

AITUTAKI CYCLONE - FEBRUARY 2010

Dee and Mike used to manage Tauono's Organic café, each year (2002-2008) for a month or so when Sonja and Tauono were overseas having a well earned holiday. Tauono died from a stroke while visiting Auckland in December 2009. Sonja and her cat Banff experienced the full force of Cyclone Pat in February 2010 and the following is part of an email she sent to us -

Thank you for thinking of me and yes, I wish you were here to help. You have no idea how challenging it is to work in the burning 38 degree sun with no clouds and now no leaves or shade anywhere. You can't imagine what the island looks like. Drove around today and one could clearly see the strips it travelled in and tore into everything in its path – unfortunately Tauono's was on one of those paths.

This is the first I've started to reply to mail. We were without electricity for a time although I had the phone as we have underground cables. That's also why we have electricity and others don't. I was up to see Eva today and the damage is severe. The mango trees they were always so proud of are now quite sparse. Aitutaki will definitely not be known as the mango island anymore. Yes, I say this is the worst of the 8 hurricane's I've seen.

I'm grateful to Tauono that he built this house so well as the roof held even though the rest of the place has been destroyed. There were a few roofing iron just holding by one nail.



Tauono in the garden (Tauono suffered a heart attack and died while in Auckland in December 2009)

Tauono in the garden (Tauono suffered a heart attack and died while in Auckland in December 2009)The entire island has been denuded of very old trees (some perhaps 100 years old) ours is still standing but without a single leaf. The plantation has suffered immensely with most of the avocado trees gone, bananas levelled and the remaining pineapple we gathered, very battered, some even thrown across the plantation.

The force of the wind and rain was immense. I even managed to re nail a board that came off during the worst blow. Haven't gotten to the back room to clean it as the wind and rain whipped away at the inside wall. As the house shook so did Banff and I during 3 hours of the worst. Winds are estimated to have been around 205 - 215 miles per hour – one house was even picked up and taken – no one has found where the house is now. Even a 2 ton container was moved through the air and put down across the street. Only about 20% of houses are

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standing. It is grim to drive into town and see 1 in 10 houses with a roof on and huge piles of crumpled roofing iron and tons of broken wood and rubble of telephone poles.

Tarpaulins from Red Cross and white tents are giving temporary shelter to those who have no homes. People are sunburnt everywhere as there are now no leaves on trees and there is no shade and everyone is out raking and clearing. But on a positive note, our mulberry trees are wearing a green coat already and laden with new fruit. Nature in its resilience is truly amazing. Perhaps next year there will be mangoes but certainly not the amount we used to have.

I was lucky that a couple from Austria was working in NZ and they called to come and help. Unfortunately, AirNZ took away his specialty chain saw, the lady cut her knee severely with the bush knife while she was clearing the bananas and my face got stung badly by having reached into a wasp's nest that was in the crown of the bamboo that had broken off and landed in the bananas. We are all well and continue to work from sun-up to sun-down. I'm very happy to have their support and help. 8 tourists helped me on the first day for 4 hours and we managed to get the drive sufficiently cleared to get the car out. The following day 3 doctors from the US helped clear the cafe area. The path to the beach will take weeks and at this point I'm not even thinking of what it means to clean the plantation.

I'm open for coffee and cake service but no lunches and of course there is just a minimal market as there is little fruit – only what was spared. I'm exhausted and sunburnt but ok. I've only had moments of realization of how much I miss Tauono. At times the cyclone, his death, burial and being alone are all wrapped up and there is desire to just have some little time to digest it all!

Sonja

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