

Waikato River Feb 2005

by Evan Pugh

303 km, 7 dams, 5 people, 3 bloody trolleys

Over the last year I had spent much time checking and planning this trip, get-in and get-out points, campsites etc. etc. I had paddled the whole river before but not in one hit and was raring to go. Ryan Whittle, John Flemming, Mike Bell, Linda Pugh and I started our journey on Friday, 4 February 2005 at 4.30 p.m. at the southern most sea kayakable part of the Waikato river just below the James Rapid and paddled to our first campsite 28 km downstream setting up camp at 7.45 p.m.

This part of the river was a tad higher than usual and some were slightly apprehensive through the moving and swirly waters but the fully laden kayaks guided them safely.

Day 2 Away at 7.30 a.m. we paddled on in settled and overcast conditions that were perfect for paddling. Our stop at the Ohakuri camp was for lunch and had Sandy, a Taupo kayaker, paddle up to us as she was waiting for a group from Tauranga and thought we were them so she enjoyed her lunch and kayak talk with us before we departed. After fitting our wheels, up the road to the get-in area I knew would be our hardest portage at the Ohakuri Dam where 3 of us had to stay up top of the 50 metre high, 70 deg bank, and slowly lower each kayak while Mike and I manhandled and released them at the bottom before carrying them through scrub and boulders to the small get-in beach. It was very physical. Once we had them all down and had a swim to cool off we carried on paddling this lovely section of river to the Aitamuri Dam where we got out in some lovely mud before again fitting wheels and off to the get-in after lifting them over a locked gate which happened several times during the trip. At the front of the dams the current can be fairly swift and I decided to get in the water last in case of mishap. There was mishap as I followed Mike through the tree and around the corner we saw John ahead had also hit the tree and had decided to cool off in the flowing water. We sorted him before too long and carried on to camp along Lake Whakamaru, finishing the day at 7.10 p.m. and 52 kms.

Day 3 7.30 a.m. seems a good time again and another ripper day as we portaged the Whakamaru Dam then paddled through the great Maraeti section of river and on to the Maraeti Dams. There are two of them side by side. A bit of a lift to get out as the bank was steep. Five sets of wheels were fitted to the kayaks that we dragged and pushed up the small hill before it levelled off followed by a steep, rough, long downhill to go. The ground was very rough, we were very rough. On this section 3 sets of wheels broke, 2 of them totaled. Mine I repaired but had to be gentle with them. I was not happy as we had at least a 3 km portage at Arapuni not counting other Dams. We swapped and helped each other and did extra back and forths and it seemed to be that was how it was and it wasn't so bad after all.

This portage took us 3 hours as once we were at the bottom and had a quick lunch we then had to lift them down a bank and 2 meter drop on to rocks before launching, again very physical. On the water paddling seemed to be the easy part as we headed through another great piece of river down to the Waipapa Dam and portaging then carrying wheels back for the others.

Once back in the water we paddled 5 kms to a neat campsite up a 2 metre bank where we dragged the gear up and by the simple turn of a full kayak on the bank I managed to send Mike catapulting ungraciously into the water (he wasn't happy). We had landed at 7.45 p.m. having paddled 32 km and conquered 3 dams.

Day 4 This was going to be easier as we were feeling the long days. We started at 8.30 a.m. and had

some nice stops before pulling out near the Arapuni Dam and starting the long portage down the road and down the hill through the farm race to our campsite below the Dam, finishing at 5.00 p.m. and 20 kms paddled with fine weather yet again.

Day 5 We started at 8.05 a.m. I had been keeping tabs on paddling hours with the GPS and they had just started releasing water from the dam so we all shot off at 17 kph on the grade one section through a couple of corners and headed down stream. Mike and Ryan paddled up the Pokaiwhenua Stream as far as they could and met up with us at Horahora Domain. We had a long relaxing lunch there then continued to Karapiro and portaged around and down to our get-in area. There are two different spots to get in and we chose the downstream area for safety and the great campsite in the old quarry. Had fun putting some pegs in. Mikes lovely wife arrived at the gate up the hill so we went up and helped her bring the fish and chips down. Ryan was not happy as there was no tomato sauce. Well he didn't have to eat them did he now.

This day had finished again at 5.00 p.m. 25 kms paddled.

Day 6 Our start was at 7.45 a.m. The water had gone down so we carried the boats a couple of hundred meters to a get-in area nearby. I got in first as the water was rising rapidly. With the demand for power increasing, the flow was good so I sat in a back eddy until the others got going so they could follow me through this 6 km section. The morning's flow was better than I had encountered here before and our single file of paddlers followed through the gorge and the rapid, successfully negotiating the strong current and swirly water. We stopped paddling and people chatted as I said, "And where would Mike be?"

We looked back and saw him taking photos. Actually he didn't quite get the rapid right, took a swim and self rescued, lost another hat. Through Cambridge and a stop at Hamilton then Ngaruawhia. We stopped at Huntly for water. As we always carried two days worth and had been filling up at different spots along the way, this water would have to keep us going till the end. Our camp spot a few kilometres north of Huntly was reached by 5.45 p.m., 74 kms paddled in hot weather.

Day 7 On the water by 8.45 a.m. and the weather was pleasantly repetitive. Through willow lined river banks and islands, we paddled on past Rangariri, Meremere and Mercer to our island campsite landing at 3.30 p.m. and 38 kms paddled. This was a great camp spot to sit and enjoy some wakeboarders crashing and splashing while we all had a well deserved rest.

Day 8 7.10 a.m. and we were off to the sea past scores of huge koi goldfish that were in groups of 20 or 30 and you could paddle into. Past the sand works and on and on with many mullet jumping nearby. The current stopped, the tide was coming in big time so we stopped for about an hour before heading off with a tail wind and waves helping us the last 5 kms. We got to Port Waikato at 2.00 p.m., 34 kms today.

Between campsites we spent 68 hours and 10 minutes. Actual paddling time was 41 hours and 1 minute. Elevation at the start was 295 meters guess what it was at the end. To get over the 7th dam by Tuesday we had spent 44 hours and 35 minutes but had only paddled for 23 hours and 16 minutes, most of the other time was portaging.

The weather was brilliant, cloudy some days, hot on others and we had a slight head wind for half an hour. It could not have been better.

The portaging was a lot harder than I had thought and my wheels will be strengthened to prevent breakdown in the future, though it was rugged ground that we were on.

The crew were great, this trip would be very difficult to do on your own and a few injuries were inflicted upon members due to slippery surfaces or kayaks during downhill portages getting out of control. We also found out that a fully loaded kayak on wheels will disembowel a dead rabbit in the way on the road (sorry bun bun).