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AUTUMN 2021

Hawke's Bay

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WORDS Susan Wylie
PHOTOS Nic Caviale Delzescaux and supplied

Creating a future for the Whangawehi Stream has gained awards for a Mahia community project, and a new walkway will open it up to everyone.

Turn inland where the stream meets the sea on Mahia Peninsula, and you will find the new Te Araiia Walkway. Opening at the end of March, the track follows an ever-changing landscape of water, hills and bush. The bush and the walkway are the result of the efforts of a band of people who have worked hard on the award-winning Whangawehi Stream restoration project.

The walkway is a 24 km loop through the Whangawehi Stream catchment from the Mahia East Coast Road on the Pacific side of the Peninsula, crossing to Kinikini Road and Mahia Beach on the western side, and back again. It's a good day's walk, but people can enjoy a shorter walk from the Whangawehi side.

The entry is through the new waharoa (gateway) designed and built in November 2020 by EIT students and local carpenter Will Kereru. It's a welcoming shady spot where visitors can admire the panel painted by Te Mahia School students depicting their part of the world.

Seats will be installed in other shady spots along the walkway, including a picnic table with a view of the stream and beyond. Near the start of the walk, there's a grass track down to 'the beach', where visitors can take a cooling dip in the stream. Between the farmers and the volunteers, an estimated 250,000 trees have

been planted in the catchment during the past five years. The landowners have put in considerable effort – fifteen kilometres of stream and tributaries and 30 hectares of existing bush are protected. The rest has been through fundraising (one being a cycle tour around the catchment) to purchase plants, and volunteer effort adding 150 hectares of new riparian planting on both sides of the stream.

This considerable support has improved the Whangawehi Stream environment and won awards: New Zealand's Green Ribbon Awards Supreme Award in 2017, the Asia Pacific International River Prize Award in 2018 and a nomination for an international rivers award.

The current chairman of the project trust is Pat O'Brien. His wife, Sue, is the fourth generation on this land, and they still farm her family's property.

"We were involved in the project since the beginning, so it started on our land in the middle of the catchment. We were the guinea pigs," Pat says.

Rae Te Nahu of Tuahuru Marae was another early volunteer who helped present the environmental



One of the early planting volunteer teams

vision to councils and farmers. "It happened because of all of us doing our bit," she says.

The project team honour the late Kathleen Mato of Tuahuru Marae as the major champion of the project. By bringing people together, she had the privilege of holding the awards that were a recognition of her vision.

The project started in 2011 when the Wairoa District Council decided to install a community waste water system at Mahia township, on the other side of the peninsula, to protect the environment. The waste water ponds are in the headwaters of the Whangawehi Stream, although the material doesn't enter the stream. It is sprayed onto surrounding forestry land.

Whangawehi people were concerned that in a storm an overflow would contaminate the stream and ocean. The Whangawehi Catchment Management Group was formed to address those water quality issues, plus the loss of habitat and traditional food sources for local marae.

The Whangawehi project now involves most of the farmers in the catchment, as well as the local marae, the Mahia Maori Committee, Wairoa District and Hawke's Bay Regional Councils and the Department of Conservation. Plenty of volunteers come here to help plant, from Wairoa, Napier, Hastings, Gisborne, and as far afield as Wellington and the Waikato.

"The initial challenge for the catchment restoration was getting the stakeholders involved, getting people to see the benefits. But steadily farmers have come on

board," says Pat. "By retiring 25 percent of the land, we haven't decreased productivity – in fact it grows. And we change our farming practices to protect the waterways. There's funding assistance available, which helps landowners do these projects bit by bit. It's about getting a balance."

The detailed work of fundraising, organising meetings and keeping communication flowing over the years has been done by project manager Nic Caviale Delzescaux, a local environmental project contractor.

"It would be too difficult without Nic doing this work and keeping everything on track," says Pat.

Monitoring water quality throughout the restoration project has been the responsibility of freshwater and marine specialist Arthur Bowen, often with regional council scientists. There has been steady improvement in water quality, as much as fifteen percent, and more fish are in the stream, such as mullet, eels, kahawai and whitebait.

The main impact on water quality here is not sewage or stock effluent, as many people assume. Mahia Peninsula is beef and sheep farming country – there's not enough water for dairy cows.

"The current main water quality issues are sediment, occasional *E. coli* caused by ducks and geese in the water, and maybe slash when the forestry blocks are harvested," explains Arthur.

Effluent from nearby grazing animals is caught in the longer grass in the riparian edges. "And before there was long grass hanging over the stream, we wouldn't see many young longfin eels because they were being predated by adult eels, but now they can hide in the grass, there are more of them," says Arthur.

The Te Aratia Walkway entry is alongside the gate to Pongaroa Station, which straddles both sides of the stream at this point and has fenced off the riparian margins. Manager Bevan (BJ) Parker says Pongaroa's owner, investment banker Sir Michael Fay, is very supportive of the restoration work. BJ also gets involved in community planting days.

The main planting effort began in 2015 and the plantings have flourished with very little die back. Pest control has been vital to ensure the ongoing health of the young plantings. Farmers have been controlling possums on their land since 2006, but the goal to eradicate the pests with the help of the regional council started in 2019.

BJ says predator control has been the biggest game changer. "Once the possums and rats are gone, you see changes through the whole food chain – more bees, bumblebees, skinks and geckos through to birds."

In January, he spotted a rare bittorn in a fenced off wetland in another part of Pongaroa Station. It has been exciting news for the project team, who had hoped to attract these rare and endangered birds back after not being seen in the catchment for decades.

Tui, bellbird, wax-eyes and kererū thrive here, and even shining cuckoo have been heard after not being recorded for a long time. Kingfishers, ducks, herons and terns frequent the stream, while the O'Briens' wetland has fernbirds.

Pongaroa Station has retired more than just the riparian area to allow some archaeological sites to also be contained within the walkway area.

"The area is full of archaeological sites, both Māori and early European," Janice Edwards explains. Janice and husband, Pera, moved from Wellington to Mahia a few years ago and are part of the Kaiuku Marae involvement in the project. She is also the project's 'bug lady' and does the insect monitoring.

"There are signs of kūmara pits and gardens and where [Māori] pulled up their canoes. And on the other side of the stream there was a whaling station. We plan to add signs so visitors can learn about the richness of what's here."

The main archaeological site is a whare floor, possibly dating from 1850 to 1890, which has been fenced off to protect it. There's nothing left of the whaling station except some cleared land, but about seven whaling stations are thought to have been on Mahia Peninsula and Portland Island during the 1840s.



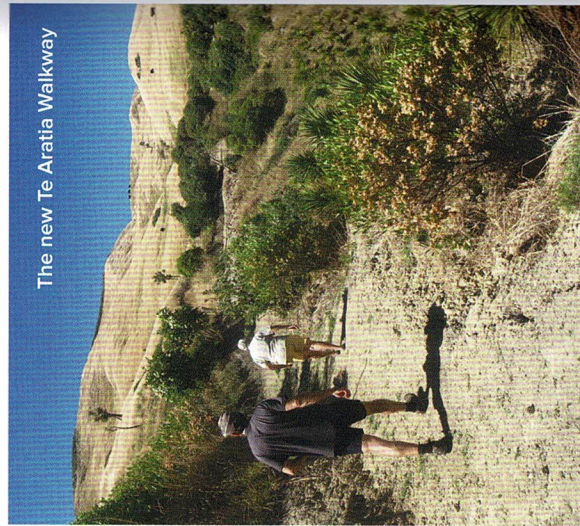
Janice Edwards checks the new track



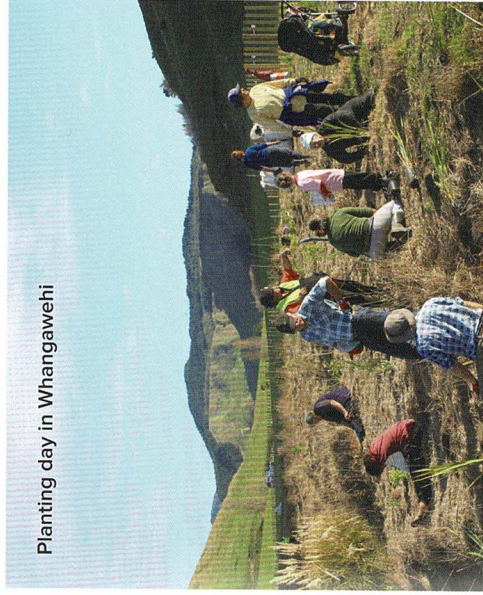
The late Kathleen Mato with Rivers Award



Waharoa entry welcome



The new Te Aratia Walkway



Planting day in Whangawehi



The Coop family

Down the road from the walkway entrance, Richard and Hannah Coop at Okepuha Station have fenced off ten hectares around their stream, one of the smaller tributaries of the Whangawehi. They've planted 27,000 trees, including some species for future sustainable harvest. The walkway doesn't reach their property, but they are hopeful that one day it will.

"We're keen to do more – as much as we can," say Richard and Hannah, who are clearly thinking of the next generation and their own children: Eva, Patch (Patrick), Rosa and three-month-old Isabel.

"Our land is part of the catchment, and retiring areas and planting trees is part of the social privilege of farming. We've been involved in all the planting days since before Eva was born."

Five-year-old Eva Coop has just started at Te Mahia School, where she will learn from the special environment programme that shares local knowledge around mātauranga Māori and indigenous practices. The students have built nesting boxes to attract little blue penguin, although there's no sign of them ... yet.

Arthur Bowen has worked with the school to share his monitoring knowledge with the children: "This is not about us, it's about the future. And if we can get one or two Mahia kids enthused each year so that one day they come back and carry on the work, we have succeeded."

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