

WINNERS OF THE SUPREME AWARD:

The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group is made up of tangata whenua, school groups, landowners and the wider community, working with local councils and government agencies to improve water quality in Whangawehi River. Their seven years of hard work was recognised last night when they received the Government's top environmental award, the 2017 Supreme Green Ribbon Award, and an award in the 'Caring for our water' category.

Picture supplied



Mahia water project the winner

by Michael Neilson

A COMMUNITY-led awa (stream) restoration project on Mahia Peninsula won the Government's top environmental award at a ceremony in Wellington last night.

The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group received the 2017 Supreme Green Ribbon Award, and an award in the 'Caring for our water' category, for work to improve water quality in the Whangawehi River.

The team effort over seven years has involved tangata whenua, school groups, landowners and the wider community, working with Wairoa District Council, Hawke's Bay Regional Council and the Department of Conservation.

The national awards, in their 27th year, celebrate exceptional environmental and conservation initiatives by individuals, communities and organisations to protect and manage New Zealand's environment. There

were close to 150 nominations this year from all corners of the country.

The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group formed in 2011 over concerns about the potential effects of a new wastewater system and other land uses on the water quality of the river, estuary and marine ecosystems outside the river mouth.

They have since installed 7.5 kilometres of fencing, 42 hectares of native planting with 136,000 native trees, retired five hectares of native bush and designed debris dams to retain silt beds.

The benefits have been increased schools of whitebait, more abundant long-fin eels and a 15 percent increase in the recreational status of the water quality.

Group leader Kathleen Mato, of Rongomaiwahine descent, says she is proud of what the group has achieved in the remote spot on the Mahia Peninsula neighbouring the

RocketLab launch site.

"It has been a lot of hard work, but has been well worth it. When you involve everyone around you, it has to succeed — because everyone is working together to achieve the same thing."

Ms Mato says the awa, sacred to Rongomaiwahine iwi and hapu, has a special connection to the community.

"We need to ensure that the area and water is safe for the young ones growing up to be able to continue to catch fish and bathe in.

"It all ends up on kaimoana beds, which is why we decided to try to do something in the first place."

With the country facing a freshwater crisis, Ms Mato says their project can be replicated by other communities to clean up their waterways.

"Already there are projects around the country replicating what we have done here.

"All around the country, communities are facing challenges with freshwater, and in marine

environments, because it all ends up in the sea."

Despite the seven years of hard work, she says there is still a lot more work to do.

"We are not even halfway there.

"We have still got to get the water back to a high quality, all the awa fenced off and pests eradicated.

"People don't realise what is involved in these types of projects until they begin.

"It is not only about water quality but the entire catchment, because it is all related."

Environment Minister Dr Nick Smith congratulated the group on its success.

"It signals what is needed across thousands of rivers and streams across New Zealand.

"The Government's target of 90 percent swimmable rivers and lakes by 2040 is going to require 1000km of rivers be improved every year for the next 23 years.

"The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group is a powerful model of what is possible."