

Active and Well in Nature with a Green Prescription: Rangitoto Island, NZ

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From coastal walkways to native forests and ancient glaciers, New Zealand is a walker's paradise with short walks and longer hikes to suit all ages and fitness levels.

Prior to partnering with the Department of Conservation (DOC) and Fullers Ferry, adults involved with Sport Auckland's Green Prescription (GRx) exercise support programme carried out most of their exercise through a range of activities such as aqua based sessions at the community pool, gym-based programmes, walks around their local streets and parks and doing home based exercises. Whilst these activities remain a key part of the GRx programme alongside the weekly health and nutrition workshops, Sport Auckland, DOC and Fullers Ferry now offer clients the opportunity to attend the bi-annual summit walk up Rangitoto Island, Auckland's youngest volcano.

The first Rangitoto summit walk on October 27th 2017 was attended by just over 150 GRx clients. Acknowledging the success of the first event, Sport Auckland has continued to work alongside DOC and Fullers Ferry to host two walks each year for people on the GRx programme. The generosity of Fullers Ferry to fund 300 return ferry tickets each year has made this initiative possible and genuinely a highlight for many people on the GRx programme.

Being active in nature is associated with a whole host of health benefits therefore it seemed clear to Sport Auckland to offer this opportunity to their clients noting that the focus of GRx is to support people in making lifestyle changes to improve their health in a sustainable and achievable way.

As little as 30 minutes in nature each week can help reduce symptoms of depression and high blood pressure. In addition to that being active even boosts the health benefits further. Other key health benefits associated with being in nature include; having a positive mental state, increased mindfulness and reduced stress; improved focus and productivity; enhanced immune function. Not only do adults benefit but children also benefit hugely from factors such as improved sleep which is critical for things such as physical, cognitive and social development.

What is a Green Prescription and how can it connect clients to nature and activity?

The majority of clients on the GRx programme are referred to the service by a health professional that deems they would benefit from some support through increasing physical activity and/or making changes to their nutrition habits or making significant lifestyle changes within their family situation. Clients can also self-refer to the service. The ultimate goal of a GRx is to support clients to become independently active so they have the tools, knowledge and resources to continue to live healthy active lifestyles. Most clients are engaged in the programme for a period of 3 – 6 months and receive face to face support

through registration and review consultations, weekly education and nutrition workshops and regular contact through phone based support where required.

Taking on the Rangitoto Summit Climb

The process of this whole event starts with taking registrations for GRx clients who would like to build their fitness and health to a point where they can take on the challenge of a 2.4km walk up the Rangitoto Island summit track. Our intention is to get as many new clients registering for the walk and setting the goal to complete as much of the walk as they can (given their health conditions or limitations).

Clients are prepped with a walk date and details of things to bring along on the day for the trip. Everyone meets at the Pier in downtown Auckland. The Fullers Ferry team hands out the tickets and we are off to Rangitoto – a short 20 minute ferry ride and everyone departs the ferry to take on the mountain. Firstly, we are greeted to the Island by a Māori local DOC Ranger and provided with a history of the Island and of course a Waiata (Māori song). The Sport Auckland support team, DOC staff and GRX clients embark on the hill climb at their own speeds, encouraging each other along the way and taking in the sights and sounds (there are a lot of vocal 'Tui' birds on the Island). Many rest stops are taken, layers of clothing are shed, water is consumed at regular intervals and some long breathers are required by a few on the way to the top. Many people along the way are commenting about how nice it is to get away from the city and how quiet it is over on the Island. Some people who have been living in Auckland for more than 30 years have never been to Rangitoto before and wished they had come over sooner!

The walk to the top is along a well-marked scoria rock track. The last 100m climb is up a steep wooden stair case which can really push some clients to the limits in terms of their mind set, cardio fitness levels and leg endurance. The elation of people reaching the top is really something to admire. For some of the clients it can take up to an hour and a half for them to complete the 2.4km walk, for others it is closer to 45 minutes. Not everyone makes it to the top, but for those that don't, they make it their personal goal to come back next year and make it even further!

There is no shortage of big smiles at the top for pictures and selfies at the summit. There is a nice backdrop of the ocean panoramic and a sweeping view back to Auckland City and time for everyone to reflect on how great it is to connect with nature and make it to the top. New friendships are made and many connections made between clients and support staff. Lunches are brought out, people are spread everywhere and plenty of conversations are made before the walk back down to the wharf and ferry for passage back to Auckland City. The ferry ride back is often a bit quiet after a big hike up and down the hill but you see that the faces of many are bristling with pride from what they have achieved and overcome to conquer that mountain.

Long may the walks continue!

From the team at Green Prescription - Sport Auckland

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