

## Weather, whether we like it or not

I want anyone who reads this to make me a promise: please don't show it to Lin.

She's usually the first one to know what I've written each week because in an unguarded moment she once agreed to listen to me read a column out loud. I now find that helps the rhythm of a piece of writing, and since the reading often takes place during a Sunday morning lie-in, I can tell if I've hit the mark if Lin is still awake by the end.

I didn't want to read this one because Lin's had a gutsful. No, not of me, per se (I hope) but of the topic - weather forecasts.

They're something I go on about every time we watch Dan doing the weather on telly. It's not him personally, although he does tend to talk at 300 words a minute, which is bordering on gabble.

No, it's the assumption the forecast for New Plymouth can be applied to the whole of Taranaki. The only explanation I can think of is nobody at TVNZ realises Taranaki Maunga can cause various parts of our province to get very different weather.

Even though Dannevirke (pop: 5700) gets its own forecast, there is no acknowledgement that what happens at Hawera (pop: 10,300), Stratford, Opunake and Inglewood often bears no resemblance to New Plymouth.

On the same day, there can be drought in South Taranaki, floods in Inglewood and fog at New Plymouth Airport, but you would never know that from what Dan tells us. Again, not his fault.

One sign that things have gone awry with weather forecasting generally is the frequency with which Dan's longer term predictions for us can be wide of reality when those days arrive. The sun emoji given to New Plymouth three days hence can become a showery one or rainy or windy or stormy.

Predictions of gales so dire that we rush about adding extra fixings to the veranda can sometimes morph into a mild front we hardly notice. Better safe than sorry, as they say, but then there's that other saying about boys and wolves.

I take notice of all that because I've had a bit to do with weather forecasting over most of my working life, beginning when I was an 18-year-old cadet reporter only recently failed in School C maths (24 percent) but required to decode a teleprinter page of numbers and translate them into tomorrow's weather map.

As I think I once admitted, there was the occasional day the numbers failed to arrive so we would just move the highs, lows and fronts over to the right a bit, since even in that primitive environment I understood the weather mostly moved from west to east.

I hate to think whether fishermen like Louie Kuthy might have looked at one of my made-up maps and ventured offshore to be caught in a storm. That reminds me of a former colleague who worked on magazines and was required to make up the weekly horoscopes.

I do have a theory about the limitations of modern-day weather forecasting, one that suggests all the flash technology being used has yet to fully replace observations by the human eye.

It was about 30 years ago when the government of the day (probably National) decided lighthouse keepers were a relic of the past and could be replaced by automation, not only of the shipping lights but of weather observation.

I have a vivid memory of what happened during that time when Lin and I ventured across to Great Barrier Island in the yacht we owned the backstay of (the rest was mortgaged).

The radio weather forecast was for a brightly sunny, calm day throughout the Hauraki Gulf. We listened to it while hunkered down in pouring rain that lasted most of our trip across and while we lay at anchor.

That forecast was the first we heard following the redundancy of the last of the keepers. Prior to that, the forecasts had been invariably more accurate, because lighthouse keepers knew what the weather was doing from looking to the heavens.

One more thing to dislike about the digital age.

FOOTNOTE: Last column had a possible new entrance to Pukekura Park skirting the western edge of the fountain lake. I meant the eastern. And the gates are a memorial to their donor, Mr Sanders, not war.