

Island life is not the Pitts



Keeping eels out of the school water pipes, fixing pumps and servicing generators isn't every principal's idea of a good job, but Pitt Island School principal Rob Cameron (above) isn't complaining.

Pitt Island has the most remote school in New Zealand - about 40km or an hour by fishing boat (the common form of local transport) from the Chatham Islands.

"I love it. It's the sort of place you can call home. It's got me," says Rob. He has spent the last two years in the sole-charge position at the school, which has 14 students aged six to 12 years.

"The kids all come to school on their 4WD motorbikes. They come bowling in with their overalls, leggings and rain gear every

day - it looks wicked."

Rob is no stranger to isolation. His last school was in southern Hawkes Bay, at the end of 40 km of gravel road.

Being a farmer for 20 years has stood him in good stead on Pitt Island. He is often called

on to help with shearing and bulldozing, and he has to regularly service the two school generators.

Rob is a fan of the unique flora and fauna on the island, which has a large conservation area.

"One of the big joys of a sole-charge school is the flexibility. If something suddenly happens - if a whale washes up on the beach, we just drop everything and go."

The community is close: there are only 11 houses and most people are related to one another. "The one thing I miss is talking to someone I don't know," Rob laughs.

A more serious hardship is having to wait until term break to see his wife, Cath, Palmerston North Central Normal School assistant principal. "She likes big schools, I like small schools," he laughs.

Getting to Pitt Island can be a mission in itself. Flying is expensive - it costs the school about \$2500 to attend the twice-yearly sports day on the Chathams. Students visit the Chatham health and dental services at the same time to make good use of the trips.

"You have to be really well planned and well organised because sometimes we don't get mail for seven or eight weeks - often it's so late that we miss all the specials and closing dates."

School resources and library books have to be ordered about a term ahead, while the internet connection, via satellite phone, is about four times slower than usual.

If Rob gets sick or is stuck in the Chathams due to rough weather, the Pitt Island school closes.

He only gets major supplies twice a year so he grows his own vegetables, bakes his own bread and even makes pickles and chutneys. There's plenty of fresh seafood and game meat (including wild sheep, mutton bird and even weka) to supplement his diet, plus local delicacies of seagull eggs and garden snails.

Rob loves the island life so much, teaching in the Falkland Islands may be his next call.