvereyes play a vital role, spreading seed and propagating the land. "Once we see these guys on the land we know the battle is half won," Pete said.

The trust has been reclaiming the land from pine only since 2008 and Pete is cautious about claiming any great success... yet.

"There isn't a precedent in New Zealand for forest regeneration on this scale. This is real ground breaking, work-it-out-as-you-go-along stuff. So there are no guarantees we'll succeed."

The spraying operation has been a real example of "suck it and see" — figuring out what works and what doesn't. The team needed a spray that whacked the wilding pines while giving the natives a chance to establish.

"... We worked with Lin Wilson, a former deer recovery pilot, to come up with a brew that is potent enough to knock off about 95 per cent of the pine regrowth but sufficiently benign to let enough of the wild stuff take hold," Pete explained. "Since then we've tweaked and refined the process to the point that we're pretty happy we've got a good balance."

The trust's pioneering forest

regeneration work is mirrored in restoration projects across its four properties — three in the North Island and one in Fiordland.

"Regeneration is about re-creating what was there in the first place; restoration is about making good the damage that's been done to original forest," Pete explains.

"As with regeneration we're constantly charting new territory when it comes to restoration. The learning curve is just immense."

One such project involves kakabeak (*Clianthus maximus*), a rare shrub ranked "nationally critical". Only 90 plants are known to be growing in the wild across the whole of New Zealand.

With Department of Conservation (DoC) help the trust has launched a kakabeak restoration project in the Maungataniwha Native Forest using plants in nearby Te Urewera National Park as a source. It hopes to bring the plant back from the brink of extinction. "This, in essence, is what the trust is about," Pete said. "We're breaking new ground in the field of large-scale regeneration and restoration of privately owned forest land — all with a view to restoring its soul, its lifeforce."

To that end the trust is open to approaches by commercial and research partners wanting to use its land and resources for science and product development. It's already working with DoC on a who (blue duck) research project, and on baiting and trapping assessment exercises. And a partnership is being explored with Lincoln University's Centre for Wildlife Management and Conservation whereby the trust would host many of its research projects.

I'm struck by the immensity of this challenge. But with socially aware benefactors like Simon Hall and dedicated, pioneering men and women of worth like Pete Shaw and his team, the future of collaborative, research-based, privately funded conservation in this country is in good hands.



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## **“We’re constantly charting new territory.”**

Pete Shaw, estate manager

**The Forest Lifeforce Restoration Trust is undertaking the largest privately funded forest regeneration initiative of its kind yet seen in New Zealand. Peter Heath reports from the Maungataniwha Pine Forest**



**NATURAL STATE:** An outlook over Maungataniwha Native Forest. It's the ambition of the FLR Trust that the slopes of the Maungataniwha Pine Forest should one day be restored to this pristine state.

PHOTO/FILE2507125P7607



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**RESCUE OPERATION:** Simon Hall, FLR Trust chairman, with a flowering kakabeak plant in a specially built enclosure at Waiau Camp. PHOTO/FILE 250712SIMONHALI



**ROOM TO GROW:** Native plants reclaim the slopes of the Maungataniwha Pine Forest, site of the largest privately funded forest regeneration initiative of its kind yet seen in New Zealand. PHOTO/FILE 250712REGENERATION2.JF



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**MISSION CONTROL:** Waiau Camp, nerve centre of the FLR Trust's operations in the Maungataniwha Native Forest. PHOTO/FILE 250712WAIUAUCAMP.JPG



**BACK TO NATURE:** Here wilding pine has been sprayed (foreground) while regenerating native forest is taking hold in the background. PHOTO/FILE 250712REGENERATION3.JPG