

Case studies in

Innovative thinking from New Zealand's public sector

Case study #3:

Kia Wharite: a multi-agency environmental project

Iwi, landowners, the rural unemployed, tourists, and the North Island brown kiwi are among those who stand to gain from a unique partnership between the Department of Conservation and Horizons Regional Council in the Whanganui National Park.

The Kia Wharite project, launched in 2008, is the largest and most ambitious biodiversity initiative in New Zealand. It focuses on some 180,000 hectares of land west of Ohakune, including long sections of the Whanganui, Retaruke and Manganui te Ao rivers.

Kia Wharite is unprecedented, and not only because of its scale. Its scope is unusually wide, encompassing land (both conservation estate and privately-owned), water, biodiversity, and social/economic development. And it is also unique because it is the first time that the Department of Conservation (DOC) and regional government have worked together so closely.



The impact of their collaboration has been significant, according to DOC's Whanganui Area Manager, Dr Nic Peet.¹

“What has been achieved through Kia Wharite in terms of biodiversity protection, waterway fencing and land management could either not have been achieved at all, or certainly not at the rate of progress made to date, if each agency were operating in isolation.”

Iconic species and landscapes

The Whanganui River Catchment Area's significant natural, cultural and recreational values have long been recognised.

It's home to the country's largest remaining population of North Island brown kiwi, and a critical stronghold for the endangered blue duck (whio). The project area also contains the North Island's second largest stand of lowland

indigenous forest. The Whanganui River itself is culturally important to local iwi and communities, as well as a long-standing magnet for tourists.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the area was not as environmentally pristine as might be imagined. Water quality in the rivers had deteriorated because of erosion. Introduced pests had damaged the forest and decimated bird and animal life, including iconic native species.

The area's economy had also declined. Relationships between government agencies and the community were often tense, with iwi and other locals concerned about declining biodiversity values and a lack of investment in the river and catchment. They were also dissatisfied that the number of jobs they had expected to flow from the 1986 creation of Whanganui National Park had not materialised. Government agencies' relationships with local landowners were sometimes strained too.

Setting up the project

DOC (responsible for managing the conservation estate) and Horizons (dealing with private land) had each attempted to address some of these challenges within their separate mandates. However, there had been little meaningful progress in the face of ongoing pressures on the environment.

A different approach was clearly needed. The two agencies and already shared resources and expertise at times, and had established a high level of trust. Perhaps by working together they could deliver their services more effectively, and make more of an impact?

This idea was the catalyst for Kia Wharite. Despite initial scepticism, the proposed project received significant community support. Both DOC and Horizons agreed to commit \$500,000 a year over five years, and Kia Wharite was officially launched at the end of 2008.

Initial results positive

Halfway into Kia Wharite's first five years, results were encouraging. Some targets (especially for protecting endangered species) were ahead of schedule.

The first four trainee staff had graduated from the Te Amo Taio programme with skills including pest and species management, bush skills, fencing and tikanga Māori, and the second intake of trainees had begun work. Construction of the Mountains to Sea Cycle Trail through the project area had employed around 20 local people and injected \$500,000 into the local economy.²

Several factors lay behind these promising results. DOC and Horizons were committed to working seamlessly together, sharing resources and aligning and integrating their activities. Equally crucial as the central partnership between DOC and Horizons was the associated partnerships with iwi, landowners and other stakeholders to tackle environmental and conservation challenges. Similarly, partnerships with other agencies willing to contribute skills, expertise and funding allowed Te Amo Taio and the cycle trail to progress. Thanks to Kia Wharite, the local community could see that better environmental management can also deliver positive economic returns.

Kia Wharite has brought together multiple agencies and communities, harnessing their skills, resources and efforts in pursuit of shared goals. The collaborative project received the Russell McVeagh Award for Working Together for Better Services in the 2010 IPANZ awards and was described by the Conservation Minister in 2009 as

“a model for conservation projects.”³

² Over time, it is estimated the trail will bring an additional 5,000 visitors a year to the area, joining the approximately 21,000 who already visit.

³ DoC, 'Kia Wharite – A collaborative biodiversity initiative', media release 16 January 2009, available at <http://www.doc.govt.nz/about-doc/news/media-releases/2009/kia-wharite-a-collaborative-biodiversity-initiative>, accessed 30 June 2011



A project cluster

Kia Wharite is not so much a single project as a cluster of integrated projects carried out by DOC and Horizons in partnership with Whanganui iwi, local landowners, Te Puni Kokiri, the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Tourism.

- *Kia Wharite*, the original and umbrella project, aims to restore environmental health on both private and public land by managing pests, reducing erosion, and working with landowners to develop farm plans and protect stream margins. It also aims to significantly increase the local populations of the North Island brown kiwi and the blue duck (whio), pictured above.
- *Te Amo Taio* is a training and work experience programme. Local people learn conservation skills that will equip them to bid for conservation-based contract work. It also seeks to develop the wider capacity of iwi – not only to better manage their own lands, but also to participate in environmental management under the Conservation Act and the RMA. The programme was established by DOC, Horizons, the Ministry of Social Development and Te Puni Kōkiri, and is managed by a local iwi development trust.
- *Mountains to Sea Cycle Trail*: part of the Ministry of Tourism's National Cycle Trail project, it aims to bring more visitors into the Kia Wharite project area and create economic opportunities for local people and businesses. DOC and the Ministry of Tourism are funding the track construction, with a governance group of representatives of local authorities, iwi and DOC.