

Natural areas of Otamatea Ecological District (Northland Conservancy)

Reconnaissance Survey Report for the Protected Natural
Areas Programme

Jenny Lux and Sarah Beadel

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Foreword

This report forms part of a series of reconnaissance survey reports for the Protected Natural Areas Programme (PNAP) in the Northland Conservancy of the Department of Conservation. It describes the significant natural areas of the Otamatea Ecological District within Northland Conservancy, and was surveyed during the summer of 2005/06. There has been no previous comprehensive survey and review of ecological information of this geographical area. This report therefore provides a significant information resource for the Department of Conservation, iwi, landowners, Kaipara District Council, Northland Regional Council, resource management planners, interest groups, and the general public to help conserve natural areas.

The Northland Conservancy part of Otamatea Ecological District is a geologically diverse landscape of low rolling hills dissected by three inner arms of the northern Kaipara Harbour. On land, much of the original vegetation cover and wildlife habitat has been lost; however, the estuarine habitats are still relatively intact. Calm, mangrove-filled inlets, extensive mudflats, and small remnants of diverse coastal forest characterise the gentle, estuarine nature of this part of the Ecological District. The shallow intertidal areas are essential winter feeding grounds for many New Zealand waders, which migrate within New Zealand, as well as for large flocks of transequatorial migrant birds resident over summer.

This study provides an objective assessment of the elements of nature that remain, protected and unprotected, their value as representative examples of our natural heritage, and their relative ecological significance. The focus of the Protected Natural Areas Programme is to provide this information and guidance. The challenge then is for the community to work collaboratively to protect and enhance these natural areas.

The Otamatea (Northland Conservancy) PNAP survey report was prepared by Wildland Consultants Ltd under contract to the Department of Conservation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Jenkins', with a stylized, flowing script.

Chris Jenkins

Conservator Northland

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Abstract

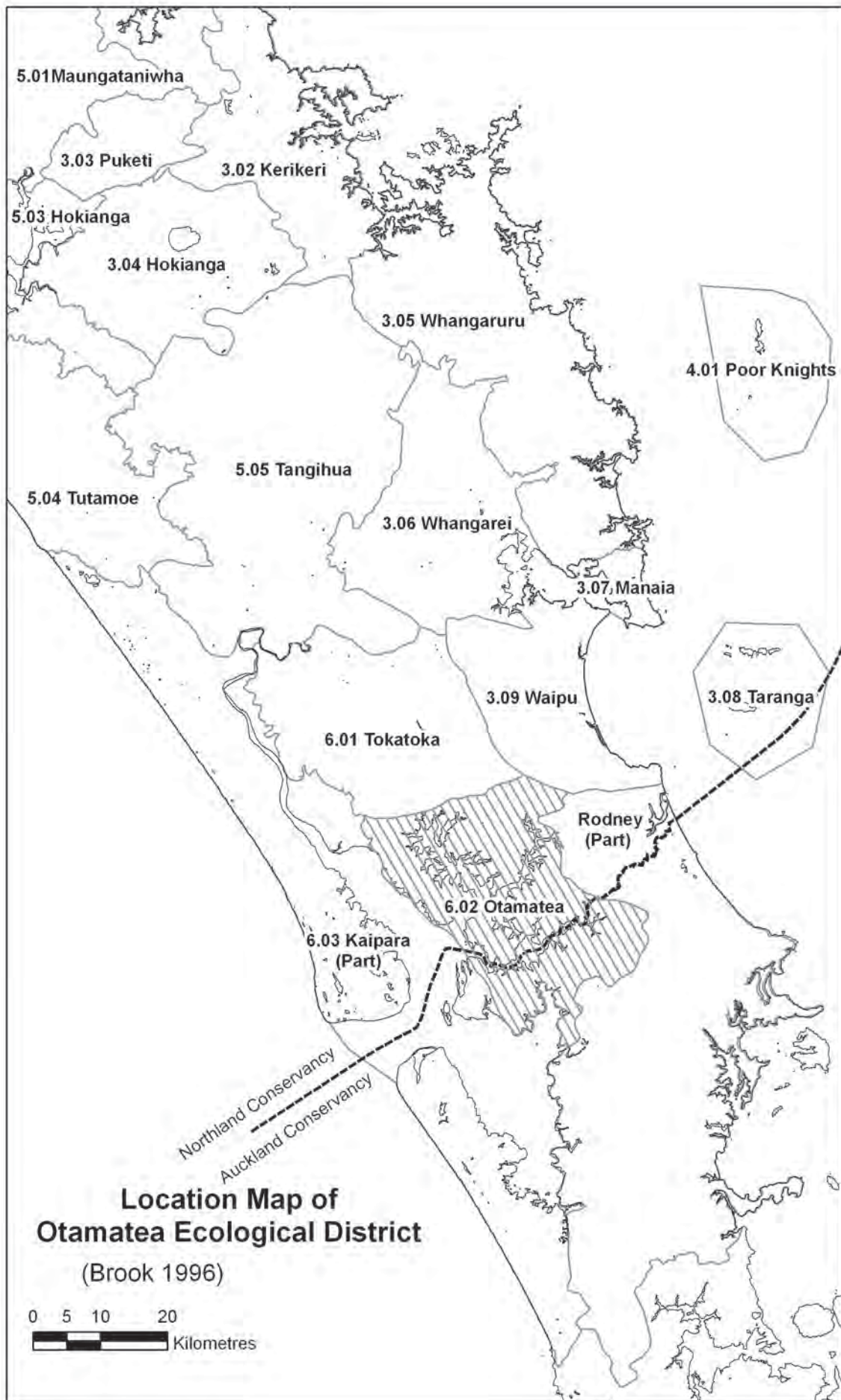
Otamatea Ecological District is located in the Kaipara Ecological Region, centred on the northern inner arms of the Kaipara Harbour. It straddles the boundary between the Northland and Auckland Conservancies of the Department of Conservation, which is the same boundary as that between the Northland and Auckland Regional Councils. The Northland part encompasses 57,950 ha, or 55% of the Ecological District. The balance of Otamatea Ecological District located within Auckland Region has been previously surveyed by the Auckland Regional Council (Davis 2002).

Natural areas of ecological significance in the Northland Conservancy part of the Ecological District were identified using information from a reconnaissance survey undertaken over the summer of 2005/06, together with information from a range of reports, existing databases and other unpublished information.

The Northland part of the Otamatea Ecological District (Otamatea ED Northland) comprises three major tidal saltwater rivers (Arapaoa, Otamatea, and Oruawharo), each of which has extensive mangroves, mudflats and sandflats. The intertidal zone is a nationally and internationally important habitat for both non-migratory and migratory bird species. Estuarine and harbour areas in the Northland part of the Ecological District support populations of eight 'acutely threatened', six 'chronically threatened', and eight 'at risk' bird species. The low, undulating hills between Hukatere peninsula in the north-west, Whakapirau to Batley in the centre, and Puketotara Peninsula in the south, support hundreds of small remnants of a diverse range of secondary coastal and semi-coastal forest types, as well as a limited extent of regenerating shrubland. The main freshwater wetlands are constructed ponds and lakes.

A total of 209 natural areas were identified. Of these, 126 are considered to be of particular ecological significance (Level 1 sites). In a small number of cases the values of natural areas could not be assessed fully due to insufficient information.

Much of the former indigenous biodiversity of Otamatea ED Northland has been lost. At present, only 9.75% of the land cover is indigenous vegetation or wetland, though estuarine habitat is still extensive. Only 1.6% of the identified natural areas are currently legally protected, which is less than 0.5% of the total extent of Otamatea ED Northland. The physical and legal protection of priority areas for protection would constitute an important first step in safeguarding remaining indigenous biodiversity. However, even if all priority areas were protected, there would still be a need for ecological restoration of additional corridors, linkages and buffers to provide better connectivity between natural areas.



Map 1. Location map of Otamatea Ecological District.



Map 2 (above and opposite). Map of surveyed sites, Otamatea Ecological District, including land administered by the Department of Conservation. Note that the representation of protected areas is indicative only and should not be taken to accurately delineate these areas.

