



Teaching pre-schoolers at Poroporo School, Whakatane.

Nine years later (and with \$20,000 raised and a further \$20,000 subsidy from the Department of Maori Affairs), the new dining room is near completion.

It has been built solely by voluntary labour and relied heavily on the experience of Maori tradesmen (many of whom work at the Whakatane Board Mills, a subsidiary of N.Z. Forest Products).

Romana says the new dining room is mainly for the teenagers. It is a place where they can meet for recreation and gives them a venue to mix with their elders.

"Young people must learn the proper Maori procedures and language", he says "and there is no better way than sitting with us oldies on the paepae."

There are already indications that the young are returning. The Poroporo football club has approached the marae trustees about building club-rooms on the marae and the trustees are considering the request.

"We already have a football field on the marae. Our dining room is part of the plan to attract more youngsters," says Romana.

Another step in the return is happening at the nearby Poroporo School.

While the 25 school-age children are taught by a teacher, in the room next door Maori kuia and mothers teach their pre-schoolers the Maori language, culture and songs.

Every Monday and Wednesday mornings these women and about 30 children meet to korero Maori.

"It is preserving our culture", Romana says. "It is the right way to teach youngsters about their heritage."

Meanwhile Bill Hall, foreman Raw Materials at the board mills and past chairman of the Puawairua marae committee says Whakatane is the prime location for the return.

Although the people had to leave the maraes to find homes, he says, they did not have to leave the district to find work.

"The board mills is the main reason why this shift back to the maraes is working. Without it, the people would have left the area and there would be no-one to entice back."

Bill is not a Maori but was brought up on the marae and speaks Maori. He describes himself as a Kiwi

He believes a return to the marae is essential if the Maori people want their values and culture to survive.

"It is not a move we are strongly involved in," he says. "Our marae originates from one family (the Hohapata's) and all the 300 members are related."

"Because of that we have been able to preserve our heritage but for many of the others, it has been a struggle."

N.Z. Forest Products Limited has played an important role in making this return possible — both on the work front and within the community, he says.

Job security means that many of the board mill workers are prepared to put more effort into rebuilding their maraes. They are not scared that they will be forced to move on, says Bill.

And in turn, the marae committees have been able to construct or renovate their buildings with a high proportion of NZFP products.

"Economics has become an important part of everyone's life, Maori or Pakeha," says Bill. "And the board mills has played a crucial role in the lives of about 80 per cent of the Whakatane Maoris, in some way or other."

"The idea of returning to the maraes is a good one. We are lucky that the mills have helped make it possible."