



*Walk the plank: Seddon School children get off the boat to explore Bluemine Island during their Eco School Cruise with Pete and Takutai Beech*

# Story Time

Maori pass on their knowledge by telling stories. The same approach is used on a very special school camp in the Marlborough Sounds, which includes orcas, Captain Cook and sleeping on a marae.

By Bev Doole. Photography by Peter Burge



Pete Beech at the helm – “Children are amazingly open to our environmental message”

April Spence steps onto the Waikawa Marae without a trace of nerves. Her assured karanga announces who we are – Awatere – and her voice dies away at the end of each call like an experienced kuia. April is 11 years old and goes to Seddon School. She and 20 classmates are starting their school camp in the Marlborough Sounds with an overnight stay at the marae, and the powhiri is just the first of many new experiences for this group of country kids.

There's a sense of awe as we enter the whareniui (meeting house). It is a calm, open space lined with geometric tukutuku panels (steps to heaven) and history-laden carvings. “This is really cool. Is this where we're all going to sleep?” asks one of the children once the formal proceedings are over. For nearly all of us, it is our first time on a marae, and Te Atiawa live up to their reputation as generous hosts, making us feel at ease.

Local historian Gary Buchanan tells the story of each poupou (carving), dropping in bits of detail such as Papatunuku and Ranginui (Earth Mother and Sky Father) having 71 children, including Tane Mahuta, the God of the Forest. He points out Te Rauparaha – “the chief with the gun” – and

“I enjoyed Gary's talk about the carvings and the mythical creatures. It was the first time I'd heard them.”

Aaron Townend

the green moko that represents the burning of human flesh. “These guys were cannibals. You know what they are? They ate their enemies.” All squirming stops and the children pepper him with more questions.

About halfway around the whareniui there is a poupou of Te Whiti, the Te Atiawa

chief who tried to stop the government taking their land. Gary points out a small wooden drum: “Pete Beech made that – it represents the colonial troops.”

Pete Beech is something of a storyteller himself. The children meet him at Waikawa wharf the next morning where he and his wife, Takutai, are loading up their launch ready to take us out down the Queen Charlotte Sound for a couple of days.

Pete and Takutai run eco school cruises as part of their Myths & Legends Eco-tours company. Pete's family has been in the Marlborough Sounds for six generations. His great-grandfather cleared the bush and carved out the family farm at Endeavour Inlet. His father was a boat-builder and passed those skills on to Pete, who rebuilt Tutanakei, the 80-year-old kauri launch that generously accommodates us all. Everyone follows the life-jacket instructions (to be worn at all times) and Takutai (known as 'Auntie') plumps up cushions to make

lots of comfy places for the 21 children, two teachers and four parents on board.

The boat soon divides into different areas – the chatty ones take up the padded seats down the back, protected from the wind by the zip-up plastic sidings; a smaller group gets more adventurous and heads out to the front deck, leaning back on pillows against the wheelhouse; while three mates – Ned, Aaron and Ben – lay claim to the front railings, mesmerised by the bow wave as Tutanakei chugs slowly down the sound.

Most of the time, Pete has one hand on the helm and the other on the microphone. “Teachers ask me to supply fact sheets but that's not how kids really learn,” he says. “On these school cruises, I just tell stories all day. I talk to them about everything – the dolphins and islands and endangered birds, Maori history and beliefs, the whalers and sealers, farmers and fishermen. We talk about what's under the water and how important it is to protect the habitat, how food chains work and the need to balance making money with looking after the environment. We have a quiz every night and it's amazing how much they remember.”

Like Gary at the marae, Pete is showing the power of oral history. “It's what our old people do – they tell stories to remember, and the teaching and knowledge is passed on through the generations.”

I have my doubts about how much knowledge is being absorbed by room 3 from Seddon School. The kids are in their own world – talking to friends, wandering about the boat, keeping a lookout for dolphins and little blue penguins, taking turns at steering the boat and chomping through the regularly proffered fruit and snacks. Meanwhile, the grownups marvel at our luck with the weather – clear sky, sparkling sun on turquoise sea, green hills giving way to blue mountains and snow-tipped Mount Tapuenuku in the south. The day feels good and is about to get better.

Takutai, with her eagle eyes, is wondering why the mail boat is lingering around Bluemine Island. Pete gets on the radio and the mail boat reports back: they've spotted a small pod of orca. Pete's face creases into one of his frequent smiles as he picks up the microphone and tells the kids to keep a lookout. “They're easier to spot than dolphins – their dorsal fin is like a tall black triangle and can be as high as the cabin. We



Dusky dolphins (top). Quiz night (above) proves everyone's been listening to Pete's stories

don't often see them so this could be a real treat.”

Pete becomes less Jacques Cousteau and more Captain Ahab as he turns Tutanakei towards the island. His commentary continues: “Orcas are often called killer whales but they're actually dolphins. They can swim at 45 knots. Dolphins go about 20 knots and Tutanakei's top speed is 10 knots. Orcas are at the very top of the food chain in the sea.” And then we see the first tall black fin slice through the water, about 30m away. The boat goes quiet until one of the class speaks in awe for us all: “That's sick!”

Two adult orca with a baby between them glide swiftly and smoothly through the water, close to the coast. “They'll be hunting down a feed of stingrays,” says Pete, as the food chain comes to life in front of us.

At Resolution Bay, we get even closer to a more vulnerable part of the sounds' food chain – blue cod. Recreational cod fishing has been banned since 2008 to try to let numbers recover, and at the end of the jetty in the bay we see just how many there could one day be. The kids lie down on their tummies for a better view as tame cod – brilliant flashes of blue – jostle to snatch pieces of bread. Even camp dad Lane



Three giant teepees sleep all the kids and parents. There's no TV but plenty of Sky

Spence, whose first question to Pete back at Waikawa was whether there were fishing rods on board, seems content to look rather than hook.

"We used to run fishing charters but it was getting harder and harder to catch fish," says Pete. "We'd go home and feel like frauds for taking their money. What we do now – showing people and telling them about the sounds – gives people a great experience every time, and we're not depleting the resources here."

The environment is close to Pete's heart. He was a founding member of Guardians of the Sounds – a pressure group set up by residents in the 1990s to try to slow down the fast ferries that were causing serious damage to beaches and the seabed, as well as posing a risk to other boats. The fast ferries stopped in 2005, but Guardians of the Sounds continues as an environmental watchdog on issues including methyl bromide, scallop dredging and the expansion of marine farming.

"I get tired of the fighting; tired of all the work that it takes to make submissions to the council and government," says Pete. "Sometimes I feel like an old snapper hitting his head against a rock. What I like best

are these school camps and being out on Tutanakei. Children are amazingly open to our environmental message and they're much more informed than adults. It's wonderful. We put a lot of energy into it; it's part of our kaupapa [principles] to teach the next generation."

*“The highlight was sleeping in the teepee. It was beautiful looking up, and very calming for the kids. No power, no technology; it was a great camping experience.”*

*Paul Marshall, camp dad*

For the children, it's a long way from the classroom – there are no books or pencils for three days and there's no sign of boredom. After lunch on shore at Ship Cove, we head over to Motuara Island for a bird-spotting walk, guided by Takutai.

One of the children, Sam Foster, says she likes the variety of the eco cruise: "I like how we're not just doing one thing, like on a ski camp. We're going for bush walks; we're

on the boat. And we're hearing all the Maori stories and how they used to do things."

The bush walks are Takutai's domain. At Bluemine Island, Pete runs the launch up onto the stony beach, an aluminium ladder is dropped off the bow and we climb down with the help of another camp dad, Paul Marshall, who doesn't mind getting his feet wet.

Throughout the sounds, many native birds have been wiped out by introduced pests – possums, rats and stoats. But predator-free islands like Bluemine and Motuara show how it once was and how it could be again as native bush regenerates and the wildlife returns. Takutai points out huge native snails, bellbirds, weka and well-fed kereru as she leads the way up to WWII gun emplacements and the remains of an army camp; now taken over by nikau palms.

Pete meets us on the other side of the island; we clamber back up the ladder, put on our life jackets and head for our favourite perches, rather like the puffed-up kereru we've just seen.

The late afternoon light is softening as we head into Te Aroha Bay on Arapawa Island. Standing sentinel at the head of the bay are three giant teepees – our camp for the night.



Above: The best way to watch tame blue cod is on your tummy. Below: Takutai Beech guides a bird-watching walk

"Is there TV?" asks one of the children. "Yeah," replies Takutai. "We've got Sky. We sit outside when it gets dark and look at the stars."

There are a lot more questions to come that evening when Pete holds his quiz. He asks: "What does benthic mean?" Plenty of hands go up: "Things that live on the seafloor!"

"What are the symptoms of scurvy?" – "Your gums go black. Your teeth fall out." "And what happens to your breath?" – "It stinks!"

"How many children did Captain Cook have?" – "71!" Pete tries to keep a straight face. Out of about 30 questions, that's the only answer that misses the mark.

The grownups are astonished at what the children have taken in during the day. "It's a different way of learning," says room 3's teacher, Andrew Jamieson. "And Pete gets the kids thinking about different practices and their effects on the sounds. It's good for them to hear the perspective of someone who lives here."

Seddon School principal Tania Pringle says it's a fantastic camp for this age group. "They just soak up the constant fact-feeding. It's definitely a camp I'd do again and would

recommend to other schools. I didn't realise how much there is in the sounds, and it's right on our doorstep."

As we chug back into Waikawa Bay, Pete talks about the need to create a Maritime National Park to protect the sounds. "It doesn't have to be one big reserve, but it could be divided up into sustainable areas so there'll still be fish and unspoilt bays for future generations."

"It won't ever be the same as when Captain Cook came here," he says, "but if we manage things better we could get blue cod

back like we saw off the jetty, and birds like on Bluemine and Motuara Islands."

Pete and Takutai Beech clearly love the Marlborough Sounds and want everyone to look after this special environment and share its magic. Their hopes for a Maritime National Park make me think of the whakatauki at the entrance to Waikawa Marae: Mou, moku, mo nga iwi katoa – For you, for me, for all people.

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