



The blue line marks the Whangawehi River, while the area within the red line is whole the catchment. Any land activity within that area affects the health of the river, which is why so many members of the Mahia community have been involved.



The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group, pictured following one of their planting days, has drawn in members from all parts of Mahia society.

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Model could be replicated around NZ

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

Riparian plantings, including native harakeke (flaxes) and trees, begin here and continue a full eight kilometres up the river. The group has held many planting days over the years, drawing in scores of community members at a time.

The riparian plantings 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 environment of farming, the plants filter run-off from the surrounding sheep and beef farms, reducing E.coli, helping prevent erosion, and catching silt and sediment from the land use.

Farmers have retired significant areas, fenced off remnant native bush and wetlands from livestock, and planted thousands of native plants and trees.

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 protecting areas of their farm 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, 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."

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, thriving with native birds, such as takahē.

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, and 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 and biodiversity.

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 the waterways returning to crystal clear water, and abundant native bird and aquatic life. But the benefits are not just to the wildlife.

"Since we began retiring land, farm production has increased each year. We farm a smaller area, but farm it more wisely."

"It takes a change in mindset for some farmers, that protecting these areas 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 retired about 10 hectares, involving about five kilometres of fencing, and 27,000 native trees.

"It has been awesome," Richard says. "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."

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

The community was concerned about potential effects of the proposal, and other land uses, on the water quality of the Whangawehi stream, estuary and kaimoana.

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.

Group secretary Pae Te Manu (Rongomaiwahine) says the group started slowly but had now taken on 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 natural environment.

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

"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."

Rongomaiwahine iwi and hapu have developed strong and intimate cultural and spiritual connections with the area.

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

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, and 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 Enviro-schools 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." Project manager Nic Caviale-Delzescaux, contracted by HBRC and involved since 2012, says the group is in a transitional stage.

"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 a sanctuary for birds, kiwi, takahē, 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.

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."

Waioa 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."

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

"Those involved are doing it for a good reason, to enhance the river. There are no politics."

"It is nothing magical, just giving power back to the community to drive their own destiny."