COMMENTARY

Plucking the 'golden goose', alive: The impacts of 'supercity' governance on a small island community

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1 | PLANNING FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES: WHO KNOWS BEST?

The myriad lessons for our nation's central and local governments from 2023's devastating Auckland Anniversary weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle were quickly acknowledged following those events, most of them focused on a chronic failure to upgrade infrastructure to meet climate change impacts. What also became apparent in the immediate aftermath of Gabrielle was that the communities worst affected were mainly small communities subject to the governance of city-based local governments. Moreover, what saved those communities from worse outcomes was, by all accounts, not support from central or local governments; it was the collective wisdom, connectedness, local resources and community spirit, built over decades and generations, that are endemic to those communities.

This commentary was conceived before the disastrous events of early 2023, but is the more important in the wake of those experiences and what the country has learned from them. The authors are members of a research-based group, Project Forever Waiheke, which was established to lobby for management of tourism on a small island where both the community and the natural environment were being seriously eroded by overtourism that was being aggressively promoted by both tourism operators and the governing body, Auckland Council.

Accordingly, this commentary is focused on the Waiheke Island community that we live in, love and know intimately. However, the key points we wish to make—about the need for greater localised control over planning for unique places and spaces—apply to small diverse communities all over New Zealand.

2 | WHAT IS 'SPECIAL' ABOUT WAIHEKE, AND WHY DOES THAT MATTER?

Waiheke Island is located 35 min by passenger ferry from downtown Auckland, New Zealand's largest city with a population of over 1.6 million, and a major tourism gateway. The island has a permanent population of approximately 9500 resident 'Waihekeans' and is known within and beyond New Zealand as a hub for artists, environmentalists and people with 'alternative' views, and for over 150 years been a favourite getaway for Aucklanders. The importance of sustaining Waiheke's 'special character' has been embedded in multiple Auckland Council planning documents over the past 25 years, in particular the 'Essentially Waiheke' reports (Auckland Council, undated). The first of these reports—*Essentially Waiheke—A Village and Rural Communities Strategy*—was adopted by Council in October 2000 (Auckland Council, 2023), and its "principles (for) environmental protection, economic development and employment, strong communities, protection and enhancement of Waiheke's character" have since been a guide for planning by the Waiheke Local Boards. The most recent of those reports—*Essentially Waiheke: Refresh 2016* (Auckland

Council, 2016)—highlighted rapidly increasing tourism as a significant threat to sustaining those principles.

3 | PLUCKING THE GOLDEN GOOSE—ALIVE …

As a result of local government reforms in 1989, and exacerbated by Auckland becoming a 'supercity' in 2010, Waiheke has been subject to an increasingly urbanising influence through that external governance. Pervasive changes have included hugely increased tourism—estimated at around 1.3 million visitors annually in 2018 and 2019 (Allpress & Roberts, 2021)—along with gentrification, as the island's coastal beauty has attracted 'high-end' residential development. These developments have dramatically changed the island's demographics, eroding the sense of community and increasing local residents' dissatisfaction with metropolitan governance (Project Forever Waiheke, 2018). Waiheke sought secession from Auckland in 2016, unsuccessfully, but achieved some increased local controls over planning decisions in a 2018 governance Pilot (Allpress & Roberts, 2021).

From 2014, Council's economic development agency, ATEED,[1] began to promote tourism on Waiheke aggressively, positioning it as the 'jewel in (Auckland's) crown', highlighting its huge value to the supercity's economy. Along with equally aggressive marketing by the ferry companies and a wide range of tourism operators on Waiheke, visitor numbers grew exponentially over the following 5 years.

The impacts on the Waiheke community were pervasive, with major disruption to core aspects of residents' lives that included road and ferry congestion, noise pollution, littering, and a rental housing crisis, but also disruption of access to essential services. Vital transport to the mainland, and even access to potable water and health and emergency services, had all become prioritised to tourists' 'needs' (Project Forever Waiheke, 2021).

In response, Project Forever Waiheke (PFW) was established in 2017 as a community-based research group to monitor tourism impacts, both negative and positive. Its focus from 2017 to 2021 was on highlighting and communicating overtourism issues, along with solutions, to the local community, the Waiheke tourism sector, and the governance bodies, through robust research. PFW undertook a series of community consultations and research projects, always in close collaboration with the Waiheke Local Board and the Waiheke tourism sector body (Waiheke Island Tourism Inc [WITI]), through broad consultation with all sectors of the Waiheke community. Four research reports provided comprehensive, up-to-date data on the views, concerns and suggestions of the Waiheke community, including the tourism sector, on the key problems with overtourism on Waiheke, along with feasible measures and strategy for preventing future overtourism (PFW, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

Common themes emerging from these projects were that the Waiheke resident community, including many engaged in the tourism sector, wanted tourism numbers reduced, a primary focus on sustainable and eco-tourism, and the island's economic development to be controlled by the community, through the Local Board. A consistent theme was that residents at large had lost trust in Auckland Council to understand, let alone plan for, the unique needs of an island community and natural environment.

Then COVID-19 hit. The 2020 experience of the pandemic—which effectively prevented tourism for a year—provided an enlightening opportunity for Waiheke residents to identify exactly how damaged both the community and the natural environment had been through overtourism, as its absence revealed aspects of a restored healthy natural environment and a reconnected and reinvigorated community (PFW, 2020, 2021).

4 | WHO KNOWS BEST?: WAIHEKE'S RECENT EXPERIENCE

The following four examples illustrate the superior effectiveness of localised governance.

4.1 | The COVID response management

In October 2020, as 'Auckland' became associated with rampant COVID-19 infection, Waihekeans campaigned effectively, through their Local Board, for a variance from Auckland Council's pandemic boundaries. A bespoke border was implemented at the ferry access points, so as to keep out potentially infected non-residents until vaccination rates were sufficient protection (Franks, 2021a, 2021b). Likewise, several North Island iwi implemented road boundaries to prevent COVID-19 infection into their rohe from visitors.

Similar localised actions occurred internationally where island 'destination' communities felt sufficiently empowered to 'close off' from outsiders. Magnetic Island residents protested at their ferry terminal to prevent non-residents from coming onto the island during Queensland lockdowns (ABC News, 2021), as did Moloka'i residents at their airport (Hawaii News Network, 2020). On Aotea (Great Barrier Island), the Local Board implemented localised health protocols, seen as more effective than Auckland Council or national guidelines (personal communication, Great Barrier Island Local Board Chair, 15 May, 2021).

4.2 | Waiheke local climate change action plan

In 2020–2021, the Waiheke community, in collaboration with the Local Board, developed a bespoke *Waiheke Local Climate Change Action Plan* detailing the unique needs and wishes of the Waiheke community. Based on decades of local expertise, its goals and targets differ significantly from those set in the *Auckland Climate Action Plan 2020* (Our Auckland, 2021); that plan, constructed by Auckland Council, makes no specific mention of Waiheke Island or its unique contextual vulnerabilities. The catastrophic climate events of early 2023 for Auckland have prompted assertions that the Auckland Climate Action Plan is already outdated (Crossen, 2023) and will need major revision; in contrast, the Waiheke Climate Action Plan had already taken into account the potential impacts for Waiheke of events like Cyclone Gabrielle.

4.3 | Preventing renewed harm from overtourism

Residents responding to PFW's 2021 survey, including those engaged in the tourism sector, wanted the Waiheke Local Board to have greater control of decision-making and planning related to the island's infrastructure development. They saw Auckland Council as consistently failing to understand the special character and value of Waiheke's natural and community environments and what is needed to sustain those environments in a semi-rural island context. Reflecting those concerns about centralised governance, the 2019 Report of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (2019) asserted that the "the terms of our hospitality (manaakitanga) and responsibility for looking after our tourist destinations (kaitiakitanga) are *ones the wider community, not just the industry, should determine*" (p. 6, emphasis added).

Nonetheless, in early 2021, Council's economic development agency—now rebranded 'Auckland Unlimited'—commissioned a Destination Management Plan (DMP) for both Waiheke and Aotea Great Barrier islands, from a Sydney-based tourism promotion company. Two years later, no draft DMP has been presented to the Waiheke community, and the DMP presented to Aotea Great Barrier Island has been rejected by key agencies there (see below).

4.4 | Ensuring a reliable structure for essential public transport to the mainland

Waiheke residents' access to the mainland, for regular employment in Auckland and for vital medical and other services, is largely by passenger ferry, with around 1400 people commuting daily on the passenger ferries (personal communication, ATEED, 7 August 2021). These essential public transport services are the *only* way most Waihekeans can reach the mainland quickly. Over the last 5–6 years, the Waiheke community and Local Board have complained consistently to Council about the persistent failure of the passenger ferry monopoly of Fullers 360° to provide a reliable service for Waiheke residents. Nonetheless, in late 2022 Auckland Transport renewed the sole contract for that service to the same company, for a further 10 years, apparently without open tender. The community voiced its outrage on Waiheke's social media pages, and Auckland's recently elected mayor, Wayne Brown, acknowledged that Auckland Transport has homogenised transport planning for the past decade, based on assumptions that all populations across the supercity have the same transport needs (Niall, 2022).

In the meantime, with often multiple cancelled ferry sailings almost daily, Waiheke residents have no consistently reliable commute to mainland New Zealand.

5 | WHY ARE ISLAND COMMUNITIES ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE TO POOR GOVERNANCE?

Islands are known to have cohesive communities (Baldacchino, 2010), where boundedness, distance from metropolitan centres and/or socio-cultural homogeneity create strong community identity and self-reliance (Tennant, 2013). Historically, island experiences have provided useful lessons in localised infectious disease management (Cliff & Haggett, 2004), due to their isolation from mainland services and reliance on local resources. New Zealand's history has numerous examples of small communities resisting having their community values, preferences and local needs ignored by metropolitan or regional governments, seeking instead to maintain more relevant localised governance. Examples range from campaigns to retain local health care systems (Kearns, 1998) to the 2021 attempt by Wanaka to "break free from domineering" Queenstown Lakes District Council to "sort … out our own nest" (Jamieson, 2021, n.p.), and Waiheke's own attempt to secede from Auckland Council in 2015–2016. Waiheke is not alone in rejecting governance by the Auckland 'supercity' (Bell, 2020); North Rodney District also tried to secede (Niall, 2017). The common arguments in these attempts have been the perceived failure of a centralised governance body to understand the unique needs of diverse communities, instead providing homogenised planning that is counterproductive to that diversity.

The key arguments for localised control of development are that: (i) communities with effective *local* governance structures are the best sources of wisdom about what has worked and will work for the *equitable* good of all locally; and (ii) for reasons of purported cost-efficiency, centralised governance inevitably has a default focus on the identifiable majority (population, lifestyles, infrastructure), so that unique communities become disadvantaged by virtue of governance that ignores their actual needs (de Flippis & Saegart, 2007).

6 | THE GOVERNANCE EXPERIENCES OF OTHER NEW ZEALAND ISLANDS AS VULNERABLE 'DESTINATIONS'

Like Waiheke, Aotea Great Barrier recently experienced vulnerability to supercity governance in relation to 'destination management' planning imposed on it by a Council wanting DMPs for all Auckland wards. In a series of meetings with Auckland Unlimited, the tourism sector group on Aotea Great Barrier rejected the draft DMP provided as failing to reflect the data collected in an exhaustive community survey undertaken by Destination Great Barrier Island (DGBI) on the local community's wish to focus as a priority on sustainable tourism (personal communication, DGBI, December 2022).

In contrast, Rakiura Stewart Island is under the governance of the Southland District Council (SDC). Notably, many communities under SDC mandate are relatively small and geographically isolated. As a result, the Council understands the critical value of local control of development planning. Recently the SDC has provided leadership in the 'reset' of tourism management promised by the Tourism Minister in 2019 (The Guardian, 2021). Through collaboration with the tiny Milford Sound community, a reset plan was approved imposing stringent new limits on both tourist numbers and on the transportation options by which people can visit Milford Sound and other vulnerable but popular places in Fiordland (Mitchell, 2022).

Exemplifying fully localised control of tourism planning, Chatham Islands Council operates as a district council with regional council functions—in effect, a unitary authority—with complete control of its own tourism planning. Its DMP, commissioned in 2021 and involving whole-of-community input, adopts explicit principles of environmental sustainability *and* protection of the local community as the kaitiaki of the environment. It states explicitly that, for the Chatham Islands community, "tourism is not primarily about economic viability, business growth and visitor experience. It is also centred on preserving our environmental, cultural and heritage assets, community wellbeing, quality of life of the Islanders and meeting a balance", so as to ensure sustainability of both tourism and the community (Tourism Chatham Islands, 2022, p. iii).

7 | POLITICAL SUBSIDIARITY: LOCALISING CONTROL OF PLANNING IN SMALL AND ISLAND COMMUNITIES

The Waiheke community's wish for a localised response to the pandemic, over-tourism and now climate change reflects the concept of political subsidiarity (Kull & Tatar, 2015): that a centralised authority should control only those tasks that cannot be performed more effectively through localised governance. The *Vision For The Future* 2022 report by Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ, 2022) explicitly recommends a planning "system that provides local government with well-defined roles and responsibilities and reflects the principle of subsidiarity to *enable people to make meaningful decisions about their places and wellbeing*" (p. 7, emphasis added).

Subsidiarity was evident in practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand, with iwi supported by central government to lead bespoke vaccination drives (Neilson, 2021) and setting up travel borders. New Zealand's recent catastrophic floods have demonstrated that cohesive communities with strong shared values and endemic wisdom of what works locally, and what does not, are best able to create their own community-based solutions (Knight, 2023). Malpass and Franke-Bowell (2023) noted that central government "has been at pains to make sure its (cyclone) response appears driven by local people, while it provides the cash they need", giving responsibility for decision-making over disaster funding allocation to local agencies in collaboration, not just to local governments.

Some highly effective co-governance models for island communities have been developed and implemented successfully to mitigate harm from overtourism, climate change and 'over-governance'. The Rottnest Island Authority in West Australia was established by the Rottnest Island Authority Act, 1987, reporting to the Minister for Tourism, and is tasked to "maintain and protect the natural environment and the man-made resources of the Island"; all development planning requires the inclusion the local Aboriginal peoples and the residential community. Similar long-standing examples are the Biosphere Reserve operated by the Noosa Council in Queensland, now extended to the entire Sunshine Coast region (Sunshine Coast Council, undated) and the protective designation of Salt Spring Island in Canada as an 'unincorporated rural Electoral District', established under the

jurisdiction of the Capital Regional District in British Columbia (Capital Regional District, undated). In all three models, the focus is on protection of unique community and environmental vulnerabilities.

8 | WHOSE VIEWS TAKE PRECEDENCE? COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED DEVELOPMENT ON WAIHEKE

'Community-controlled development' (CCD) has been discussed and written about for more than 50 years (eg, Faux, 1971). In the present century, it has built on the framework of 'community economic development' (Neff Consulting, undated) and is viewed increasingly as a prerequisite for truly sustainable development, in every sense of 'sustainable'—economic, social, cultural, and environmental (Campbell, 1997).

Council's Draft Waiheke Area Plan 2021 was produced concurrently with the Waiheke Island Local Board Plan 2021, but takes precedence over the latter in terms of directing Council's planning for the island. The Local Board Plan was undertaken through broad community consultation, including workshops, a community survey and other genuine opportunities for locals—individuals, businesses and community organisations—to make submissions. In contrast, the Waiheke Area Plan process, undertaken by Auckland Council, cherry-picked the organisations with which it consulted, and the final Draft fell short of reflecting the key principles and goals of the concurrent Local Board Plan.

PFW's 2021 research, obtaining input from more than 400 residents, found that residents were asking for "holistic, long-term, whole-of-community planning for development of the Waiheke economy and community as a whole, rather than 'destination management' planning", based on a "common perception that Auckland Council agencies, including Auckland Transport and Auckland Unlimited, lack understanding of the infrastructure or other needs of a small, semi-rural island community" (PFW, 2021, p. 35). Likewise, the evaluation of the 2017–2020 governance Pilot recommended extending Local Board delegations to "where there are specific local issues that have not or cannot easily be addressed by existing (Auckland) Council policies or practises (sic)" (p. 29), in the interests of utilising local wisdom (Allpress & Roberts, 2021).

The final words go to a Waiheke resident in PFW's 2021 research:

> People come to Waiheke to experience our unique lifestyle and the beauty of the island, but in allowing unfettered tourism we are basically killing the golden goose. Locals need to have more say in how many visitors we think is beneficial for the island - we need to be involved in the conversation much more than we have been up to now. We should be following the tenets of 'Essentially Waiheke', which is a document created by Waihekians for Waiheke. We live here; we are not a 'destination' to be milked by AT and AC.[2] This is our home.

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ENDNOTES
[1] Auckland Tourism, Events and Economic Development.

[2] Referring to Auckland Transport and Auckland Council.

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How to cite this article: Oliver, P., Kearns, R., & Wills, P. R. (2023). Plucking the 'golden goose', alive: The impacts of 'supercity' governance on a small island community. *New Zealand Geographer*, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1111/nzg.12352