



Title: *“Tolaga Bay Wharf”*

Description: Tolaga Bay Wharf at dawn

Photographer: Henrik Moller

Where, when: Tolaga Bay (Ūawa), Tairāwhiti, March 2021.

Sustainability? At 660 m long, the Tolaga Bay wharf was the longest wharf in New Zealand until 1971, when the Tiwai Wharf (1500m) was built in Bluff Harbour. Work started in January 1926. In 1929 the farmer-owned firm Geo. H. Scales broke ranks with the British-owned Conference Lines that controlled New Zealand’s trade with the UK and loaded direct from Tolaga Bay, sending its ‘Conference buster’ Bencruachan to the new Tolaga Bay Wharf to tranship from coasters. The wharf made it possible for large coastal trading ships to load and offload goods. However, even as the Tolaga Bay wharf opened, improved roading and motor vehicles had begun to compete with coastal shipping. It was ironic that much of the cargo that passed over the wharf was road-making material, used to construct the road through to Gisborne, soon providing an alternate means of transport. In 1936, 133 ships worked the port. But that was the high point. After the Second World War only coasters called, and too few of them to pay for the maintenance of the deteriorating ferro-cement piles. Richardson & Co.’s Kopara made the last call to Tolaga Bay Wharf in 1966.

This story underscores how transport has driven transformations of economies and trade, and thereby had a huge influence on sustainability. When scholars look back on the late 19th and entire 20th Century they may well call it the “age of mobility”. Our ability to shift materials and people has driven globalisation, created far away markets, monetarised local economies. This decoupled consumers from their local

environments – there is little prospect that consumers of our meat, wool and butter in the United Kingdom would be aware of, let alone concerned about, the impacts of their consumption on the ecological landscapes of Tairāwhiti. Nor are they likely to care that the economic rewards and market strangleholds of large businesses could choke the local economies of the farmers and communities down here on the other side of the planet. A relentless “cheap food from somewhere” demand of consumers, fed by international business interests, presents a formidable and long-term risk to families and communities at the start of the food supply chains. Supplying these markets meets immediate needs for cash for the commodity producers to maintain a presence in Eastland, but they have little control of their future in this food and fibre system.

Many people viewing this photograph will see a triumph of progress and development, a testament to the resilience of the locals reaching out into the sea to protect and nurture their markets. As a sustainability scientist that has spent 15 years researching food systems, I mainly see a ramp for food and fibre going off over the horizon into a void. The unseen consequence is a degraded landscape behind the camera. For me, the image is suitably grey and it’s been raining – rather fitting tinges to underscore my view of this scene of our past.

I worry that we have learnt little and therefore the photograph also symbolises business-as-usual for our future. The equivalent monumental wharf is now at Tīwai where an overseas mega-corporate gobbles super cheap electricity to smelt aluminium. New Zealand urgently needs to reduce its reliance on commodity exports, especially its food and fibre products. Otherwise, we will be forever consigned to be “price takers” rather than “price shapers” for or primary produce, and our land and communities will be increasingly unsustainable and less resilient.

But could there be a new dawn here too. Now only pedestrians use the Tolaga Bay wharf, although they do it in such numbers that it has become one of the area’s biggest attractions. In 1999 locals formed the Tolaga Bay Save The Wharf Charitable Trust to preserve the wharf. Much remains to be done, but recently two stages of repair work have made noticeable improvements, including that seen in this photograph. This part of the story is about biocultural restoration and the role that communities will play in it, including preserving their historical sites.

Photo notes: A long exposures for 26s was needed in the dawn gloom and rain. I used an 18 mm focal length, f/18 aperture and ISO-500.

The very kindly local takeaway caravan-shop keeper let me borrow her ladder for the dawn shoot the next morning so that I could high enough to show the length of the jetty. Buy one of her delicious pizzas if you go there!

Digital specs: 6,636 x 4,660 pixels (31 MP).

Key words: Tolaga Bay, Ūawa, Wharf, history, shipping, commodity markets, Henrik Moller, Aotearoa, New Zealand, Sustainability.

Price: \$120 (incl. GST) for use of the digital image.

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Donation: The price includes a \$100 donation to a sustainability organisation or project of your choice, or otherwise for *Heritage New Zealand* <https://www.heritage.org.nz/>

I recommend that the donation goes to *Heritage New Zealand* because they are a not-for-profit organisation that relies on donations to help its work to preserve iconic historical structures like the Tolaga Bay Wharf. Celebrating our history, including built landmarks, reminds us where we have come from and who we are. If we look hard, it also may help us see better future options.

Image Ref: HM#029 (Please refer to this reference in orders and correspondence)