

INCREASING WILDLIFE HABITAT AREAS IN A FARMING LANDSCAPE

PROJECT DETAILS

Project cost:

\$981,500 including land purchase, plans, consents, subdivision, fencing, and establishing a Trust with seed funding to begin ecological restoration work.

Location:

Pūkorooro Miranda

Parties:

Vendor

Purchaser

Co-Purchaser: Department of Conservation

Pūkorooro Miranda Naturalist's Trust

Ngāti Paoa

Western Firth Catchment Group

Project purpose:

- Bring back nature into an agricultural landscape
- Reverse the historic and incremental loss of wildlife habitat in a coastal landscape
- Support community implementation of restoration activities
- Demonstrate ecological restoration activities without impacting on farm productivity
- Model the potential of low lying coastal lands which are subject to sea level rise and climate change, as economically viable sites suitable for "blue carbon" (wetlands as carbon sequestration sites)

Project timeframe:

2014 - 2023



Drainage and clearance of wetlands, conversion to farmland, construction of roads and settlements, and the proliferation of weeds and pest animals, has reduced habitat for wildlife in the Pūkorooro Miranda area severely impacting on ecosystem resilience.

BACKGROUND

Drains were regularly cleared mechanically releasing sediment and nutrients into the water and removing riparian vegetation. The 'cleared' environment created ideal conditions for algal blooms, which starved fish and invertebrates of oxygen meaning there were no food species to support wildlife.

An area around the Miranda and Pūkorooro stream mouth, which had potential for wildlife habitat restoration, was identified. Key characteristics of the area were:

- it was adjacent to a wildlife refuge and intertidal area designated under the RAMSAR Convention as internationally important for shorebirds
- it was flat and had good public access
- it was visible from the road so progress could be observed by the community

In 2014, a farmer offered 60ha of land for sale, but after three years of negotiations Living Water could only secure support and funding to purchase about a third of that land. Subdividing the 60ha into a smaller block to enable Living Water to purchase the land outright was not possible.

In the end, the entire 60ha site was purchased through a joint venture between the Department of Conservation and a neighbouring farmer. It was then subdivided with the farmer taking ownership of 40.4ha and the Department of Conservation taking ownership of 19.6ha, which was then designated a Wildlife Management Reserve. The transaction was completed in November 2018.



AT A GLANCE

About the catchment:

- Size: 6,000 ha

Total area of land purchased for wildlife habitat restoration:

- 19.6ha as Wildlife Management Reserve (Reserves Act 1977)

Desired Outcomes

- Increase the area of freshwater and estuarine wetland within the total catchment by 20 percent
- Improve breeding, roosting and feeding conditions for shorebirds leading to greater resilience of their populations
- Establish a Community Trust to lead the ecological restoration and ongoing management of the reserve

Lessons Learnt

- The Department of Conservation had to apply to the Crown's Land Acquisition Fund (LAF) for funding to make to the land purchase.
- The LAF had constraints that meant the purchase could only proceed with the involvement of a neighbouring landowner and his agreement to subdivide.
- Complexity of Crown's land acquisition process required specialist skills and expertise.
- Over time, the complexity and commitment of purchasing the land increased. Simpler options to improve wildlife habitats on public land or implementing other freshwater ecosystem restoration initiatives may have produced results sooner.
- Establishing a new community-led trust comprising iwi, farmers and conservationists from scratch, was a complex process. It took over three years to agree shared values, a mission and vision, a strategy, how to work together, and form the legal entity. Research tells us that without this careful foundation work Trusts are unlikely to survive long term. Don't lose site of the fact that they are called "Trusts" for good reason.
- Grants to Trusts do not generally fund administration putting significant pressure on volunteers with the risk that people will leave. Because of this, Living Water has committed to providing the necessary 'foundations' for the Trust to operate from day one. This includes an ecological restoration plan and seed funding until 30 June 2023.

Summary

Did we achieve the outcomes?

- With the purchase of 19.6Ha, the area of freshwater and estuarine wetland within the total catchment has been increased by close to 20 percent. Ongoing surveys of bird populations will determine if this has provided improved breeding, roosting and feeding conditions for shorebirds, and we will share these results over the next few years
- A Community Trust to lead the restoration and management of the reserve has now been established.

Recommendations

- Purchasing public land is complex. There are simpler ways to bring nature back into an agricultural landscape, such as the Living Water 'Mountains to Sea' project where landowners are supported to improve water quality and biodiversity on farmland.
- Where there is a willing community and resources available, spend time agreeing shared values, short and medium term outcomes, and have a go.
- We will share the results of the Mountains to Sea project as things progress.