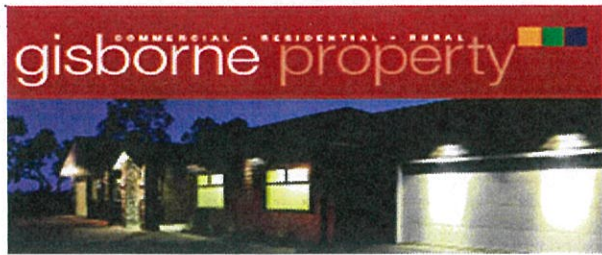


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Restoring an awa, one plant at a time



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As the country grapples with a freshwater crisis it could do well to learn from a catchment on the Mahia Peninsula, where a community has banded together over the past seven years to improve their waterways. Michael Neilson met with members of the award-winning Whangawehi Catchment Management Group, to find out what makes the project so special.

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GUIDED TOURS: Members of the public taking part in a guided tour last summer some of the riparian planting, which helps prevent erosion and silt and sediment getting into the river, and filters effluent from livestock. Project manager Nic Caviale-Delzescaux says such tours could be a source of future employment for Mahia. Picture supplied

ALL around New Zealand farmers have been pitted against everyone else in the battleground over fresh water, but a community group on the Mahia Peninsula has taken a much more collaborative approach. Once a month the Whangawehi Catchment Management Group, consisting of farmers, tangata whenua, general community members, and local and central government representatives, gather over a cup of tea at Rongomaiwahine's Tuahuru Marae to discuss environmental concerns in the area. Throughout Aotearoa stories are emerging of swimming spots running dry due to irrigation, E.coli from livestock making people sick, and toxic algae, but the Whangawehi River catchment, surrounded by farming and forestry, has seen improvements across the board.

The collaborative group, which formed in 2010, involves tangata whenua from five marae, eight landowners, a forestry plantation, general community members, Te Mahia School, Wairoa District Council, Hawke's Bay Regional Council, the Department of Conservation, and several other public and private agencies and the Mahia Maori Committee.

It has overseen a mammoth community effort to improve water quality in the catchment, installing 15 kilometres of fencing, 56 hectares of native planting with 160,000 native trees, retiring five hectares of native bush and designing debris dams to retain silt beds.

Water clarity has improved, and E.coli levels have dropped 15 percent over the past seven years of monitoring (the only waterway monitored by HBRC to reverse the trend).

Increases in whitebait (inanga), long-fin eels (tuna) and native birds have accompanied their successes.

The group has also been involved in pest control, including a goat control strategy and managing about 350 traps.

Those efforts were recognised nationally this year when the group took out the supreme honour at the Government's Green Ribbon environmental awards.

"It has been a lot of hard work, but has been well worth it," says group founder Kathleen Mato, of Rongomaiwahine descent.

"When you involve everyone around you, it has to succeed, because everyone is working together to achieve the same thing."

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."

Classic New Zealand scene

On a warm, sunny day the Mahia coastline perfectly depicts the country's 100 percent pure advertising campaign: golden beaches, gentle waves lapping onto rocky outcrops and idyllic baches.

It is also home to a passionate community and playground to many from the Hawke's Bay and Gisborne, with its popular surfing and fishing spots.

About halfway around the northern side of the Peninsula, neighbouring the Rocket Lab site, the Whangawehi River catchment begins.

Riparian plantings, including native harakeke (flaxes) and trees, begin at the river mouth and continue a full eight kilometres up the river.

The group has held many community planting days over the years, drawing in scores of community members at a time.

The riparian plantings are designed to replicate how the riverbanks used to be, before the bush was cleared, providing habitat for native birds and fish and enhancing the river quality.

In the modern farming environment, plants filter run-off from the surrounding sheep and beef farms, reducing E.coli, help prevent erosion and catch silt and sediment from land use, which also includes forestry.

Further into the catchment farmers have retired significant areas, fenced off remnant native bush and wetlands from livestock, and planted thousands of native plants and trees.

Farmer involvement

Pat and Sue O'Brien have run a 400ha sheep and beef farm in the catchment since 1999.

They, and the Grandy Lake Forest plantation, were the “guinea pig” landowners of the project.

The O'Briens had been fencing off areas of their farm to protect areas since 2004, and were drawn into the project because of its collaborative approach.

They have since retired 15 percent of their farm, including 40ha of wetlands, 10ha around waterways and 15ha of native bush, and planted 36,000 native trees.

They plan to retire another five to seven percent of their land.

“Farmers cleared the land in the first place, and now we are thinking about the future generations,” says Pat, who is chairman of the group.

“We can't continue farming in an unsustainable way. We need to look after waterways, native bush and wetlands for future generations.”

Now seven other landowners are involved, who have all signed a memorandum of understanding with the group.

The next stage is to put 25-year covenants on the retired areas.

The Whangawehi Valley was once filled with native forest and thriving with native birds such as takahe.

When humans arrived and settled, first Maori and later Europeans, the river valley functioned as a highway, leading to and from Mahia's northern coast to the back country.

It held multiple Maori settlements, evidenced by middens (ancient rubbish sites) and kumara pits.

Later, whalers set up camp in the valley, before farming took over.

Much of this activity in the valley had a detrimental impact on its environmental health.

Felling of bush increased the amount of silt and sediment in the river and removed habitat for native wildlife, and the introduction of livestock increased E.coli levels.

Pat envisions returning the streams and river in the catchment to crystal clear water, with a boost in biodiversity, bringing back the native birdlife and fish.

The O'Briens are creating a habitat for the critically endangered bittern, and have bird experts out on the farm regularly advising them on planting and wetland maintenance.

But the benefits are not just to the wildlife.

“Since we first began retiring land we have seen production on the farm increase each year.

“We are farming a smaller area, but are farming more wisely.

“It takes a change in mindset for some farmers, that protecting these areas is not going to dampen productivity, but can actually enhance the farm.”

The Okepuha Station sheep and beef farm has been in Richard Coop’s family since 1905.

They joined the project at its inception, and have since have retired about 10 hectares, involving about five kilometres of fencing, and planted 27,000 native trees.

“It has been a chance to do our bit,” Richard says.

“It has been an awesome project. Our family cleared the bush, which was a different generation, but we are here for the future.

“A lot of the money goes back into community too. We had an average of 10 local people working on the project over 10 months. It is good for everyone.”

Wastewater concern spurs action

While the valley has long been the scene of human activity, it was a proposal from HBRC in 2010 to discharge treated wastewater into the catchment that spurred the group’s formation.

For years the community was concerned about septic tanks leaching into the sea, affecting mahinga kai (seafood gathering) and recreational activities.

The Mahia Beach Community Waste Water System proposed to replace septic tanks and pump wastewater from Mahia Beach homes, on the south side of the peninsula, up to treatment ponds above the Whangawehi catchment, on the northern side.

The wastewater would then be disposed over a field in an area of forestry owned by HBRC, before ultimately running down the Whangawehi River, and out to sea.

The community raised concerns about potential effects of the proposal, and other land uses, on the water quality of the Whangawehi stream, the estuary and the mahinga kai beds outside the river mouth.

But the community knew something had to be done about the wastewater, and decided to come on board with the proposal to ensure the environment was adequately cared for.

Kathleen Mato came up with a strategy that resulted in the Whangawehi Catchment Management Group.

The group identified a shared desire to better manage, protect and enhance the natural, physical, cultural and spiritual resources of the catchment as a whole, returning the Whangawehi River to pristine condition for future generations.

Aspirations include improving biodiversity, restoring customary freshwater fisheries and protecting kaimoana (seafood) beds.

Group secretary Rae Te Nahu (Rongomaiwahine) says the group started slowly but has now taken a life of its own.

Her whakapapa have been in the area for five generations, and she wants to see the environment cared for long into the future.

“If the environment does not survive neither do we.

“People need to make an income, but we also have a responsibility to protect the environment.”

Like many of the dozens of people involved she puts the group’s success down to the collaborative approach, and connection of the Mahia community with the environment.

However, it took some time to engage all of the different groups involved.

“The biggest challenge in the beginning for Kathleen and I was that we wanted to protect our taonga, but it went through land that did not belong to us,” Rae says.

HBRC helped them make those connections, especially with the landowners.

However, it has been driven by community aspirations the whole way through.

“The way of the future is people coming together, to ensure everything is sustainable for the generations to come,” Rae says.

“People here are passionate about the land and sea, and leaving something for those coming after us.”

Cultural monitoring and rangatahi engagement

The Whangawehi River is sacred to Rongomaiwahine iwi and hapu who have developed strong and intimate cultural and spiritual connections with the awa.

Cultural surveys have identified important sites and specific plants and animals native to the area.

Along the river a whare (house) has been built to provide shelter for people who frequent the area.

Sue O'Brien established a flax collection and 12 rare specimens were planted around the site of the whare.

The idea was to provide a high quality supply of different types of flaxes and develop with the community, weaving activities around the whare.

Cultural health index co-ordinator Arthur Bowen monitors not only the scientific health of the waterways, but the cultural and spiritual health.

“It is similar to what NIWA does but with a Maori slant.

“We look at the history of the place, but also the medicines in the stream and around it. It is a more holistic style.”

He has noticed improvements in water quality and an increase of eels (tuna) and whitebait (inanga) spawning.

He works a lot with Te Mahia School, assisting with river monitoring and tree planting sessions.

“It is part of the succession plan. We are trying to instill some interest in them.”

Te Mahia School pupils are involved in the project as part of their Enviroschools programme.

“Our involvement is about the kids’ role as kaitiaki of our local awa,” Te Mahia School principal Aan Hoek says.

“They have really taken it on board.”

Bright future

Project manager Nic Caviale-Delzescaux, contracted by HBRC and involved since 2012, says the group is in a transitional stage, spurred on by its recent success at the Green Ribbon Awards.

“We have been growing and gaining momentum, and there is potential to move into other projects, such as pest control on the whole Mahia Peninsula.”

The group has also been developing tracks through the catchment and is building a public walkway.

“I see the valley being be a sanctuary for birds, kiwi, takahe, and having businesses with a lot of people from here working in conservation.”

The group has five people employed part-time, who work on track maintenance and planting, however a challenge is to keep them employed all year long.

'It's nothing magical, just giving power back to the community to drive their own destiny'

Last summer they ran tours in the valley, teaching history, conservation and culture.

“Future jobs could involve guiding tours in summer, planting in winter, and track maintenance in spring.”

Wairoa Department of Conservation community ranger Malcolm Smith, who has been involved since the beginning, says the group is a great example of how the country can combat not only issues like freshwater degradation, but achieve the predator-free 2050 goal.

“Predator Free 2050 won’t happen if there is no community engagement.”

Group chairman Pat says the group’s success has inspired other farmers on the peninsula in different catchments, and supports the idea of a predator free Mahia.

“Either the group could lead it or we could support others.”

Like the rest of the group, Nic feels their model can be replicated around the country.

“A key aspect is agencies supporting the community’s aspirations. Those involved are doing it for a good reason, to enhance the river, so there are no politics.

“There has been strong leadership from the five marae, huge commitment from the community, agencies supporting us, and great buy-in from landowners.

“There is also belief in the cause. We have touched people’s hearts. It’s nothing magical, just giving power back to the community to drive their own destiny.”

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