

WORKING TOGETHER FOR A

# Better Future

BY JOANNA MANSON

A highly successful stream restoration project in northern Hawke's Bay has taken the top prize at this year's Green Ribbon Awards. A testament to seven years of hard work due to local community groups fulfilling their mission statement, 'If the waterway is healthy, then everything will survive.'

The Whangawehi catchment sits on the Mahia Peninsula, an area which was recently in the spotlight as the launch pad of New Zealand's first rocket to space.

Back in July 2010, the local community raised an issue around the potential effects of the Mahia Beach wastewater system and other land activities on the water quality of the Whangawehi stream.

This small but passionate group became a catalyst in raising awareness and the movement led to the formation of the Whangawehi Catchment Management group — a collaboration of stakeholders including landowners, Hawke's Bay Regional Council, Wairoa District Council, Department of

Conservation, Tangata Whenua and Marae Trustees marked by the signing of a memorandum of understanding.

Project coordinator Nicolas Caviale Delzescaux said work really kicked off in early 2013 and hasn't stopped for the past four years. The group initially set itself the challenge of fencing off 8.3km of stream, retiring 45 hectares of riparian margins and establishing 150,000 native trees.

"We had a vision and we started with a focus on the water and protecting the river, however, other initiatives were developed in order to work towards a holistic vision statement to improve the cultural, ecological, economic and recreational value of the Whangawehi



Chairman of the Whangawehi Catchment Management Group, Pat O'Brien and project coordinator Nicolas Caviale Delzescaux holding the Supreme Award at the Green Ribbon Awards evening in Wellington

catchment." One of these initiatives is the Matauranga Maori school programme, which is driven by the marae and community for local Te Mahia school students.

Based in the catchment it encompasses Maori themes in hope the lessons will be passed on to future generations.

"We have developed a curriculum with Te Mahia School. Once a month someone from the community teaches the children better ways to manage the environment in a practical way. Whether it's learning to weave flax, plant trees or eeling we try and teach the children new things that they can pass on to their families as well."

Another accomplishment for Nicolas and the group was executing a successful community engagement strategy and sustaining it within a remote area of land.

"It was critical for the group to break its isolation and invite the wider community to be involved and share the benefits of the work done."

This included planting weekends in the winter, guided walks, mountain bike rides in the summer and community gatherings.

"The project has generated a momentum amongst neighbouring landowners and is now influencing conservation work beyond the catchment boundary," said Nicolas.

As a result of the group's work, significant improvements have been captured by the water and fish monitoring team in the group and has been reinforced by the water monitoring carried out by the regional council at the estuary.

Their success was recently recognised by securing the title of 2017 Supreme Green Ribbon Award, which was presented by Environment Minister Dr Nick Smith and Associate Conservation Minister Nicky Wagner at the beginning of June. Mr Smith commended the overall team effort by iwi, landowners and councils.

"This Supreme Award for a community-led waterway clean-up is important as it



Community planting weekend on Pongaroa Station with support from local Marae, DoC, tangata whenua, school students and overseas visitors

signals what is needed for thousands of rivers and streams across New Zealand. The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group is a powerful model of what is possible.

"Specific achievements include 7.5km of fencing, 42 hectares of native planting involving 136,000 native trees, retirement of 5 hectares of native bush and carefully designed debris dams to retain silt beds. The benefits have been increased schools of whitebait, more abundant long fin eels and a 15 per cent increase in the recreational status of the water quality," noted Mr Smith. Looking ahead Nicolas is hoping

to develop a walkway and bike ride area in the catchment as well as a 'red meat brand initiative' for the group to become financially sustainable. Something he says will take time to establish but will deliver a return in the long term.

"Our next step is based around biodiversity work for pest control and working towards a pest free Mahia concept. We want to carry on what we are doing, we haven't finished our work just yet and hopefully winning this award will leverage support for our project. We would like to reintroduce some birds like the kiwi and takahē; it's a long term vision for the group," said Nicolas.