



□ Pat O'Brien (right), chairman of the Whangawehi Catchment Group, receiving the Asia Pacific International River Prize Award in Sydney on Tuesday night.

Win for Whangawehi

THE Whangawehi Catchment Management Group has won the Pacific category of the prestigious Asia Pacific International River Prize Awards held at a ceremony in Sydney on Tuesday night.

The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group was the only New Zealand group to be a finalist in the awards which recognise organisations achieving strong results in river restoration and sharing their knowledge to achieve even greater benefits.

Whangawehi Group chairman Pat O'Brien's hopes to represent both New Zealand and the Wairoa community well on the international stage were realised when he accepted the award in Sydney.

"The judges were highly impressed by the fact that this project was community driven, with Maori leaders instrumental in setting up the vision and achieving and measuring the progress made. We are now exposed to the international sphere and this offers new opportunities to influence more change in our Pacific community," said Mr O'Brien.

Due to the high calibre of strong candidates this year, the awards were split into two separate categories. The Asian River category included projects of huge scale, such as the Yangtze River in China and the Pasig River in the Philippines. The Whangawehi project competed in the Bert & Vera Thiess Australasian River category, alongside projects on Brisbane's Laidley Creek and Sydney's Parramata River. All three groups in the Australasian category

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Thursday, 18th of October
2018

Award recognises 'true collaboration'

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are credited with achieving incredible outcomes for rivers in a collaborative partnership with their community, sponsors and government agencies.

Iain Maxwell, Hawke's Bay Regional Council Group Manager Integrated Catchment Management said the award was "fantastic news for the Whangawehi Catchment Group, and a deserving tribute to a project that has truly set the bar for collaboration, partnership with tangata whenua and community engagement".

"Their personal commitment, passion and drive for the project have been instrumental in this outcome."

The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group is a marae initiative that identified the Whangawehi stream as a sacred river needing protection and enhancement. Under a community-led catchment management plan, the Group has helped landowners to fence off their waterways, revegetate river margins, better manage their soil by establishing soil conservation areas planted in trees and carry out pest control work.

The project was also the Supreme Winner at the 2017 Green Ribbon Award, the New Zealand Government's most prestigious environmental award.

Nic Caviale-Delzescaux, Hawke's Bay Regional Council project manager for the project, says the award is a big thank you to everyone involved for their continuous support, dedication and passion for the project. "The work we all achieved together has set us apart from the other projects."

The collaborative work of

the catchment group and many volunteers has resulted in the protection of 13 kilometres of river, the establishment of 160,000 native trees on 60 hectares of riparian margins and the retirement of 15 hectares of native bush block.

Close monitoring of the work done by the group has revealed a 95 percent survival rate of plants, an increase in native bird and fish life and a 15 percent improvement in water quality, the highest improvement in water quality in the region. The once nearly extinct whitebait population is now abundant, and the endangered longfin eel has now grown to

healthy populations.

The group also has a unique environmental education programme developed locally with Te Mahia School. This was created to transfer local knowledge around Matauranga Maori

and indigenous practices. The community is also hoping that these school children will be the next generation of Kaitiaki (guardians) of the land.

The flow-on effects are speaking volumes. A recently announced Mahia Pest Free project in collaboration with Hawke's Bay Regional Council is an extension of the pest management work initiated by the Whangawehi Group.

The Group is also in the final stages of talks to develop an extensive walkway through the Whangawehi catchment for both locals and visitors to enjoy.

Other projects include the development of a brand to return a premium for any meat products produced under a catchment management plan protecting the waterways.

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