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CAWTHRON MARLBOROUGH ENVIRONMENT AWARDS 2023

Sponsored by Morgans Road Nursery

JUDGES' REPORT

LANDSCAPE & HABITAT

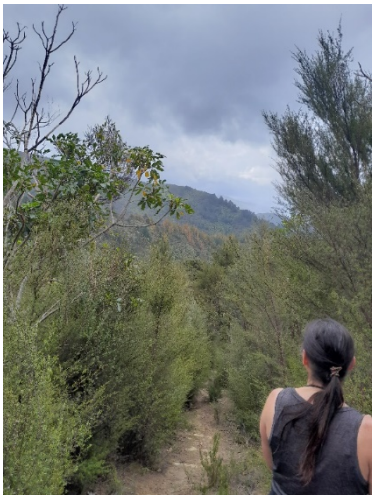
WILD WAIKAWA

INTERVIEWED Nigel Muir and Michelle Clark

DATE 28 October 2022

JUDGES Dave Hayes, Chris Beech and Wendy Sullivan

INTRODUCTION



Wild Waikawa is a restoration project on approx. 200ha of private land, located at the head of Boons Valley, Picton. The property rises from 100m to 1000m above sea level and includes Mt Piripiri/Te Maunga Piripiri.

The main issues that have degraded the forest ecosystem are mammalian predators, ungulates (primarily goats and pigs), possums, wasps and weeds (mainly wilding pines and old man's beard).

Landowners Michelle Clark and Nigel Muir have begun restoring the ecological values of their property with input from the community, Department of Conservation and Marlborough District Council. Restoration activities include wilding pine removal, wasp control, a predator trapping programme and growing and planting eco-sourced native trees.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Landowners Nige and Mish purchased the property in 2020 and immediately set out to understand and restore the ecological values.

The property is designated a Significant Natural Area and bounds public conservation land. It contains a number of ecologically important and/or rare species such as black beetle (Megadromus speciousus), Marlborough Sounds gecko, snails Powelliphanta hochstetteri bicolour and Wainuia nasuta, falcon/karearea, and rifleman/titipounamu. The upper reaches are old growth podocarp and beech forest.

The initial work involved controlling 8600 wilding pines, and building trap sets using recycled real estate signs,

As the trap network developed, Mish and Nige sought information and knowledge, the diversity of restorative actions increased, including controlling wasps with Vespex in 500 wasp stations, weed control of old man's beard, gorse, broom and Spanish heath, and ungulate control. Funding from Jobs for Nature and Working for Nature has allowed a rapid increase in the work achieved. Traps have increased from the original 80 to 400; more than 11,000 wilding pines have been pulled or poisoned. All predator catches are recorded on Trap NZ.

The property also had five derelict and overgrown tunnel houses which Nige and Mish restored and now use as a native plant nursery for propagation of plants eco-sourced from the property. Approximately 8000 plants have been grown, and 1200 of these planted to date.

Bird counts are carried out through acoustic recordings and their data has shown that bird numbers have tripled. They are also monitoring southern rata trees to measure forest regeneration. They have sought experts to assist with identification and surveying of rare species including lizards, snails and black beetles.

In addition to restoration, an important component of Wild Waikawa is to help people have a deeper connection with nature.

Mish is a trained Ecotherapist and Forest Therapy Guide and has brought this ethos to Wild Waikawa. Opportunities have been provided for the education of several hundred visitors, with emphasis on engaging with schools.

Te Atiawa and Waikawa Marae have a deep spiritual connection to Te Maunga Pirpiri, their ancestral mountain, but it has previously been inaccessible to them. Mish and Nige have developed a strong collaborative relationship with Te Atiawa and Waikawa Marae, working towards facilitating greater connection with Te Maunga Piripiri and Te Awa Waikawa (Waikawa Stream) through providing access and understanding and applying tikanga. There have been four collaborative projects with Waikawa Marae so far, and they are exploring joint projects with Te Atiawa, such as an internship, to allow rangatahi to connect with and be involved in native restoration.

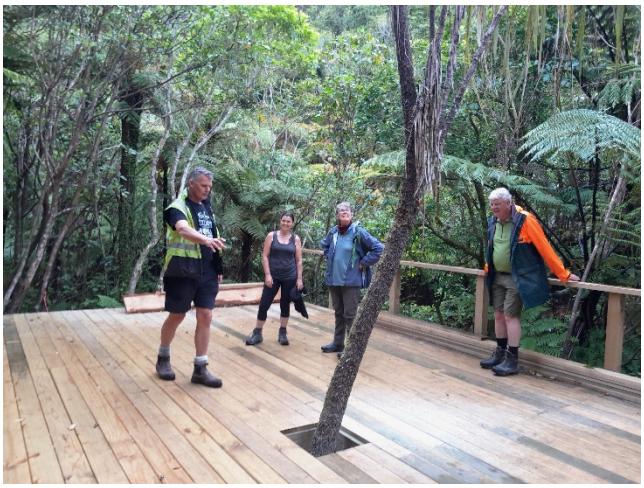
Community involvement has steadily increased, with volunteers assisting with trap placement, building work, pine control and nursery work. The result of Nige and Mish's deep passion and ethos of kaitiakitanga and protecting nature has no doubt resulted in people wanting to contribute and be a part of the project.

The property is off the grid, using a Pelton Wheel hydro system for electricity. Reducing waste and recycling as much as possible is carefully considered in all their endeavours.

Mish and Nige have a 400-year vision for the area, which includes improving the water quality and healthy habitat of the Waikawa Stream, creating a wildlife corridor from Te Maunga Piripiri to The Snout (mountain to sea) and to support community participation around learning about conservation as a life skill.

THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY:

- The 400-year vision that drives the landowners.
- The speed at which this ambitious project has got off the ground.
- The extensive trap/track network which allows access for other restoration activities.
- Turning derelict tunnel houses into an asset and potential income earner; resulting in a very impressive nursery propagation operation.
- The attitude of continual improvement and seeking out information and skills from technical experts and community groups.
- Passion, drive and ability to engage with the wider community – iwi, schools, and individuals.
- Ensuring the infrastructure is fit for purpose to support this, such as the learning platform, toilet, and nursery shed.



- Engagement and relationship with local iwi: exploring with Te Atiawa and Waikawa Marae the opportunity to reconnect with Te Maunga Piripiri, and reciprocal collaboration on shared goals.
- Natural and spiritual connection - the holistic restoration approach of not only removing negative impacts but supporting the community in re-engaging with nature through volunteer, mental health and educational opportunities.
- Looking for opportunities to utilise surplus plants such as the "Kickstart 300" where properties with SNAs can purchase a package of 300 plants, using subsidies from the Trees that Count programme.

PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

Size, terrain and topography of the property: It is steep, often wet and takes almost three hours to reach the tops. The landowners combine multiple tasks in one trip. The extensive trap network allows access for other activities such as wasp and ungulate control. Health & Safety measures include providing volunteers with boot microspikes, using emergency bags as track markers and marking the tracks with reflective markers.

Scale and cost: Traps, timber and other resources have largely been donated, purchased at a cheap price through online marketplaces or constructed from recycled materials. A Council grant and local timber donation allowed the helicopter transport of traps and building of new traps.

Initial lack of in-depth knowledge of conservation practices: Mish and Nigel had the philosophy of "Doing the best we can and when we know better, we do better." They started on projects they understood, such as trapping and wilding pines, then sought knowledge and technical advice from others with the aspiration of continual improvement.

SUMMARY

Wild Waikawa aims to restore Boons Valley catchment, create a predator- free corridor from mountains to sea, and reconnect people with nature so that both can rejuvenate.

The restoration potential of Wild Waikawa is immense. Within two years the project has already achieved significant gains in terms of ungulate, wilding pine and wasp control, and in growing knowledge of the biodiversity of the area.

Even though the project is on private land, Nige and Mish have had immense community engagement in a short period of time, a huge achievement.

SUGGESTIONS

- Expand on the vision and ideas within the business plan and nursery plan to finalise a formal restoration plan, ie, define objectives, actions and targets for a 5-10 year timeframe. This will aid management and restoration decisions, and the project will benefit from prioritising and budgeting these actions. An example can be found at Ecological Restoration Plan Template. This will also add confidence for potential funders.
- Setting short-term, medium-term and long-term goals will allow the project to grow sustainably and strategically and help prevent burn-out of both landowners and volunteers/community.
- Recording pest numbers only records what has been caught, it doesn't give an indication of what is still present. This information is critical in making management decisions on future trapping requirements and translocations. Seek out best-practice methodology on tools such as tracking tunnels and wax-tags.
- Translocation of bird species is an achievable long-term goal but protecting and boosting species that are already present should be a first priority. Seek expert advice from DOC about what their criteria are for pest thresholds and habitat requirements. Include these criteria as milestones in the restoration plan.

- Work on site and tenure protection. Investigate QEII, Council or DOC covenants. There has been and likely will continue to be a high level of 'investment' by volunteers, agencies and funders. Covenanting will allow continued investment, as well as peace of mind for contributors.
- Continue investigating the creation of a Trust and governance structure. This will increase resilience and longevity and enable better funding opportunities.