

Changing Waters

WAI CONNECTION WORKSHOP SERIES

MARCH - JUNE 2026



MOUNTAINS
TO SEA
CONSERVATION
TRUST



CENTRE
for SOCIAL
IMPACT
A Foundation North
Initiative



CONNECTION
TATAI KI TE WAI

Wai Connection was a catchment group engagement and support project funded by
the *Essential Freshwater Fund* from May 2023 to June 2026



Authors

Miranda Cassidy-O'Connell of the Centre for Social Impact

Kim Jones and Holly Cole of Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust

Contents

Executive summary

Context

Purpose of the series

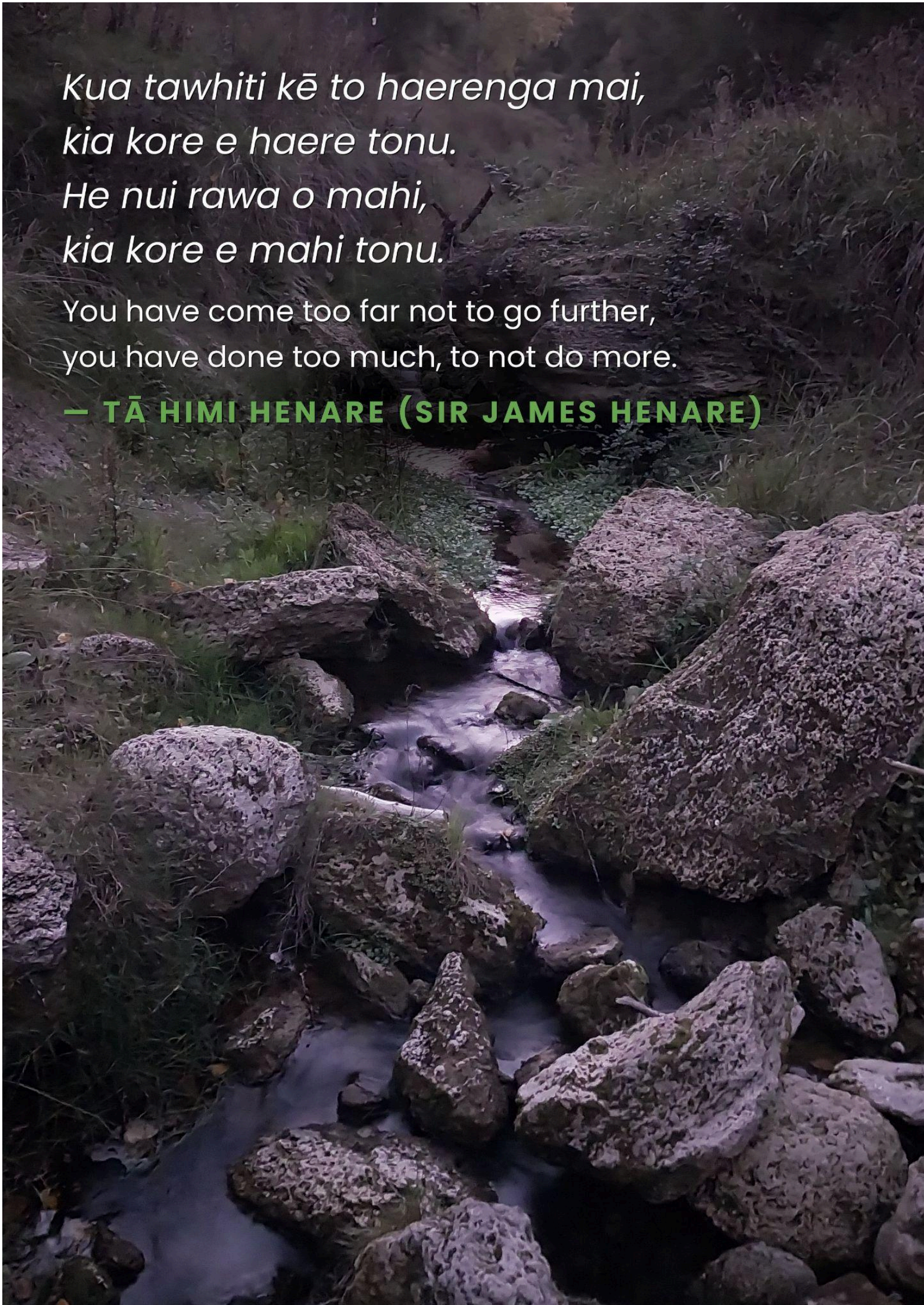
Participants

Process & methodology

Themes of what was shared

Insights

Recommendations

A photograph of a small stream flowing over large, mossy rocks in a forest. The water is clear and reflects the surrounding greenery. The rocks are large and jagged, with patches of moss and small plants growing on them. The background is a dense forest with tall trees and thick foliage.

*Kua tawhiti kē to haerenga mai,
kia kore e haere tonu.*

*He nui rawa o mahi,
kia kore e mahi tonu.*

You have come too far not to go further,
you have done too much, to not do more.

— **TĀ HIMI HENARE (SIR JAMES HENARE)**

Executive summary

As part of transition planning for the Wai Connection project, which came to a close in June 2026, the workshop series called Changing Waters took place across the country from March to June 2026.

Approximately 170 people took part in the workshop series, and three interviews were conducted in regions where the workshops were not held, providing a useful pulse check on the progress of freshwater catchment work in regions where Wai Connection had provided support.

The series was regionally specific yet nationally relevant, offering information and insights that can inform future decisions on freshwater catchment health in Aotearoa.

The workshops found:

- The aims of Wai Connection are proving to be achievable at regional level.
- Evidence of increased capabilities in catchment communities to improve freshwater catchment health.
- Evidence of regionally driven conditions for systems change.
- Increased engagement of catchment communities with whole-of-catchment issues and management.
- Evidence of engagement becoming coordinated action, with both biodiversity and social indicators of improvement.
- Resulting reports of increased social resilience even in the face of increased biophysical threats such as extreme weather events.
- Persistent commitment at regional level for improving the health of freshwater catchments and increased intention to collaborate across differences.

- Optimism and hope for country-wide shifts on freshwater degradation if we all work together.
- Sweeping changes in funding, policy and legislative decisions are limiting the momentum in most regions and undoing relationship and trust building in some.

From which the authors recommend:

A re-visiting of the systemic focus for freshwater health of the 2020 era and Te Mana o Te Wai as a set of guiding principles by the central government, supported by local government, science organisations and diverse funding sources, and continue the learning target of 2023 to increase capacity and capability of catchment communities as a connection between all parties.

This renewed focus should be intentionally and simultaneously working the multiple layers of structural, relational and transformative change to achieve a systemic shift of freshwater degradation.

Specific recommendations:

- Provide clear and detailed national objectives for improvements to catchment health to foster alignment.
- Provide a policy and funding system that is appropriate for the scale and timelines of the change required.
- Support the conditions of systems change: objectives and guidance by subject experts, not vested interests, paired with the intentional inclusion of all whose actions impact catchment health at the catchment level.

Context

Aotearoa New Zealand's freshwater catchments are more than hydrological units. They are dense, overlapping systems where land use, biodiversity, cultural values and community identity all impact water quality outcomes. The health of a waterway reflects the cumulative outcomes of many land uses over time, and no single group can improve it alone (Knight 2019). This biophysical complexity (climate and weather, biodiversity and land use, geology and hydrology) is nested inside the human complexity of overlapping authority, values, and capacity to act.

By 2020, central government policy explicitly reflected that complexity. The National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management (NPS) embedded Te Mana o te Wai - articulated as a hierarchy that places the health of the water first, followed by the essential health of people, then the abilities of communities to provide for their social/economic/cultural wellbeing - as the guiding principle for freshwater management. Research commissioned to inform the NPS and Essential Freshwater Fund (EFF) showed that regulation of individual farming practices was making little progress against diffuse and cumulative pollution, and groups were forming across the motu in response to regulations. The same research found the groups on the ground did not match the tidy and representative collectives that policy might imagine, and that expectations of them differed sharply among communities, tangata whenua and agencies (Sinner et al 2023, 2025). A regional analysis for the Ministry for the Environment (MFE) found energy without infrastructure: groups everywhere, but support fragmented and unevenly resourced, and no clear picture of capability or capacity in any region (Highway et al 2022). The research warning was consistent: if agencies fund catchment groups without understanding them, the expected freshwater improvements will not arrive (Sinner et al 2023, 2025).



Community Based Freshwater Monitoring Training for Wai Connection Catchment Coordinators, 2024

The Catchment Group Engagement round of the Essential Freshwater Fund in 2022 - part of the Jobs for Nature package - was a deliberate systemic response. The \$36M round funded multiple levers at once to scale catchment capacity and capability through:

- further direct contracts with groups and collectives (including through MPI)
- contracts for new science and access to existing expertise (with industry bodies, universities and BECA/access2experts)
- increasing the catchment management workforce in regional and unitary councils
- producing resources to enable good decision making (NZARM's professional capability tool, NZLT's ACE Programme)
- providing tailored capacity and capability building directly to catchment communities through Wai Connection

Wai Connection had a large, diffuse aim: **to enable both the capacity and capability of catchment communities directly in every region, to act as the connection between the communities, organisations and science that is required to work together to implement change.** Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust (MTSCT) had 20+ years of experience in community-led conservation and restoration work in both freshwater and marine environments

and solid consensus-building practices based on their experience - education - action frameworks but were not operating at a fully national scale.

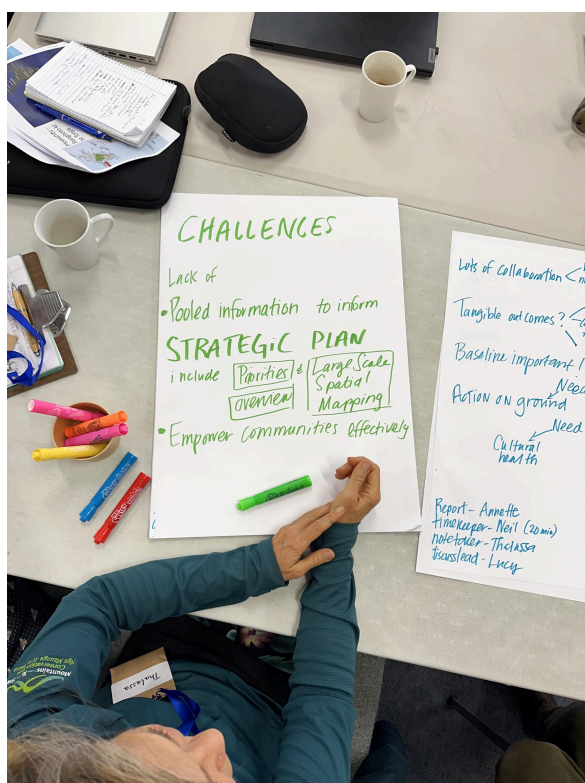
To avoid duplication and share funding appropriately, Wai Connection partnered with existing organisations (called Mountains to Sea Provider Organisations or MTSPOs) in each region, opening with region-wide hui that brought council and central government representatives and everyone working in catchment conservation in that region to the table along with existing groups. From these hui MTSPOs created collaborative regional needs assessments and tailored regional plans for how the region could meet the needs of its catchment communities.

By the end of 2025, Wai Connection was reporting remarkable levels of engagement, coordination and collaboration in catchment groups themselves. Wai Connection's initial target of supporting 100 catchment groups had progressed to 400, of which 136 were new groups. Many mature groups had received training in multiple areas and were conducting their own water monitoring projects, applying for project funding, and shifting beyond establishment to science and action-based activities. Complexity remained and different groups and regions worked more collaboratively than others, but MTSPOs were providing tailored support in 13 regions and requests for national-level training, science advice, fundraising and communications support were increasing rapidly.



Freshwater Guardians event, Waikato

However, while catchment communities acquired skills, built relationships and gained momentum, the context had markedly changed. A change of government, ministry restructures, policy pauses, regulatory change, and associated staff turnover meant that as MTSCT worked to create regional transition plans for the end of Wai Connection, the elements needed for such a transition were missing. Funding signals were silent, policy direction was unclear, and all over the country, Jobs for Nature projects were facing the largest 'funding cliff' in memory. An independent review of the catchment group support pointed to what should come next - clear operational strategies that promote collaboration across regional and national agencies, prioritisation of scalable projects with measurable outcomes, and transparent funding (Burt-Priddy et al, 2025) - echoing the wider systems change insight that durable results come from shifting the conditions that hold the problem in place (Kania et al, 2018)



Purpose of the series

The Changing Waters workshop series was created for that purpose, with Miranda Cassidy-O'Connell of the Centre for Social Impact contracted to co-design the series and each regional workshop with MTSPo and their partners.

The Changing Waters series was a connection point for each region to celebrate freshwater catchment achievements, understand current impacts, and assess their collaborative fitness to work together on a long-term and resilient future. The series ran as a participatory process to take a pulse check of freshwater catchment health efforts after three years of funding and support from Wai Connection. The series is a snapshot in time, intended to reflect on what has been achieved and give guidance on what could be achieved moving forward.

Each region had specific priorities that they wished to focus on and different people to participate in their workshops. As a result, the formats and topics were considerably varied, but with some commonalities of purpose, to:

- Bring together diverse voices who are working to action and support freshwater catchment health in their region.
- Celebrate the progress that has been achieved by catchment groups and in their support, as well as learn from the challenges.
- Explore current trends regionally, nationally and globally that are impacting the work in freshwater catchment health.
- Identify and agree some common ground to work on together for long-term freshwater catchment health and resilient communities.

Participants

The Changing Waters workshop was offered to all 13 regions funded by Wai Connection across the country. Three of the regions declined the opportunity, because the catchment group engagement calendar was already full all the way to the end of June and a region-wide hui was impractical. Three of the regions had phone calls and meetings with CSI to determine their priority needs and decided not to run a workshop at this point for similar reasons and because of team attrition at the end of the project. Information gathered from these interviews is included in this report. Seven of the regions chose to take up the workshop opportunity, with Nelson and Tasman running a combined workshop.



Tamaki Makaurau / Auckland Changing Waters workshop participants

3

Interviews

7

Workshops

170

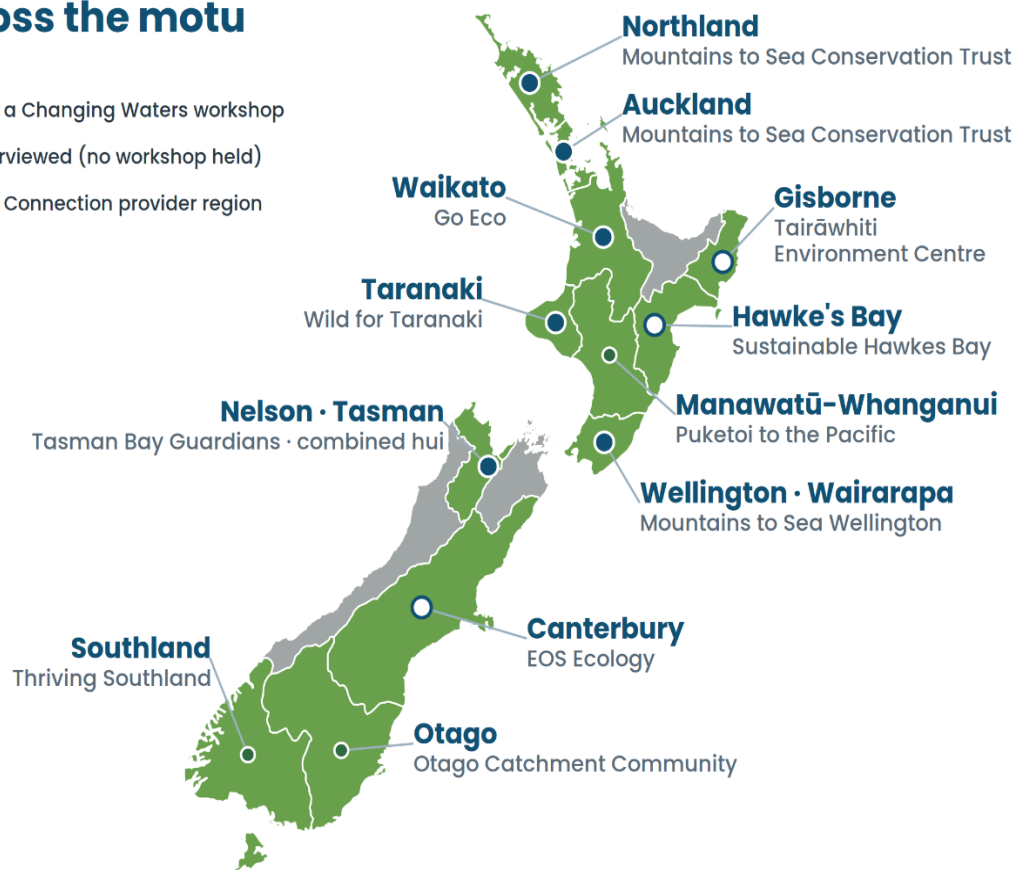
Attendees

8 - 40

Attendees per
workshop

Changing Waters across the motu

- Ran a Changing Waters workshop
- Interviewed (no workshop held)
- Wai Connection provider region



Participants brought the voices and experiences of mana whenua, catchment communities, local councils, NZ Landcare Trust, MPI, DOC, some funding organisations, and local industry. Just one of the workshops had rangatahi participants. Christina Robb from Te Uru Kahika (a collective of regional and unitary councils in Aotearoa) took part in two of the workshops, bringing the regional council context of environment and freshwater to these regions.

Process and methodology

Implementation of the Changing Waters series was guided by the understanding that improving freshwater catchment health is both a deeply place-based effort and a systemic challenge common to the whole country. Therefore, it was important to co-design each workshop to include both the specific focus points of each region and a few activities that took place in every workshop.

Co-design

Prior to each workshop, the MTSPOs worked with Miranda to identify what their current key challenges were and how they would like to make the most of this workshop opportunity. Each region had run regional needs assessment workshops in the prior two years of the Wai Connection programme and the information from these earlier workshops contributed to the co-design of the Changing Waters workshops.

The co-design conversations were an opportunity to discuss the highs and lows of collaborating on freshwater catchment work. It enabled each region to identify particular issues that they wanted to address in their workshop, such as:

- making space to discuss the stressful impact of severe weather events
- showcasing the leadership of rangatahi immersed in kura taiao
- exploring how to collaborate on fish passage in the region
- specific learning about the Māori landscape of the region
- supporting catchment collective governance to intentionally plan strategically, and
- exploring how to collaborate on two sub-regional projects

It was clear that all the regions valued the opportunity to bring people together in person. This meant suitable venues needed to be arranged at dates and times that would enable diverse participation and, importantly, provide good food as a way of valuing participants.



Taranaki Changing Waters



Walking the regional timeline at the Tāmaki Makaurau workshop

Participatory approach

The facilitation style honoured equity of participation, where every voice was valued and valid. The activities were interactive, with participants asked to write up their knowledge and thoughts directly, engage in small-group dialogue, and take turns speaking to the whole workshop about their small-group discussions. The workshops were low in digital content, with an emphasis instead on face-to-face conversations and the use of paper, bright-coloured markers, some post-its, and sticky dots. A few presentations took place at some of the workshops and time was made to then collaboratively discuss what was heard and implications for freshwater catchment work in their region.

This participatory style valued the importance of connection, which is the lifeblood of freshwater catchment work and enabled a trusting environment for tricky conversations to take place. Feedback from the workshops indicated an enjoyment of this style and whetted an appetite for more forums of diverse voices and facilitated conditions.

Repeating activities

Three activities took place at all the workshops:

- Timeline of key events, projects, and milestones over the last three years
- Current Trends (regional, national, global) impacting the work

Participants made sense of the information generated in small group dialogue and then came together to identify some common ground for future work.



Whakatu Nelson / Te Tau Ihu Tasman Changing Waters



*"Catchment communities are
vehicles for change."*

— WAIRARAPA WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

Themes of what was shared

So much action is underway

Workshop participants richly populated the timelines. The sheer quantity and variety of events, projects and milestones that filled each region's timelines is a remarkable testimony to the capacity and capability for freshwater catchment health across the country.

Key freshwater catchment health actions highlighted across the country included:

- Plant production and riparian planting
- Water testing
- Pest control
- Formation and support of catchment groups
- Catchment management planning
- Cultural health monitoring
- School education programmes
- Spotlighting, Bioblitz and 'know your awa' events
- Fencing
- Fish & other biodiversity surveys
- Fish passage efforts
- Technical support and training for monitoring and pest control
- Catchment mapping on GIS, soil maps, LiDAR and other biophysical mapping projects
- Advocacy for freshwater decisions at local and central government levels
- Multiple events fostering learning and connections
- Restoration of wetlands, awa and īnanga spawning habitats

Some of the workshops specifically named the capacities and capabilities in their regions and openly shared their needs and offers to help each other. The word clouds below give insight into these:

Working together is essential

An activity in several of the workshops asked participants to stand on a continuum of collaborative fitness, with one end being low in collaboration and high in competition, and the other end where collaborative behaviour is very common and effective. In general, the workshops had participants grouping around the middle of the continuum with a few outliers at either end. Rich dialogue occurred as participants explained why they had stood at a particular point on the continuum, including references to historical trauma that led to 'gates' being put up and to a fear of the risks of collaboration.

Overall, participants at all the workshops expressed both a need and desire for more collaboration in freshwater catchment work. The nature of the work is about interconnected parts from the land to the sea, and all the people dependent on freshwater health. It is a complex space that demands collaboration as the most effective behaviour to firstly observe and understand the full picture, and secondly call on everyone's skills to implement practices for freshwater catchment health. The systemic potential of collaboration can magnify benefits, reduce barriers and increase efficiency.

There was particular focus on the benefits of community and farmers collaborating with mana whenua as a pathway for just and effective outcomes in freshwater catchment health. This included taking guidance from the wisdom of mātauranga Māori. In addition, there were repeated calls to work with, inspire and be inspired by rangatahi in freshwater catchment health.

The role of local government in freshwater catchment health was in evidence at each workshop. Local councils are more connected to regional freshwater catchment issues and people than the central government. The capability and commitment of council staff appeared to influence the effectiveness of work with catchment groups overall. Council staff could be very effective enablers of collaboration and aligned outcomes.

Some comments included:

"Relationships are the work, not just a means to programme delivery."

"Wai Connection was a welcome social infrastructure that bridged the many people committed to freshwater catchment work. Enabled a very inclusive approach that was holistic. Daylighted the reality of mana whenua having a huge history in the work and continuing the work through the ongoing changes of everyone else."



Kōrero and rangatahi voices at the Waikato workshop

"We have the opportunity to keep on relationship building, identify wins and spaces to improve and tap into collective creativity to keep supporting much-needed efforts for freshwater regeneration."

"Let's keep connecting as support agencies, to let go of ego, tunnel vision and competition; so we can enable communities, farmers and hapū to lead."

"This brings together the diverse array of people in the catchment that wouldn't normally end up together, and that is what can bring real change."



"The biggest lesson out of this work is the importance of building strong collective relationships over time. It takes thousands of cups of tea. Trust and time are crucial."

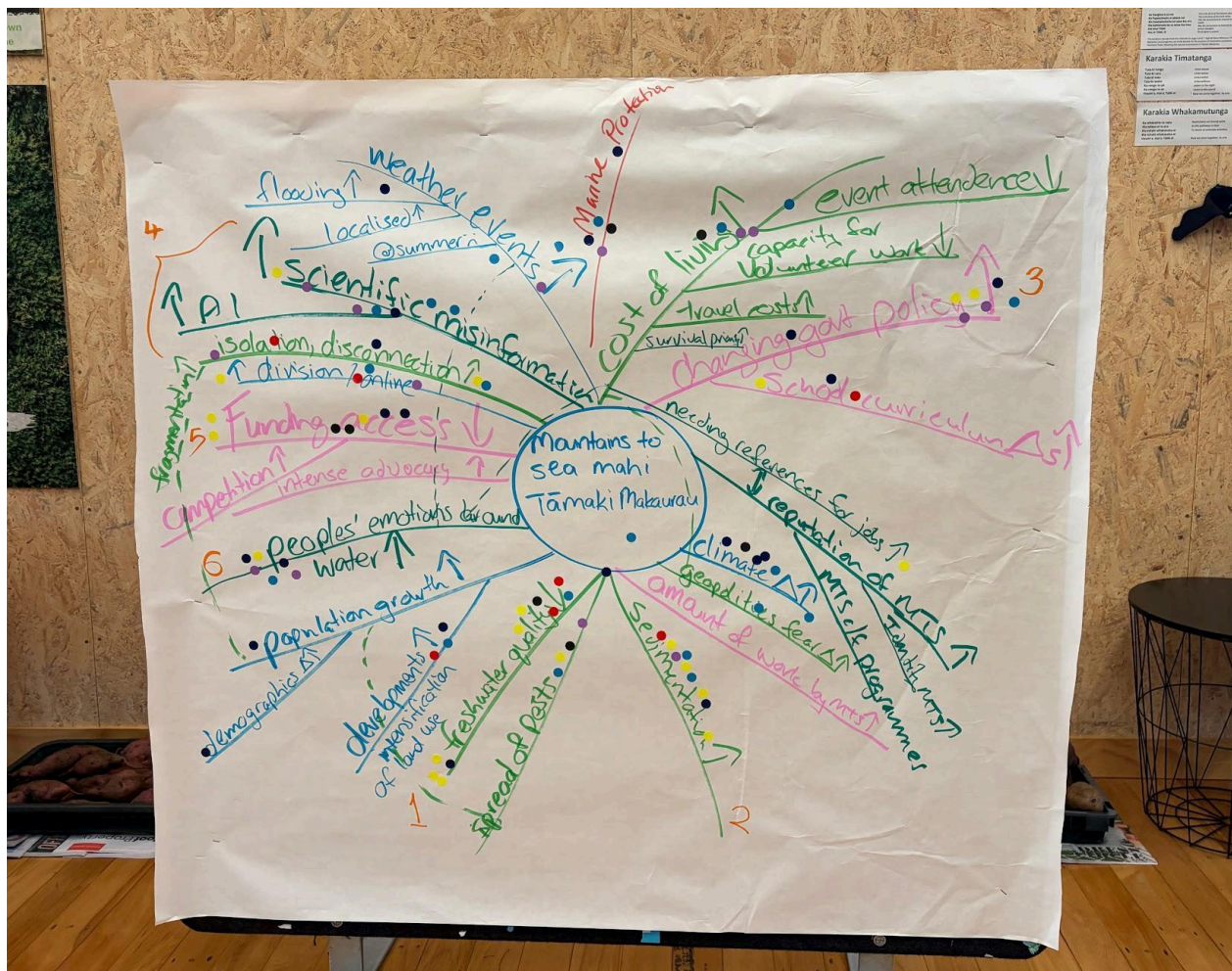
— WAIKATO WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

There are systemic trends impacting the work

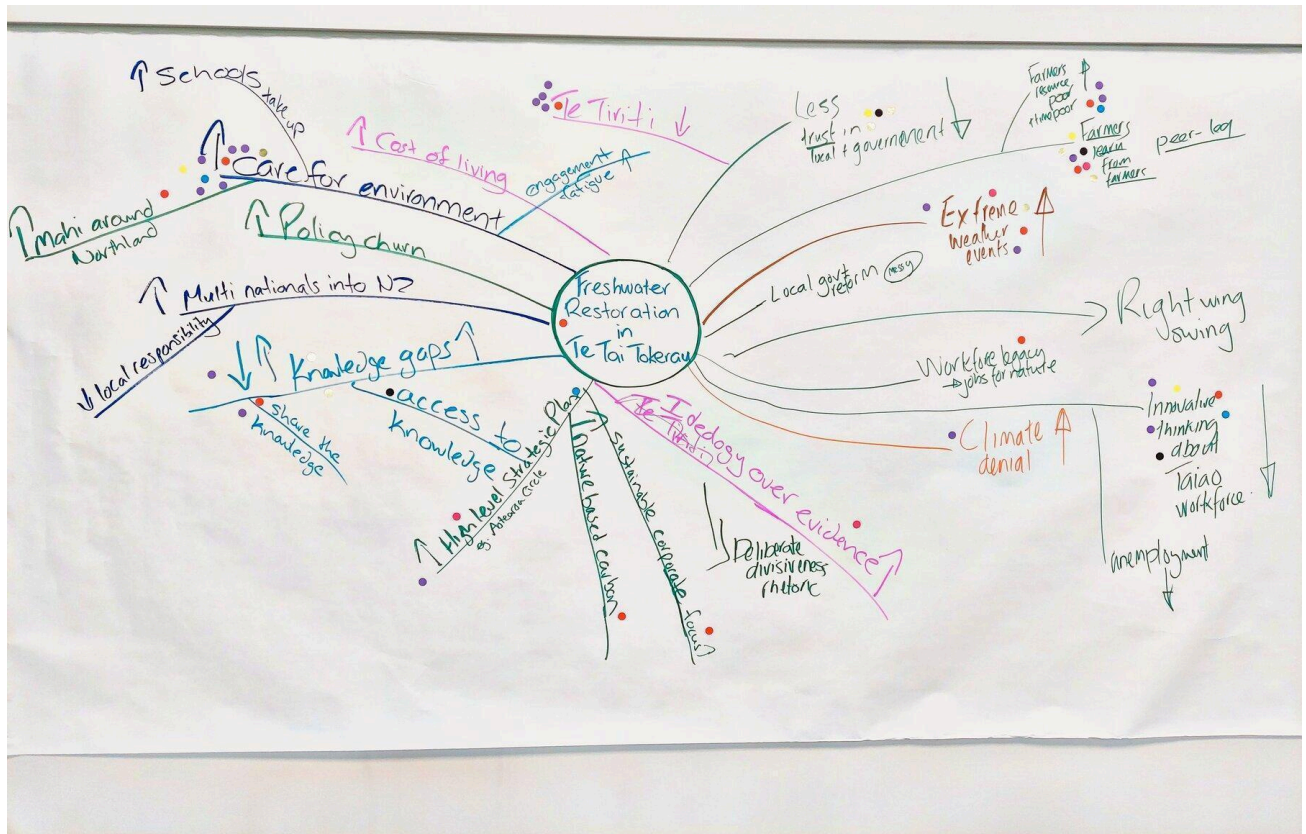
Each workshop was asked to identify trends (increasing or decreasing social, economic, technological, political, and environmental changes) that are influencing freshwater catchment health. These include local, regional, national and global trends.

Participants called out a trend and gave a specific example of that trend. The trend was drawn onto a giant mind map by two scribes. This was a highly engaged part of each workshop, with trend calls coming in a constant flow and keeping the two scribes busy at the wall. At the end of the identifying trends activity, each participant placed up to five sticky dots on the trends they would prioritise for action.

The images below show the completed mind maps for each region.



Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland



Te Tai Tokerau / Northland



Waikato



Taranaki



Whakatū Nelson / Te Tai o Aorere Tasman



Wairarapa Catchment Collective (Wellington Region)

Participants easily identified regional, national, and global trends affecting their efforts to heal freshwater catchments, demonstrating a savvy awareness of the 'big picture' within which their regions operate. The trends identified were very diverse, ranging, for example, from the impact of international markets to increasing sedimentation through to people's emotions around water. Unsurprisingly the recurring and increasingly disruptive force of extreme weather events across the country featured in many of the mind maps.

The table below shows the top five trends of particular concern to each region, noting that these are the tip of the iceberg of the bigger family of impacts and are only a snapshot of how each region wishes to focus its energy at this moment in time in 2026.

Regions	Top 5 priority areas from mind map trends
Te Tai Tokerau / Northland	Caring for the environment Supporting farmers Innovative thinking about taiao workforce Te Tiriti o Waitangi Extreme weather events
Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland	Freshwater quality Sedimentation Changing government policy

	Misinformation around science People's emotions around water (isolation, disconnection, division)
Waikato	Kai (declining health as a measure and indicator) = Increasing awareness of mātauranga Māori = Sedimentation Collaboration of farmers and mana whenua Land use Sporadic and short-term funding
Taranaki	Decreasing momentum due to increasing changes in policy Deprioritising of taiao and Māori in funding and increasing anti-Māori sentiment Intergenerational change and more responsibility taken by farmers Increased understanding of erosion, awareness and access to riparian planting Increasing technological innovations
Wairarapa	Changing policy and people in central and regional govt Increasing data and knowledge Increased trust of catchment groups Increased anti-Māori sentiment Increased weather variation and instability Reduced funding for environmental work
Te Tau Ihu / Nelson and Tasman	Sedimentation Pressure of changing regulations Climate change Restoration of wetlands Increased engagement and education

Navigating funding, policy cycles and uncertainty

"The current amount of government changes to freshwater policy and governance is creating a 'wait and see' pattern."

Every workshop touched on the compounding headwinds of flip-flopping government policy and short-term and intermittent funding for freshwater catchment work, which were also the top two barriers identified in Wai Connection's year two evaluation report. It was clearly stated that the nature of this catchment work is long-term and the resource commitment also needs to be of a long-term nature. One of the trends that was repeatedly referred to was the misalignment of funding cycles and funder requirements with how environmental and community work actually happens.

One observation regarding the changeability of central government policy and decisions was that “all other voices (Māori, community, farmers, local government, te taiao itself) GET the task, yet central government is more disconnected from the rooted place and is able to change behaviour with less consequence.”

Other comments made included:

“Noticed that funding is geared to the short term with three years maximum for grants. This is not fit for taiao regeneration, which is a long-term undertaking.”

“We can let go of being paralysed by government policy and funding uncertainty.”

“We need to change the language from funding to investment as proof of the long-term commitment.”

“Regional providers need to advocate for better conditions, not just adapt to poor ones.”

There is common ground for ongoing regional action

Despite the real inconsistency and uncertainty of funding and policy decisions, each workshop was pervaded by a determined energy to keep going and maintain momentum in freshwater catchment health. So much work is already underway and has been for years, and there is a strong commitment to continue taking action on freshwater catchment health. This work is life, with many comments affirming the belief that the work brings hope, joy and resilience to people and their catchments.

“We just live this mahi. It cannot be a 9-5pm job, we have to live it all the time.”

“Participants left the workshop with a strengthened commitment to expand partnerships, share learnings, and align efforts, contributing to a more connected, resilient freshwater future for the region.”

“The ultimate aim is long-term self-management by communities that are taught and empowered.”

“There is a strong, inclusive and motivated culture that is underpinned by programme quality and healthy relationships.”

In addition, each region had a specific focus in their workshop that was able to be discussed and agreed upon for forward action, working together. These included:

- A collective call to establish a regional community of practice for fish passage, recognising the need for ongoing coordination, knowledge exchange, and joint problem-solving.
- Agreed to a community of practice for all the support organisations in the region that will meet bi-monthly as an open-source and collaborative space. Explored ideas and actions to collaboratively implement for catchment health in two sites.
- Renewed commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi in the work, including exploring a cultural advisor role and dedicated resources for relationship building with mana whenua across the region.
- Collaboratively discussed and gave advice to MPI to guide central government decisions on the funding for ‘On Farm Support - Catchment Extension Services.’
- A collective commitment to ‘slow the flow’ - referring to slowing water down with nature-based solutions for reduced sedimentation and flood resilience. It can also refer to people slowing down, creating space to observe their nervous systems and get resourced and calm, acknowledging the stress of weather events on people and their work.
- Collective commitment to intentionally build and maintain relationships with local and central government, mana whenua and local industry. Then advocate for catchment collective value in the region and attract diverse funding. Back this up with excellent data management - generating, sharing and distributing data that helps understand trends.

"There is such joy when working alongside nature and being able to synergise with living systems."

— NORTHLAND WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT



Insights

Making sense of the information collaboratively generated at the Changing Waters workshop series is best done through a framework for systems change. This report uses the Water of System Change framework developed by John Kania, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge in 2018 (see page 33). The three top takeaways of this framework are:

- Systems change is about advancing equity by shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place.
- To fully embrace systems change, funders should be prepared to see how their own ways of thinking and acting must change as well.
- Shifts in systems conditions are more likely to be sustained when working at three different levels of change: structural, relational and transformational.

Catherine Knight refers to implicit levels such as mindsets in her 2019 'Potted history of freshwater management in New Zealand':

"The issue of freshwater degradation will not be resolved by legislative change, or even institutional change, alone. Mindsets will need to change. Even today, when the extent of damage from land use intensification is beyond doubt, there is reluctance on the part of regional councils to regulate land use. This deep-seated devotion to private property rights will need to be supplanted by a stronger consciousness of the public good and, with it, a deeper recognition of the social contract. Only then will New Zealand be able to fully resolve freshwater degradation."

The years since 2019 have had markers of a willingness by central and local governments to tackle the complex systemic challenge of freshwater catchment degradation. This includes the 2023 decision of the Ministry for the Environment to help create Wai Connection.

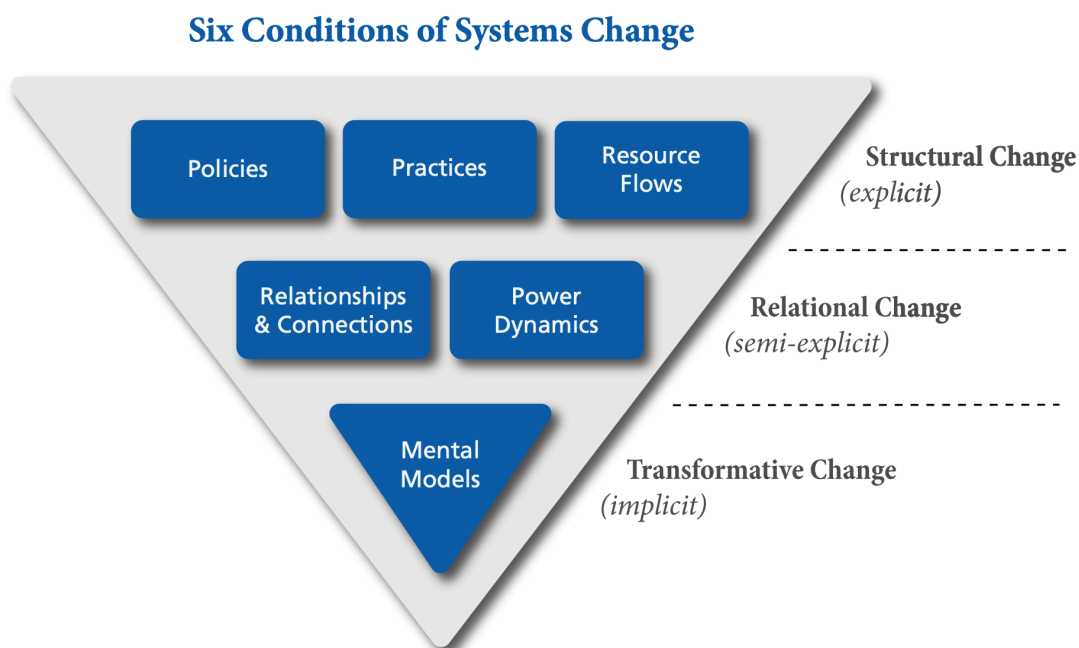
The EFF, and Wai Connection as one of its investments, was the MFE's practical response to the early diagnosis from commissioned research: a recognition that catchment groups needed sustained, tailored capability-building, not just money, to close the gap between policy ambition and delivery on the ground. From implementing that tailored programme, we have learned that inclusive, deliberative capacity building that recognises the input of the whole catchment community and brings everyone along on the change journey is the only way to scale and maintain momentum.

The Changing Waters workshop series provides contemporary evidence of a persistent willingness by mana whenua, farmers, and communities to tackle freshwater catchment degradation in their regions with creativity and courage. Often, scientists and local councils support the work and understand the practical challenges being addressed. In some cases, industry players are contributing to their efforts.

Not only is there persistent willingness of those in the regions to tackle the challenges, the workshop series demonstrated a deep and broad awareness of the systemic issues and an understanding that collaboration of all parties is essential to truly shift the problem of freshwater degradation.

The original aim of Wai Connection is proving to be achievable at regional levels. Three years of Wai Connection intentionally providing social infrastructure to support the energy of local and regional catchment efforts has been a success. Over 400 catchment groups and numerous other collectives and individuals actively working to heal freshwater catchments have been supported, and clear pictures are now held for regional capability and capacity.

Below is a diagram from the Water of System Change, where Kania et al, 2018 identified six conditions that, when intentionally shifted, lead to systems change. While explicit structural change of policies, practices and resource flows is important and does help, they rarely create lasting systemic change on their own. Changing them doesn't alter the deeper structures driving the system. What truly transforms a system is working with all six conditions in a courageous way, going deeper, facing more and taking creative actions with others over time.



At the regional level across Aotearoa, many of the conditions that hold freshwater degradation in place are beginning to shift. This demonstrates a functional social infrastructure that is generating outcomes of increasing freshwater health and resilient communities. This report suggests that long-term investment in a flexible and customised social infrastructure (such as Wai Connection provided) will generate emergent and desirable outcomes in a way that managing inputs such as criteria for land types and catchment group definitions won't.

The Changing Waters series highlighted regional shifts in all six conditions. In summary:

Levels	Levers	Regional shifting of the conditions
Structural	Policies	The MTSPs were all tasked with working in an inclusive and holistic way that provided bridges of information and understanding amongst diverse interests.
Structural	Practices	Numerous narratives were shared that demonstrated the vision, passion, determination and willingness of catchment communities to call on a diversity of knowledge and give things a go in actively reversing freshwater catchment degradation. All decision making tools are being employed from ancient mātauranga Māori to contemporary eDNA and catchment management models.
Structural	Resource flows	Experiences and data are being openly shared with generosity so all can learn and be intentionally educated about options for improving freshwater catchment health. Dedicated funds for mana whenua to reconnect with mātauranga, for coordination of events and catchment collectives, for storytelling and inspirational communications - have uplifted capacities and capabilities for actions such as planting, water testing, pest control, whole of catchment management etc.
Relational	Relationships and connections	Workshop participants provided endless examples of how important relationships are to this work. The commitment to 'thousands of cups of tea' demonstrates the earned understanding that trust and time will assist in reaching solutions. Everybody involved accepts that collaboration is the pathway for turning around freshwater degradation, with relationships and connections being the life-blood of the work. There is open dialogue about connections yet to be made and how to build them to enable change.
Relational	Power dynamics	Prevailing and often undiscussed power dynamics, such as colonial breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and deep-seated devotion to private property rights, are beginning to surface in catchment communities' discussions. These are deeply uncomfortable discussions that are enabled by the shared passion for freshwater, for te mana o te wai and for future generations. Wai Connection, with its many 'bridges', has enabled the opening of these conversations and supported them over time. Another example is supporting rangatahi to be immersed in kura taiao and then be guided by rangatahi leadership as an inter-generational pathway.
Transformational	Mental models	Knight 2019 refers to mindsets needing to change. Deep shifts of mental models come from a combination of brain-centred cognition, body-centred sense-making and nature-centred embodiment. The MTSC experience-education-action framework has guided Wai Connection's efforts to activate this combination. For example,

		supporting diverse people to be side by side in a river keenly looking for biodiversity indicators, counting those indicators such as numbers of īnanga or tuna and collectively making sense of what they are observing and how their behaviours can influence the outcomes. Another example is the courage to notice and own the traumatic impact of weather events and choose to work differently and support each other. This is transformative change.
--	--	---

Just as funding catchment groups without understanding them will not produce healthier catchments alone, funding for capability and capacity building can also not produce favourable long-term environmental outcomes in isolation. What is missing is a similar durable commitment by the central government to shifting all six conditions for improving the health of freshwater catchments.

The Changing Waters series highlighted systemic governance issues. In summary:

Levels	Levers	Central government practice
Structural	Policies	All workshops emphasised the impact of rapidly changing policies and legislation on freshwater catchment health work with comments such as 'confusing', 'frustrating' and 'exhausting' used to describe policy reversals in the political cycle.
Structural	Practices	A mixed bag of practice was reported, with examples of central and local government practices that understood and supported regional issues, alongside examples of practices that were not fit for regional contexts.
Structural	Resource flows	Central government funding has a disproportionate impact on regional activity, with freshwater catchment activators struggling to navigate the inconsistent flows. The flow of data also has a patchy record, with a mix of open-source data to inform freshwater catchment health practice and proprietary data and tech limiting wide use.
Relational	Relationships and connections	Genuine collaboration must be modelled by funders and government agencies if we are to expect it from catchment communities. However, siloed behaviour was commonly reported, both between and within government local and central government silos.
Relational	Power dynamics	Power dynamics are active in the freshwater catchment health system. Examples include the inequity of downstream impacts from upstream activities, preference for private property rights over the common good, and disregard for intergenerational and cultural inequities.
Transformational	Mental models	The deeper work of facing the deep-seated devotion to private property rights and the colonial impact on the land, the waters and the people is yet to be embraced at central and local government decision-making tables.

Wai Connection was intended to facilitate catchment communities that were ready and able to engage with the other components of the Essential Freshwater Fund. It has proven that intentional provision of social infrastructure for the energy of regional freshwater catchment work does begin to shift the conditions that are holding freshwater degradation in place.

However, policy has faltered at present, and MPIs increased budget for farmer-led catchment group operational funding - though welcome - is far from systems-level funding for landscape-level change.

This will not stop the many hundreds of individuals and groups that now have a better understanding of their local waterways and plans to improve them, but it is a missed opportunity to align the energy of those communities with the knowledge and capacity to engage and clear direction from the government on the most effective path towards long-term improvement of freshwater catchment health.

In a simple summary, the solutions exist, the leaders exist, and those doing the work on their land and in their waterways exist. What is needed is more pathways for them to be visible, valued, connected in a systemic way and invested in for the long term.

Recommendations

When viewed through the lens of the last three years of the Wai Connection in operation, these recommendations are about progressing and fine-tuning the pathway towards improving the health of freshwater catchments that is already in action regionally. The general sense that collaboration works, that central government should work with collectives in the regions and that funding needs to reach the catchments where the work is happening rather than staying in Wellington are all markers of a growing comfort with systems change.

However, the deeper work of facing power dynamics and mental models and the crucial need for central and local government to operate in an aligned and interconnected way, is yet to be fully embraced. The following recommendations are for central and local government and funding organisations to consider.

General recommendations:

- continue the learning target of 2023, to increase the capacity and capability of catchment communities to act as the connection between all parties in freshwater catchment health.
- do this with clear and detailed national freshwater objectives and 5+ year funding horizons to attract and keep the expertise and experience needed to achieve those objectives
- acknowledge that 'at-place' in the regions, catchment communities' action is happening at the levels of relational and transformative change despite the unpredictable structural changes of policies, practices and resource flows.
- accept that the capacity and capability of central and local government and funding organisations deeply influence the overall system's ability to achieve healthy freshwater catchment outcomes.
- understand that catchment communities are diverse and both policy and funding must cultivate inclusion.

Specific recommendations:

Levels of change	Recommendations for change
Structural	Intentional progress towards an integrated funding system for freshwater catchment health that: • Has investment time periods suited to the biophysical, social and cultural changes being sought. • Has visibility for all with transparency on criteria and decisions. • Is available to all freshwater catchment activators (mana whenua, community, farmers, others) with an emphasis on collective action. • Attracts diverse funding sources, including central and local government, private, industry and philanthropic funding. • Encourages alignment amongst support agencies on how funding is allocated so there is support across the life cycle of capacity, action, training and social infrastructure. • Provides clarity of objectives at a national level so that projects can be created and funded to address local issues, but that align with national freshwater objectives. • Embeds collaboration, communication, and evaluation into funding or project milestones.
Relational	Intentional progress towards inter- and intra-governmental collaboration on freshwater catchment health that: • Links all agencies with responsibilities for catchment health - MPI, MCERT, DOC, local govt. • Encourages open sharing of information, tools and resources - to allow what works to scale. • Ensures regional context is experienced and understood - because catchment communities are not passive instruments for implementing policy. • Dismantles siloed behaviour within and between support agencies - which stymies progress to action and outcomes • Reflects, learns and shares knowledge. • Uses creative communication to share the lessons across the parts of the system that are changing. Adopt the recommendations of Sinner et al 2023 to clarify expectations and understandings and create durable relationships. Adopt the recommendations of Burt-Priddy et al 2025 to develop a freshwater management system built with expert guidance, transparent funding and flexible application.
Transformational	Recognise and empower Māori leadership in freshwater catchment health processes and decision making. This includes: • Revisit Te Mana o te Wai as a guiding principle • Support existing Māori-led networks • Resource mana whenua capacity to actively participate in freshwater catchment work. Support more forums of diverse voices and facilitated conditions for hard conversations that face mental models (such as a deep-seated devotion to private property rights) and enable discussion about the public good and the social contract to have healthy freshwater catchments country-wide.

References

Burt-Priddy, E and Highway, M 2025 Regional Analysis of Catchment Collective Support, project report prepared for Ministry for the Environment by Environment Innovation Strategy Ltd

Highway, M et al 2022 Regional Analysis of Catchment Collective and Catchment Group Support, project report prepared for the Ministry for the Environment by Element Environmental.

Kania J, Kramer M, Senge P 2018. Water of System Change. FSG.

Knight, Catherine, 2019 "A potted history of freshwater management in New Zealand" New Zealand Science Review Vol 76(3) 2020

MTSCT 2025 Wānanga Proceedings. Theme: Building Resilience

MTSCT 2025 Wai Connection -three years of progress

Pannell et al, 2026. Community is Climate Resilience: Lessons from Cyclone Gabrielle & the Auckland Anniversary Floods. Environment Hubs Aotearoa

Sinner et al, 2023 in Cawthron Report No.3881 Where next for catchment groups? Lifting ambition and gearing up for the long game

Sinner et al, 2025 in Ecology and Society Vol 30(1) Great expectations for collective management: the mismatch between supply and demand for catchment groups

Thriving Southland, 2025 Catchment Group Farmer and Stakeholder Annual Survey.



Queen Charlotte Track, Marlborough