

# ***Lucy Baragwanath & Nick Lewis: Waiheke typical of what Super City must protect***

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Development on Waiheke is inevitable. But that development must be managed correctly.

Photo / Robert Trathen

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As debate around the shape of the Super City continues, Waiheke has emerged as a prime example of the need for the new Auckland Council to balance the regional perspective against the highly distinctive requirements of unique places within the city.

Extensive surveys, interviews and background analysis by our researchers at the University of Auckland in an 18-month project into tourism and wine on Waiheke has recently been completed.

Waiheke emerges from that research as a microcosm of key issues of significance to Auckland and New Zealand.

Waiheke's distinctive character, 35 minutes from downtown Auckland yet far-removed from the urban rat-race, has potential for lifting the appeal of Auckland and New Zealand as tourist destinations.

Extrapolating its recent history and analysing present planning shows an urgent need to identify opportunities and risks among Waiheke's future options.

Already at the forefront of Auckland's tourism attractions, Waiheke is an immensely popular destination. Attracting around 700,000 visitors each year, it makes an important contribution to Auckland's visitor proposition, with the potential to enhance its own intrinsic appeal, and the city's, still further.

Visitors are drawn to its unique combination of the harbour crossing, beautiful beaches and scenery, as well as its cultural diversity - relaxed island charm, a diverse and varied community, sculpture, world-class food and internationally acclaimed wine. Most visitors are Aucklanders, supplemented by a steady stream of tourists from further afield.

The golden sandy beaches and crystal blue waters are an important drawcard, complemented by Waiheke's fast-developing reputation as a unique wine-growing region, with a diversity of vineyards offering a range of memorable experiences.

Individual wineries take advantage of Waiheke's stunning setting in different ways.

Stonyridge's olive groves and architecture evoke a Mediterranean charm, Obsidian sits in a fold of hills beside a tractor shed and a raupo swamp, Kennedy Point's pohutukawa eyrie overlooks the turquoise sea below.

Among the high-end restaurants, Mudbrick's French provincial terracing, Cable Bay's sophisticated modernity and Te Whau's Le Corbusier-inspired oval open up to magnificent harbour views back to Auckland. At the other end of the island Passage Rock's winery restaurant nestles among vines surrounding a picture-perfect tidal inlet and enclosed by native bush.

Waiheke represents an outstanding example of the "100 per cent Pure" campaign assiduously promoted by Tourism NZ, and of the "Pure Discovery" that the Winegrowers Association promises for New Zealand wine. It offers further scope to enhance Auckland's appeal as a destination in its own right, as well as augmenting this country's tourism proposition as a whole.

But the potential opportunities also carry risks. The increasing efficiency and comprehensiveness of the ferry service over the past 20 years has made Waiheke more accessible to locals, visitors and a new type of resident.

Waiheke has become a maritime suburb of Auckland, and property prices have soared - the median house price increasing 160 per cent between 2000 and 2007. While the population has remained fairly static for 10 years at around 8000 people (of which 1500 commute to Auckland), the turnover is very high. Nearly half of the island's residents in 2006 lived somewhere else in 2001.

The demographic profile of the island has changed as it has become increasingly unaffordable for low-income households.

The landscape reflects this in the arrival on the ridge-lines of vast new homes, highly visible from the harbour and on the island itself.

Infrastructure has also become increasingly overloaded. Waste disposal, water extraction, roading and footpaths are all stretched.

The area for subdivision within the Metropolitan Urban Limit is now at capacity and debate is urgently needed on how further development can avoid damage to Waiheke's unique, natural, open-space character. And any proposed changes are subject to close scrutiny from the politicised and vocal community.

Waiheke's recent changes and future potential are interpreted in a range of ways, depending on how people imagine Waiheke ideally should be. Some value the relaxed peace and tranquillity of the island as it once was, and mourn the increasing urban sophistication and arrival of the city "rat race."

Others value Waiheke's combination of natural and cultural diversity, seeking to balance the advantages of recent changes (good coffee, great food and delicious wine) against the island's distinctive community (including the remnants of the alternative "counter-culture" for which Waiheke was once famous), and its landscape.

Others again see the potential for Waiheke to become the "Martha's Vineyard of the South Pacific," with scope as an elite destination for big spending high net-worth travellers, and are frustrated at perceived obstacles to achieving this goal (crowded ferries, shoddy taxis, restricted landing rights for helicopters, the nine-hole golf course, and so on).

On-going development is inevitable in a beautiful place so close to a major city. The challenge is to ensure that changes preserve and enhance the island's distinctiveness as the "jewel of the South Pacific".

To do this requires effective governance, and the research has exposed policy implications at a number of levels. For central government, the Waiheke research offers insight into how projected increases in tourism - both domestic and international - should be properly managed without destroying the very attractions that create its appeal. For the new Super City council, the Waiheke research provides suggestions for balancing the regional perspective against the highly distinctive requirements of unique places within the city, which residents will fight hard to retain.

For the university, the research outlines areas where further research and analysis is needed relating to planning implications, resource management, the wine-science programme and tourism dynamics, to ensure that Waiheke remains a destination of choice for travellers to and within New Zealand.

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