

Looking to our resources

Former stockman Nick Pirikahu leans back in his chair and surveys his new workplace. No more cattleyards and dusty, bellowing beasts. Today he's co-ordinator of the Rangitawhi Marae Enterprise Trust, spokesperson for a workforce of 100. His office in the former Patea Courthouse is decorated with all the accoutrements of big business — wall charts, productivity graphs and personal secretary.

By Yvonne Dasler

The trust was formed when the closure of the Patea freezing works put 800 people out of work in August 1982. Its members and workers come from seven marae stretching north from Kai Iwi to Manutahi on the lands of the Ngati Ruanui and Nga Rauru.

"The closing of the works forced us to look to our own resources," says Mr Pirikahu. "We've always had them, only before we didn't have the time or necessity to utilise them properly."

The resources of land and talent had lain fallow for generations. With the people previously engaged in high income occupations, there had been no need to develop marae enterprises and occupational training schemes. Till the works closed.

"When we looked at the options it was obvious we should use the land around the maraes," says Mr Pirikahu. But that didn't mean willy-nilly plantings. Before a single sod was turned, the prospective farmers toured the North Island, seeking horticultural know-how from rural marae who had earlier faced problems of youth unemployment and industrial redundancy.

By the end of the first year of operation the trust has nine blocks — ranging in size from two to eight hectares — in market gardens. The sandy loams around Whenuakura have long been famed for the high quality kumara they produce, and other vegetables grow well in the coastal Taranaki soils.

Looking to the future, the trust plans to plant orchards of nectarines and kiwifruit and has its eye on the export market with a 2ha experimental block of Japanese squash. Feasibility studies are also being done into forestry and rabbit farming and some members are urging a move into hydroponics.

The trust is administered by a committee comprised of two representatives from each marae who meet monthly to discuss progress, plan for the future and thrash out issues of community concern. Patea's kohanga reo owed its existence in no small part to the enthusiastic backing of the Rangitawhi Marae Enterprise Trust.

"While I was as shocked and upset as everybody else when the works closed, now I can see it's not so bad," says Nick Pirikahu. "It's opened up our

thinking and enabled people to discover talents they never knew they had. When the works was going only a few people made the decisions. Now everyone has a say and we share the thinking and the practical work alike."

It hasn't been easy to make the change from one lifestyle to another. People have found it difficult to go from the cocooned world of regular pay-packets, assigned tasks and paid holidays to the insecurities and challenges of self-employment, uncertain cash returns, and the vagaries of weather and the markets. It's been hard too, to switch from a timeclock mentality to the rhythm of the seasons. Tonnes of cabbages were left to rot in the ground because they ripened at a time when trust workers were not receiving PEP payments.

But there have been unexpected bonuses. "The support of the pakeha farming community has been fantastic," says Mr Pirikahu. "They're our best allies. Our situation has really brought their heart out and they're a big help when it comes to giving advice and loaning implements."

The best return of all has been in improved relationships. Maraes with a history of distrust and disagreement are now uniting in a solid front to meet a common challenge, formerly shy women are taking prominent community roles, and, says Mr Pirikahu, family life has been enhanced. "It's a good thing the works closed. With all that money and an easy life people forgot their priorities. Now they're spending more time with their families and less time and money in the pub. Patea's a better place all round."

Advanced leadership training

Anania Tamati Randall of Wainuiomata is among the nearly sixty participants attending the Haggai Institute for Advanced Leadership Training convening in Singapore.

Participants come from some twenty-three different countries. These include nations of Africa, Asia, South America and New Zealand. Courses of study include inter-cultural relationships, management and communications.

The Institute Dean is Dr George Samuel, a specialist in nuclear medicine under appointment by the United Nations. Dr Samuel, an outstanding Christian leader from South India, gives a large share of his time to this programme.

Dr W.A. Haggai is the father of the Institute founder John Haggai and also one of the staff lecturers.



Anania T. Randall (left) of Wainuiomata Baptist, New Zealand confers with Dr W.A. Haggai on the campus of Haggai Institute, Singapore.