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CAWTHRON MARLBOROUGH ENVIRONMENT AWARDS 2023

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JUDGES' REPORT

LANDSCAPE & HABITAT

SMART & CONNECTED FORESTRY GROUP

MATARIKI PLANTING PROJECT

INTERVIEWED	Gemma Morris, Sue Ross, Kristie Paki Paki, James Mills-Kelly, Angela Wadsworth, Hana Sluiter and Leika Crokett
DATE	27 October 2022
JUDGES	Dave Hayes, Chris Beech and Wendy Sullivan

INTRODUCTION

To celebrate Matariki in 2022 the Smart & Connected Forestry Group, in conjunction with Marlborough Forest Industry Association and the Marlborough District Council, organised a community tree planting project.

Funding for the event was provided by the Matariki Tu Rākau Programme led by Te Uru Rākau New Zealand Forest Service. Te Uru Rākau encourages communities to work together to plan their local Matariki projects, choosing appropriate species and public places for trees to be planted.

With the support of Enviroschools Marlborough, 17 schools from Marlborough took part, which resulted in one hectare of the Wither Hills Farm Park planted with 3000 native trees over three days in June 2022.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Smart & Connected Forestry Group was established in 2014 and compromises of representatives of the forestry industry, local landowners, transportation service providers, the Marlborough Chamber of Commerce and local government entities such as Marlborough Roads and Port Marlborough.

Their mandate is to exemplify innovation and collaboration in forestry, logging, wood processing, and waste-to-energy systems. The Matariki 2022 Planting Project allowed them to engage school children in habitat restoration and promote their goal of enhancing the reputation of the forestry industry by improving environmental stewardship, partnering with local communities and sharing information about the benefits of forestry.

The project was supported by Enviroschools Marlborough and Marlborough District Council.

The project fitted Enviroschools Marlborough theme this year of "Sustainable Communities", with the target that Sustainable Communities act in ways that nurture all aspects of nature, including people, now and in the future. Enviroschools assisted in organising more than 200 children from participating schools to attend one of six planting sessions over the three days. The project was one of the largest collaborations Enviroschools had undertaken in Marlborough.

Marlborough District Council manages Wither Hills Farm Park for the purposes of soil conservation and recreation. Operations include removing exotics from gullies and rehabilitation with natives. In working with Smart & Connected Forestry Group, MDC identified two areas for the project, both requiring planting to reduce erosion and also to expand the corridor to provide habitat for native birds. Being next to major walking tracks, the plantings will provide amenity and educational values into the future.

Given the high fire risk of the Wither Hills, the plants were carefully chosen using FENZ guidelines to have reduced flammability and tolerance of dry conditions. Species included Hoheria, Totara, Kowhai, Pittosporum tenuifolium and Cordyline.

MDC organised the site preparation and committed to funding plant maintenance for one year, ensuring the plants are mulched and weeded to help survival rates. The judges felt this was especially critical, given that these are 'legacy plantings' and the children and families have a vested interest in the success of the project. Low survival can be disappointing and demotivating for planting volunteers.

Commemorative plaques were installed at two sites and were unveiled with more than 60 school children attending along with the Mayor, forest industry supporters and the wider community. The project team had positive feedback from the children involved and thought there was appetite for future community planting days.

Children interviewed during the judges' visit said that "they liked being among the existing trees, while planting more" and "they liked that they were improving the environment, especially for the climate, and it was very moving to be part of it".

THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY:

- The large project was well planned and had a wide range of players brought together to achieve a shared purpose. Partners such as MDC and Enviroschools brought in additional assistance and experience to help the project achieve greater success.
- There was a huge diversity of participants from throughout Marlborough - 17 schools, other organisations such as Mental Health Support Group, and volunteers within the industry, all working on a common goal. This meant the participants, particularly the children, felt they were part of something bigger and more achievable rather than isolated efforts. Judges concluded that the project empowered these young students to take action for the environment rather than just talking about it. The project included scope to discuss the 'why' of planting.
- The alignment with and promotion of the principles of Matariki: doing mahi at the right time, weaving communities together, sharing kai and music and working as one.
- The use of fire-resistant plants, ensuring the planting did not exacerbate a climatic issue.
- Use of mulch from problem trees within the farm park.
- Partnering with MDC to allow them to meet their goals of actively involving community in the management of the Farm Park, and stimulating ideas of future community participation for the upcoming Farm Park Management Plan.

PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- Adverse weather events: Some of the newly planted trees were dislodged or buried in recent flood events. Collaboration between agencies allowed remedial action to be undertaken quickly and efficiently.
- The logistics of running a multi-organisational event: Strong leadership and communication within the working group, Enviroschools, MDC, contractors and the wider community.
- Access to the second less accessible site: Using older children from Marlborough Boys College and industry volunteers rather than the younger primary school children.
- Uncertainty of factors such as school participation and the time required to plant trees: The experience gained will result in a template to use in future years.
- Limitations of funding: The funding covered plant costs only. It didn't cover the full costs of site preparation and post-establishment remedial works. This resulted in partnering with agencies such as MDC, who funded the work as it fitted in with their management objectives.
- Non-availability of eco-sourced trees: A risk assessment resulted in a decision to use non eco-sourced trees, as the environment was already significantly modified, and furthermore, due to the close proximity to urban gardens, it was felt genetics of any natural wild areas would not be further compromised.

SUMMARY

The Matariki Planting Project was initiated to involve the forestry industry and school students in a native restoration project and promote the concept of kaitiakitanga.

The project achieved both goals, with the net restoration gain of 3000 trees within 1 ha of land, increasing the native corridor network and protection of erodible soils within Wither Hills Farm Park.

A stand-out feature of the project was the engagement with partners which brought together more than 200 students and allowed them to participate in active conservation. This provided a greater connection to the environment as well as an understanding of Matariki and kaitiakitanga. Supporting the project enabled the partners to meet their own goals, which demonstrates the power of working together.

SUGGESTIONS

For community planting days:

- Ensure participants have a good understanding of what to expect prior to the event, including terrain and the effort involved.
- To help plant survival, use stakes to mark the plants so they can be found for weed release; tie plants to stakes to help cope with floods and wind (it is not too late to do this for the 2022 plantings); use water crystals to increase survival through the first summer.
- Give nearby residents the opportunity to participate. This would build on kaitiakitanga so that they may become involved in maintaining the plants and future planting days.
- Ensure that any planting project factors in plant maintenance for at least two years after planting, either through seeking additional funding or partnering with others.
- Have a project debrief and complete a project template that can be used to assist planning and funding for future years.
- Find ways to bring in students that aren't typically part of schools' environment committees, so that they have a hands-on opportunity to learn about restoration.

Part of Smart & Connected Forestry Group's goals of partnering with communities and demonstrating environmental stewardship could be achieved by using this one-off project as a template for either annual community planting days, or by adopting one site and building on planting to create a holistic education hub. To assist with these options, the judges recommend considering:

- Developing a Community Engagement strategy; taking a proactive rather than reactive approach would enable the group to build on and expand the lessons learnt during the 2022 Matariki project.
- A strategy would allow for proactive planning, such as ordering eco-sourced plants well in advance.
- As an alternative to Wither Hills, consider scoping sites that have a link to or are adjacent to plantation forests. Use the opportunity to demonstrate and support best practice, eg, riparian setbacks or screening from roads. One approach would be to partner with existing groups that neighbour plantation forestry, eg, Para wetland, Pine Valley wetland.

- Build the project into the Enviroschools programme, so that the planting volunteers can have an ongoing connection to the site.
- Look to developing the site as an education hub or field classroom for experiential learning. By having a programme that includes plant maintenance, bird counts, insect surveys, photo point monitoring, etc, an in-depth understanding of how plants create an ecosystem could be achieved.