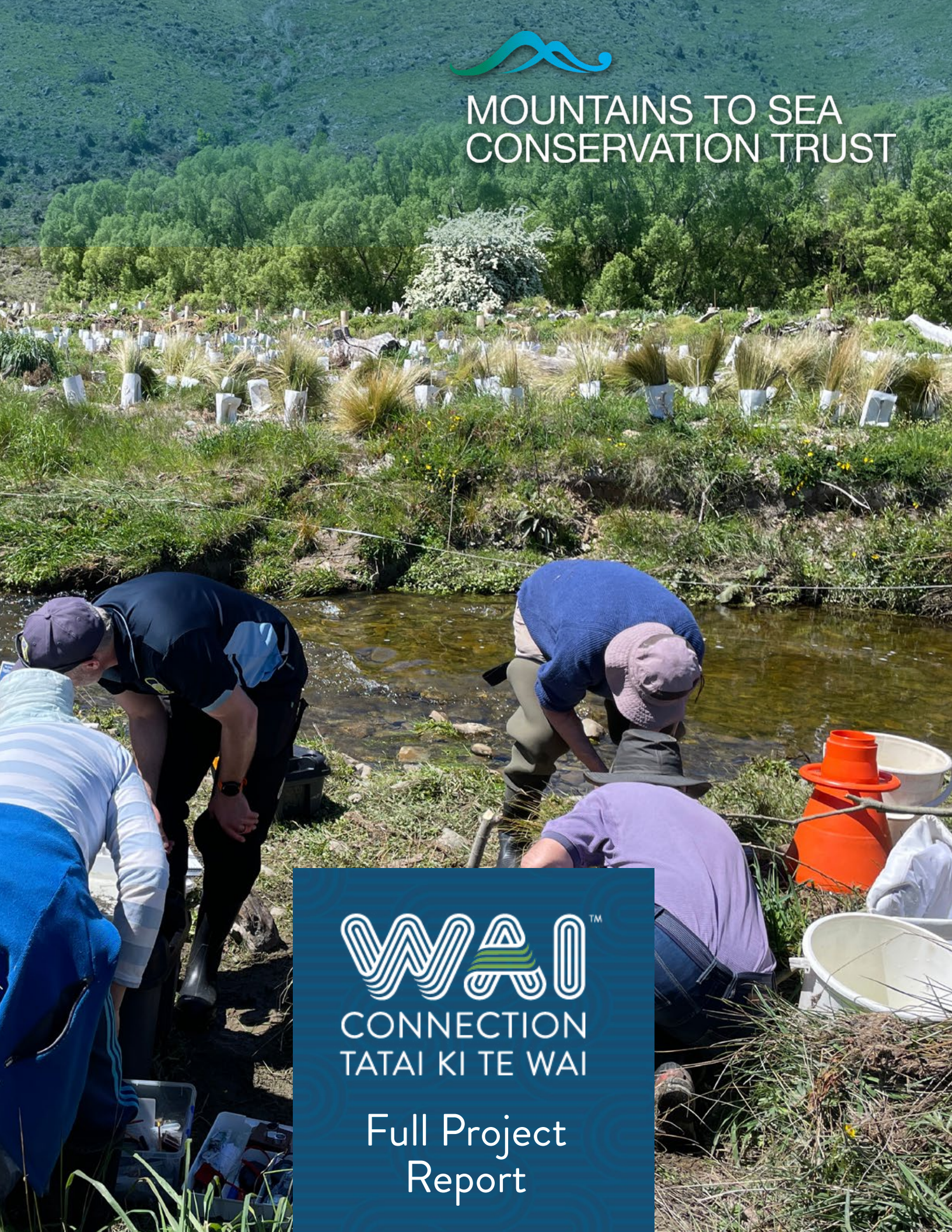




MOUNTAINS TO SEA CONSERVATION TRUST



WAI™
CONNECTION
TATAI KI TE WAI

Full Project
Report

Acronyms used in this report:

A2E Access to Experts	MTSCT Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust
ACE Aotearoa Catchment Extension Programme	MTSPO Mountains to Sea Provider Organisation
ACCG Ahuriri Catchment Collective Group	MTSW Mountain to Sea Wellington
AGM Annual General Meeting	MVP Minimum Viable Product
CBFM Community-based Freshwater Monitoring	NAG-FCS National Advisory Group on Freshwater Citizen Science
CBM Community-based Monitoring	NCC Nelson City Council
CCCV Catchment Context, Challenges and Values	NGO Non-government Organisation
CHM Cultural Health Monitoring	NISP National Inanga Spawning Programme
DGV Default Guideline Value	NIWA National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research
DOC Department of Conservation	NPS-FM National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management
ECE Early Childhood Education	NZARM New Zealand Association of Resource Management
EFF Essential Freshwater Fund	NZLT New Zealand Landcare Trust
EMR Experiencing Marine Reserves	OCC Otago Catchment Communities
FCMS Focus Catchment Map Series	PCG Pokaiwhenua Catchment Group
FEP Farm Environment Plan	PO Provider Organisation
FMU Freshwater Management Unit	PPCC Puketoi to the Pacific Catchment Collective
FOM Friends of the Maitai	PWCT Piako Waihou Catchment Trust
FTE Full-time equivalent	QA Quality Assurance
FWFP Freshwater Farm Plan	RAG Regional Advisory Group
GDC Gisborne District Council	RNA Regional Needs Assessment
HAOTO He Awa Ora, He Tai Ora Trust	SHMAK New Zealand Stream Health Monitoring & Assessment Kit
H&S Health and Safety	SLA Service Level Agreement
J4N Jobs for Nature	TBG Tasman Bay Guardians
KMR Kaipara Moana Remediation	TDC Tasman District Council
KPI Key Performance Indicator	TEC Tairāwhiti Environment Centre
LAWA Land & Water Aotearoa	TET Tasman Environmental Trust/ Te Tau Ihu Environmental Trust
LRR Love RimuRimu	TPoS Tailored Package of Support
MCC Motueka Catchment Collective	UWEN Upper Waitematā Ecology Network
MCERT Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions, and Transport	WBC Whitebait Connection
MDC Marlborough District Council	WCC Wairarapa Catchment Collective
MfE Ministry for the Environment	WFT Wild for Taranaki
MOU Memorandum of Understanding	WRCC: Whanganui Region Catchment Collective
MPI Ministry for Primary Industries	

Disclaimer

The information in this document is intended to provide readers with a summary and overview of the 'Wai Connection' project.

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1

Executive Summary

Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust's Vision for Resilient, Healthy New Zealand Ecosystems and Communities

Since 2001 Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust has been guided by intergenerational wisdom which recognises that communities hold the solutions to the environmental challenges that we face today.

***"Whakamana te maunga,
Whakamana te wai,
He mauri o ngā tangata,
Ngā mea katoa he pai"***

Our whakataukī embodies our commitment to thriving freshwater and marine environments protected and restored by connected communities. Our approach centres on community-led conservation, recognising that when people connect to Te Taiao through hands-on engagement, scientific knowledge sharing, and collaborative action, they become powerful and resilient agents of environmental change.

Thanks to strategic investment by the Ministry for the Environment in 2023, we launched the

Wai Connection project to leverage decades of proven programmes, frameworks and community led initiatives to assist in the implementation of the Essential Freshwater (EF) reforms.

Wai Connection has supercharged our efforts toward creating resilient, healthy New Zealand ecosystems and communities by empowering communities through experiential learning, honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and creating innovative tools that support both collaboration and restoration to scale. The Wai Connection project exemplifies our guiding principles in practice – fostering collaboration and open-source data sharing, maintaining integrity through evidence-based approaches, and ensuring that fun and passion drive sustainable environmental stewardship from the mountains to the sea.

Building Freshwater Champions Across Aotearoa New Zealand

The Wai Connection project represents a

transformative approach to freshwater management, demonstrating that community-led action, supported by strategic investment, delivers measurable environmental and social outcomes at the scale required for improving freshwater ecosystems. The project provides compelling evidence that local catchment communities, when equipped with the right tools and knowledge, are willing and able to make change for the benefit of their catchments, and that catchment communities benefit in many additional ways from the support and connections made around action to improve freshwater outcomes.

Remarkable Impact in only Three Years

The numbers tell a compelling story of community engagement and environmental action across regions:

- **122,722 engagements** across all regions through community events, education, monitoring, and restoration activities (61,367 in year two).
- **46,874 volunteer hours contributed by communities, representing significant in-kind investment** in freshwater health to the value of \$1,357, 002 using the living wage rate of \$28.95/hour, potentially much more considering the actual rates of many of our partners.
- **400+ catchment groups supported** across 13 regions, from formation through to independent action.

These numbers illustrate that catchment communities were ready and willing to take up the challenge of learning about and caring for their waterways. Beneath these numbers lie thousands of unique stories of inspiration, learning, and environmental action.

What worked: needs-based and flexible, steady and consistent support

Wai Connection's strength lay in its progression model, supporting groups from formation through to independent environmental stewardship. The phased regional implementation provided valuable insights into this development pathway.

Regions with over two years of intensive support

demonstrated remarkable success in building both individual capability and collective capacity. Dozens of groups have mastered community-based freshwater monitoring, with many now confidently using Quality Assurance/Quality Control field tools and contributing valuable data to regional understanding. Breakthrough discoveries, including the discovery of 11 new īnanga (whitebait) spawning sites in Taranaki, the first community detection of lymphocystis in bullies, and juvenile piharau populations in unexpected locations, show the scientific value of well-trained community groups.

Regions that joined in the project's second year demonstrated rapid uptake of the proven models with the help of shared knowledge from established regions. Regions like Otago and Southland were able to extend their existing network of paid catchment coordinators further and initiate large projects mapping soil, water flow, and critical source areas to support group action. In the mid North Island, provider organisations were able to assist with work programmes, build local partnerships, and source funding for future projects. Their early successes validate the transferability of the approach while highlighting the value of connecting to an established network of practice.

Network Effect Multiplying Impact

The staggered implementation created a powerful mentoring dynamic, where established regions provided guidance and inspiration to emerging ones. The project management team supported this structurally with a buddy system for regional coordinators. This network effect multiplied impact beyond what any single region could achieve independently, creating a knowledge-sharing ecosystem that accelerated learning and adaptation. We saw evidence of this when similar knowledge gaps were identified in different regions, and of the practical benefit reported from the mentoring. Reporting, administration, and communications from regional providers saw significant uplift from hands-on sessions with a mentor.

Strategic Partnership Success Across Implementation Phases

Wai Connection demonstrates exceptional return on investment through strategic partnerships that

adapted to regional contexts and implementation stages. The project has fostered collaboration with over 100 different organisations across regions, from regional councils to educational institutions, iwi partners, and community trusts to scientists and businesses.

Established regions show how these partnerships mature over time, with community knowledge now directly informing formal planning processes including Whaitua development and regional freshwater plans. Emerging regions are building these foundational relationships, benefiting from templates and approaches proven in earlier implementations.

Evidence for Sustained Impact Across Implementation Stages

Our formal evaluation reveals differentiated but consistently positive outcomes across regions at different stages:

Mature Regions demonstrate the full spectrum of intended impacts: expanded community reach, enhanced group capacity, improved technical capability, and renewed energy for environmental

action. Many groups are transitioning to independent operation while maintaining network connections.

Developing Regions show strong early indicators across all impact areas, with rapid skill development, growing community engagement, and increasing collaboration with local partners. These regions are positioned to achieve similar outcomes to established regions with continued support.

Consistent Success Factors show that regardless of implementation stage, success correlates with adequate coordination resourcing, alignment with community readiness, and integration with existing regional initiatives.

A Platform for Sustained Growth - The Wai Connection evaluation provides compelling evidence that strategic investment in community-led environmental action delivers lasting change, with outcomes strengthening over time and benefiting from network connections. The staggered implementation demonstrates both the replicability of the approach and the value of sustained support.



2

Introduction and Overview

Introduction

Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust has specialised in community engagement events and experiential environmental learning for over twenty years. This has brought a unique set of capabilities to catchment groups through Wai Connection. Feedback tells us those capabilities were keenly needed by the groups identified for support. When combined with the scientific expertise held by our national technical support partner EOS Ecology, Wai Connection provided tailored support to catchment groups that reflects the large variation in catchment group needs, while benefitting from centralised administration. Wai Connection allowed us to combine proven programmes with high quality needs-based training and apply consistency through national level project management and scientific support.

Critically, the project provided ‘boots on the ground’ to facilitate connections between landowners, councils, iwi/hapū, the many organisations who work in catchment management, and broader catchment communities. In doing so, it has facilitated both connection between people and connection of people to their catchments, reaching an impressive **122,772 engagements** across activities such as community events, education and training, restoration and conservation.

Reflecting its national scale, **the project actively supported over 400 unique catchment groups in 13 regions at the beginning of 2025 - 300% more than we had initially planned.** The project has built a strong national social and professional network, supported by tailored scientific and community engagement resources, ongoing needs-based education and training, and a shared passion for understanding and restoring our waterways from the Mountains to the Sea.

Because the project delivery was responsive to local needs, our supported groups have developed capacity and capability in freshwater restoration at their own

pace. Communities and individuals have increasingly demonstrated a strong commitment to using science to understand their waterways and learn from successful interventions in other catchments addressing similar challenges. By design, the project has facilitated connection to nature and local waterways, and progressed via connection to other groups, specialists, and interested community members.

The Essential Freshwater Fund (EFF) was fundamental to the creation of the Wai Connection project and critical to delivering meaningful freshwater outcomes across New Zealand. It funded a suite of capacity and capability-building activities by a range of organisations, delivered in a condensed timeframe. The funding enabled Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust to leverage 20+ years of experience working with communities, developing the services we offered and extending our reach to support any region seeking assistance with catchment conservation and restoration efforts.

The flexible funding model of Wai Connection was crucial for conducting needs assessments at regional and sub-regional levels. Our programmes, resources, and support were tailored to each group's specific requirements - recognising that every catchment group faces unique challenges and opportunities and has unique aspirations.

Working with our many partners, we achieved significant efficiencies by providing integrated project management, national level technical support, and nationwide training opportunities and knowledge sharing across catchments and regions. This approach allowed us to build capacity and capability even for remote communities and time-constrained volunteers.

Catchment groups, partners, and stakeholders will continue to use resources created by our national science delivery partner EOS Ecology and many local expert contractors to build understanding of

catchment management and freshwater ecology. Our groups enthusiastically took up the Access 2 Experts (A2E) fund for this purpose as well, with support for A2E applications featuring heavily while the fund was open. Our train-the-trainer frameworks extended programme reach far beyond those directly supported, creating lasting impact beyond the project timeframe. The outputs that we measure in this report (such as the number of catchment coordinators providing support, training hours delivered and activity attendees) are not the impact themselves, but the pathway to impact. As a result of Wai Connection, there will be informed and engaged communities and sustained environmental benefits for New Zealand's freshwater systems.

Year Two saw the completion of our programme evaluation, which showed that the Wai Connection teams did a fantastic job of not just supporting individual groups, but building vibrant cross-catchment networks of stakeholders supporting action on the ground. As one stakeholder described, Wai Connection team members are “A willing member of the community who will put their hand up to ensure

things happen” (Wellington Region Stakeholder). While some high-level results are highlighted in this report, the project has a lot of regional nuance and the full evaluation and supplementary data pack are recommended reading.

One complaint that came through repeatedly from all cohorts was not about the value of the programme or the efficacy of its implementation, but the fit of project-based funding for long term and large scale outcomes. One Wellington stakeholder commented that, “I cannot fault the programme as we have experienced it, but sustainable long-term funding would be the one change I would make if it were up to me.”

As we came to the end of Year 2, it was apparent that many groups and regions were only just beginning to gain the momentum needed to support long term change. An extension for an additional year was absolutely critical to embed knowledge and good practice and bring more mature groups to independent action. The extension came with a more limited scope: limited resources needed to focus on assisting the rollout of Freshwater Farm Plans, so Wai



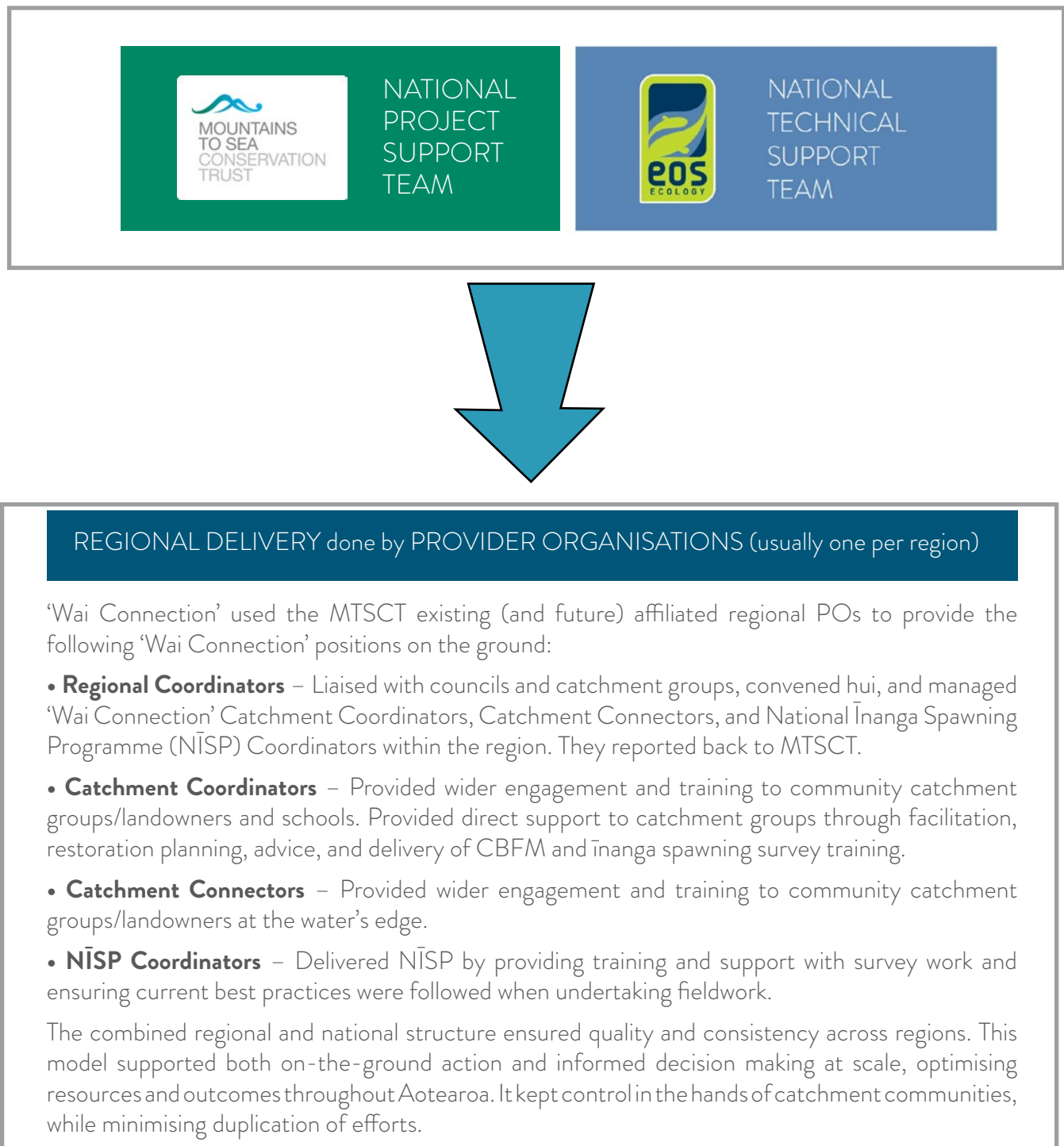


Connection teams focused their support on farmer-led groups. With over 78% of catchment groups already in that category, this limit was not as difficult to implement as the reduction in funding to around half of the previous years. Plenty of catchment groups, farmer-led or otherwise, had to be told they could no longer be supported in the extension year. MPI had been given sole responsibility for funding catchment groups and needed to work through their own definition of ‘farmer-led’ and their funding process. A great deal of angst was reported through the Wai Connection network about which groups would qualify as farmer led, which project work would be funded, what training and expertise could be provided, and about support for urban and iwi/hapu or community led groups vanishing. The success of Wai Connection was always in the

capacity to enable collaboration and partnerships at the catchment group level, and reduced funding in year three meant that providers and Coordinators needed to lean into collaboration even further. Wai Connection has shown more than anything else that connecting landowners, farmers, city residents, councils, iwi/hāpu, scientists, local contractors and local communities around the common goal of improving our catchment ecosystems for all is extremely effective. And it can happen at the scale required to improve catchment health for all. Early indications suggest if this kind of project were applied long-term with steady policy and regulation frameworks, easy-to-understand project funds, and national science and data systems, then those elusive “improved outcomes” could show up much faster than expected.

Overview - project structure

Wai Connection was delivered regionally through Provider Organisations (MTSPOs) supported by national teams. The National Project Support Team offered project management and specialist resources, while the National Technical Support Team provided science, GIS, and design expertise until June 2025. This dual structure ensured effective local implementation supported by national-level technical input.



Overview - regional rollout structure

To maximise efficiency and collaboration with and between local stakeholders, Wai Connection followed a staged process:

Regional Needs Assessment (RNA)

Key stakeholders invited to one day workshop developed by Facilitate Aotearoa to map areas of need, support, overlap, and resources for CGs. Minutes and results were circulated to attendees (and those who could not attend) for approval. In some cases, Regional Advisory Groups were formed at this point to create TPOS.

More detail of the process can be found in the Wai Connection Year One Report.

Tailored Package of Support (TPOS)

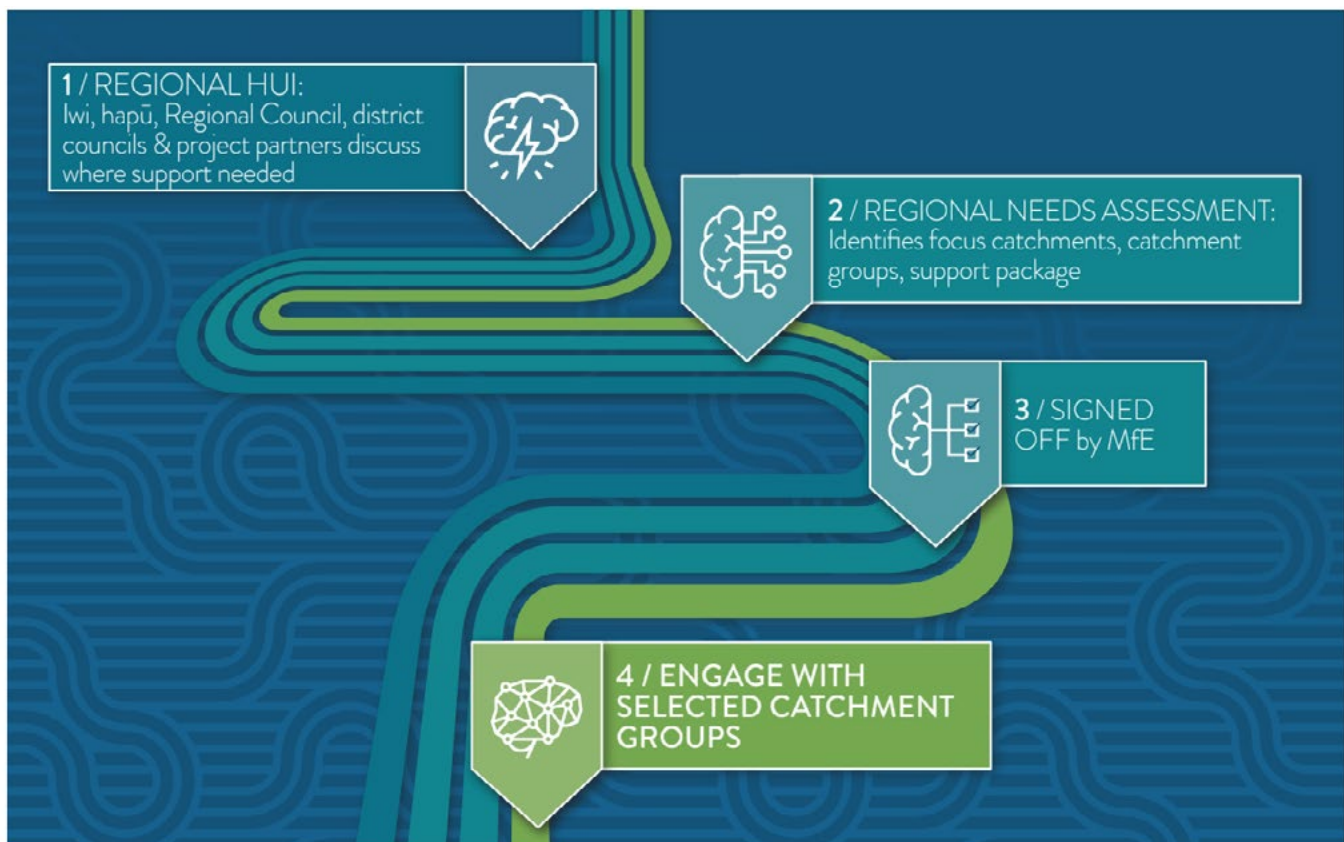
After identifying capacity and capability gaps through the RNA, provider organisations were assisted to create a work plan and budget to meet those needs, which was circulated to key stakeholders/regional advisory groups for feedback and approved by MFE before any work could begin.

Iteration and continuous improvement

National project management and the facilitation of a national professional network has enabled ongoing

improvement and allowed decision making to support action in the field in real time:

- Bi Weekly Regional Coordinators Meetings to share learning, progress, and work through issues.
- Monthly Catchment Coordinator and Monthly Catchment Connector facilitated meetings to share resources, expertise, case studies and practice new skills.
- Weekly to Monthly 1:1 meetings between MTSC and PO's (PM and Regional Coordinator, with Co Director and CEO/GMs as needed)
- Independent monitoring and evaluation survey and report in 2025.
- Regional Advisory Groups with key stakeholders including council, NZLT, MPI, DOC, and other organisations as appropriate.
- Consistent national support: project management, marketing & communications, training and professional development, resource sharing, build and sustain professional inter-regional networks.





National Technical Support Team: Project Summary

EOS Ecology is the 'Wai Connection' National Technical Support Team provider. Based in Ōtautahi/Christchurch, their team of scientists, GIS specialists, science interpreters and designers helped support the MTSCT National Project Team and the Provider Organisations (POs) in their delivery of the 'Wai Connection' project. The following is a summary of all support provided over the first two years of the 'Wai Connection' project, through to June 2025.

Design & programme support:

- » Programme development.
- » Brand development & implementation.
- » Programme summary documents and outputs.
- » 'Wai Connection' posters, banners, and other materials.
- » Fund sourcing assistance.

Project website:

- » Development and maintaining of the 'Wai Connection' project website.
- » Online surveys and forms.
- » Provider portal login area.

General science-related support:

- » Science handout about the use of Default Guideline Values for water quality data interpretation.
- » Science handout about water clarity.
- » Science handout about visual clarity data interpretation.
- » Science posters about catchment function, nitrogen cycle, springs, lake trophic level index, urban vs natural stream catchments.
- » eDNA sampling and use guidance.
- » *Essential Freshwater* summary document.
- » Training assistance at multiple 'Wai Connection' wānanga around community-based monitoring.
- » Delivery of 47 science workshops hosted by a specialist scientist from EOS Ecology. The workshops were 2–3 hours long and took the attendees through the Focus Catchment

Map Series (FCMS), highlighting key findings, and answering questions from the participants.

- » Engagement with 81 organisations (including 'Wai Connection' POs, regional councils and unitary authorities, iwi, catchment groups, and the wider community) across eight regions as part of the FCMS science workshops.
- » Collaboration and engagement with eight regional councils as part of the production of the FCMS outputs.
- » Development of supporting documentation to aid in understanding of FCMS resources, including:
 - Powerpoint presentations and video about the FCMS
 - FCMS overview
 - FCMS frequently asked questions.

Community-based Freshwater Monitoring (CBFM):

- » Development of the CBFM scoping document (Year 1).
- » Presentations and meetings for the CBFM website.
- » Support of the Investment Ready Business Case.

Specific science interpretation & graphic design support for 'Wai Connection' regional POs on request:

- » 27 'catchment group story' publications.
- » Event-based resources.
- » Group-related summary outputs, posters, and maps.
- » Summary reports and presentations for monitoring.
- » Social media posts.
- » Powerpoint presentations.
- » Competition materials for public events...and more...

"We were impressed by EOS's depth of knowledge and the professional yet relatable resources they produce."

Sarah Elliot
PRODUCTIVE & SUSTAINABLE LAND USE PROJECT MANAGER
HAKATARAMEA SUSTAINABILITY COLLECTIVE, WAITAHA/CANTERBURY

"Thank you so much for producing such awesome resources for our catchment groups – can't wait to print them off! 🍷"

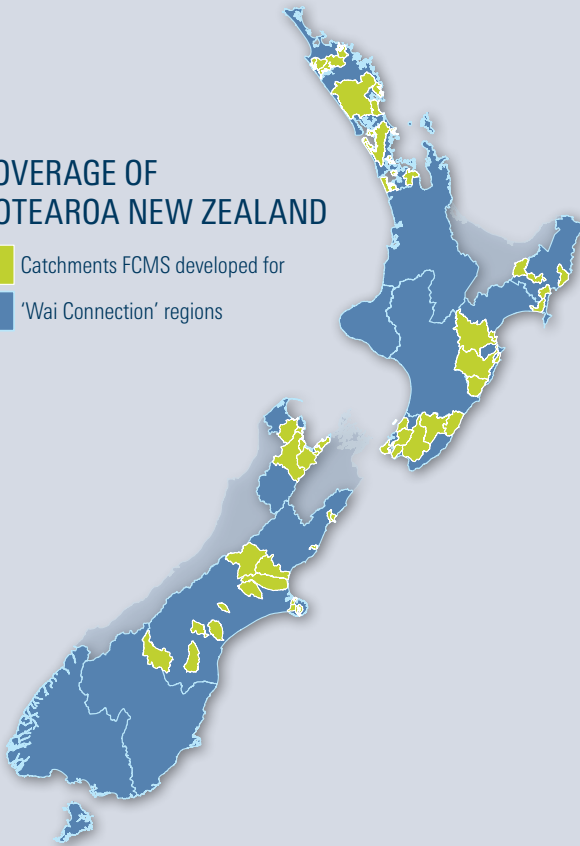
Amy Sadler
CATCHMENT COORDINATOR
'WAI CONNECTION', TĀMAKI MAKĀURAU/AUCKLAND

Delivery of the Focus Catchment Map Series (FCMS)

A science publication that provides an overview of the known state of a focus catchment based on national and regional datasets, and presented in an easy-to-understand A3 pdf and printed format. Produced by EOS Ecology's science, GIS, science interpretation and design teams.

COVERAGE OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

-  Catchments FCMS developed for
-  'Wai Connection' regions



1 pilot programme to develop the FCMS



52 FCMS publications completed



8 regions included



3,709,089 hectares mapped



2,853,211 bits of raw monitoring data processed



8,815 monitoring sites mapped & analysed



150 online national & regional data sources accessed to produce each FCMS

"Wow, these Focus Catchment Maps are a very valuable tool to have. They have already provided our Waingōngoro Awa restoration team with a better picture of our overall catchment and provided a more in depth understanding of how our catchment has evolved, providing soil, water and ecological data."

Sharon Walker
PROJECT MANAGER
RESTORATION WAINGŌNGORO AWA, TE MATAU-A-MĀUI/HAWKES BAY

"I am very excited to see the Focus Catchment Map Series (FCMS) pull together so many aspects of river health and connection with the coast in a much more integrated way than has been reported in the past. We have long wanted to achieve something like this off our own bat, but have been limited by staff capacity and budgets. So, in a way it is an 'answer to my dreams'."

Trevor James
PRINCIPAL SCIENTIST – FRESHWATER & ESTUARINE ECOLOGY
TASMAN DISTRICT COUNCIL, TE TAI O AORERE/TASMAN



National Support, Regional Delivery, Local Impact



Number of catchment groups supported: This live count built to over 400 at the beginning of 2025, including 140+ new groups.



Participant engagements: 122,772 (participants may have been engaged at multiple events)



Native planting: 92,650 (based on limited reporting - real figure likely much higher)



Hours volunteered 46,874 (worth \$1,357,002.30 at a living wage of \$28.95)



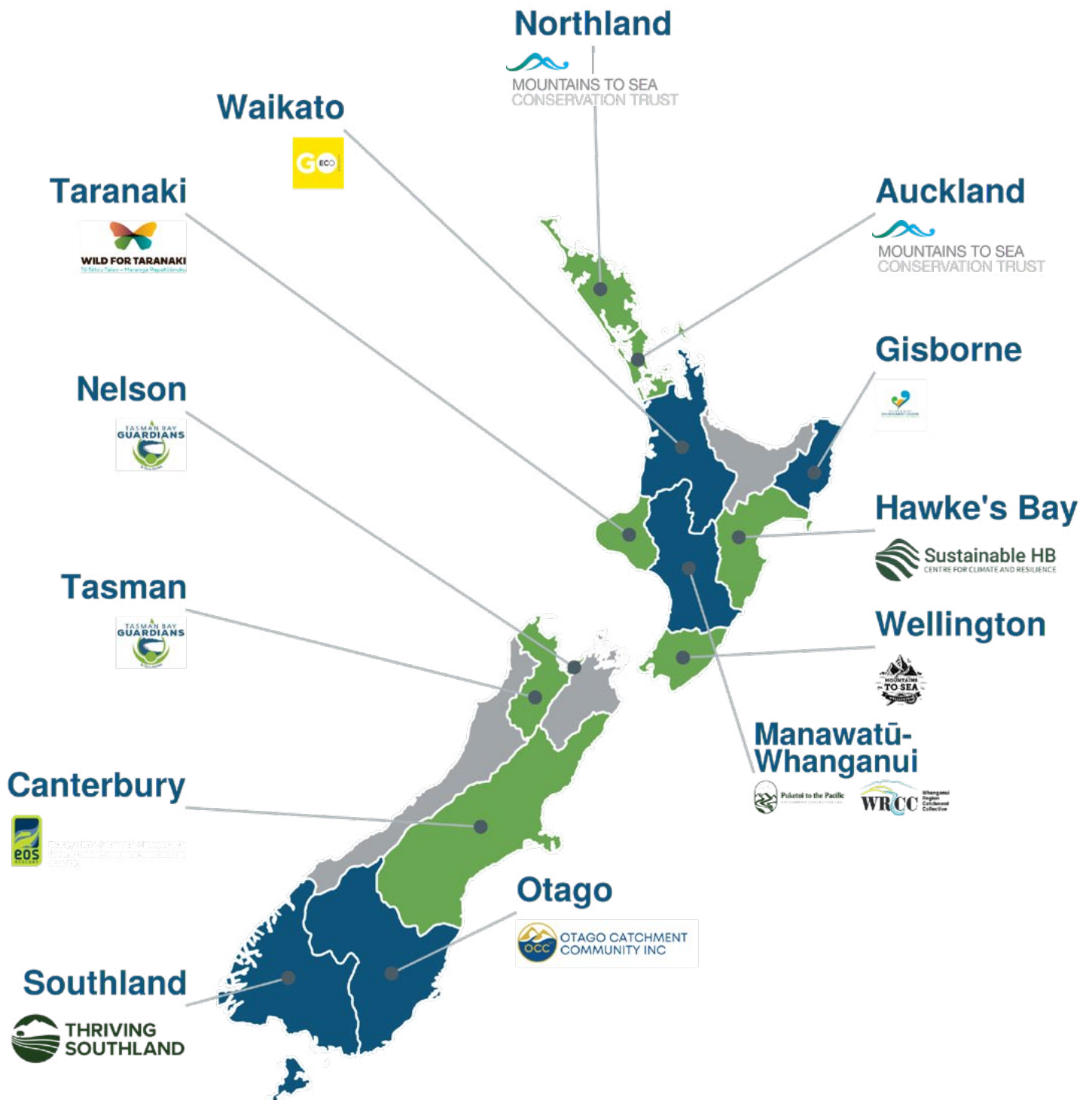
Activities delivered: 4,638

Mana whenua engagement at activities increased from 6.8% to 42.8% over the three years of the project.

Specialised training coordinated with regional providers reaching 438 participants

- ✓ **Three National Traditional Wānanga** (Kaipara, Ōnuku, Ngunguru)
- ✓ **Three National Training Wānanga** (Wellington, Hawke's Bay, Whananaki) Details: <https://www.mountaintosea.org.nz/wananga>
- ✓ **Ten in-region training Wānanga** delivered by MTSCCT team members covering programme delivery, CBFM, catchment group communications (Otago, Waikato, Southland, Hawke's Bay, Gisborne, Taranaki)
- ✓ **Multiple online webinars and training** on topics such as fish migration, community based freshwater monitoring, īnanga habitat restoration, fundraising, communications plans, content creation and communications for catchment groups. Details: <https://www.youtube.com/@mountains-to-sea>
- ✓ **National Governance Training:** 4 x 2 hour online sessions delivered by LEAD Centre for Nonprofit Leadership, to 83 participants.
- ✓ **Catchment Management Workshops,** 3 x 1 day in person for regional catchment communities and stakeholders (Nelson/Tasman, Northland, Auckland).
- ✓ **Facilitating Effective Catchment Groups,** 2 day in-person wānanga style workshop (Hawke's Bay, Taranaki, Otago) delivered by Facilitate Aotearoa.
- ✓ **Facilitation Essentials,** 1 Day in-person skills training, (Hawke's Bay, Waikato) delivered by Facilitate Aotearoa.
- ✓ **Wetland Wānanga delivered by Dr Rebecca Eivers of Wai Kōkopu.** Two hour online introduction (38 participants), followed by 1.5-2.5 day multi-site wānanga with catchment groups in Northland, Auckland (2 events), Gisborne (2 events), Hawke's Bay, Taranaki, Canterbury (5 events co-funded by ECAN). This contract included the option of a site-specific summary report offered to participating landowners interested in wetland creation or restoration on their property, taken up by 25 landowners.

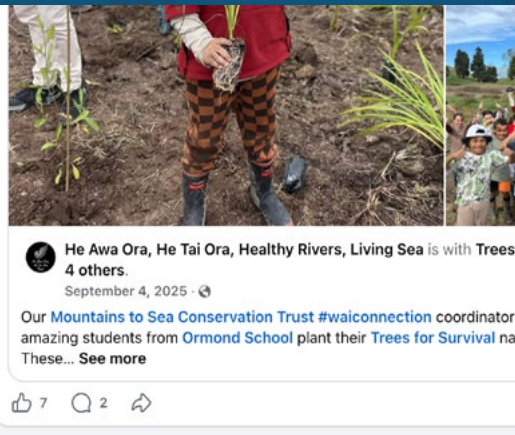
Provider organisations for Wai Connection



Promotion of the project and its impact

Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust have promoted the project, our funders and our provider organisations through national stakeholder engagement, communications, and marketing including:

- Sponsoring the national NZARM and NZFSS conferences, supporting Ballance Farm Environment Awards.
- Coordinating and commissioning national level communications and marketing activities.
- Mystery Creek Field Day and assistance with regional Field Day stalls
- Radio and Television interviews
- Increased frequency, reach and engagement across all social media channels year on year. Annual and topic based press releases, 140+ posts on social media.



3

Project Highlights

Objectives and milestones

Co Funding Requirement

The co funding target for the whole project through to June 2025 was \$2,065,831.85. Partners and collaborators had contributed **\$2,699,406.11** at the end of Year 2. Both cash and in-kind contributions continued in Year 3, but the reporting requirement was removed to reduce reporting load, as the target had been surpassed.

ACHIEVED

Objective 1

By June 2025, engage with existing and two new regional partners to formalise working relationships, identify new provider organisations in expansion regions, and determine regional needs and priorities for capability and capacity.

COMPLETE

Objective 2

By June 2025, build capacity and capability as per the needs assessment in the existing Mountains to Sea Provider network, including a pilot in two 'new' regions, building regional support for catchment communities.

COMPLETE

Objective 3

By June 2025, expand the Mountains to Sea Provider network as per the needs assessment building regional support for catchment communities.

COMPLETE

Objective 4

By June 2025, assist NIWA and the National Advisory Group for Freshwater Citizen Science (NAGFCS) in developing a National QA framework for freshwater community-based monitoring (CBM) and have a fully functioning CBM website with a plan of how to maintain and manage it into the future.

PARTIALLY COMPLETE - IN DEVELOPMENT

Jobs for nature and progress indicators

Table 1.1

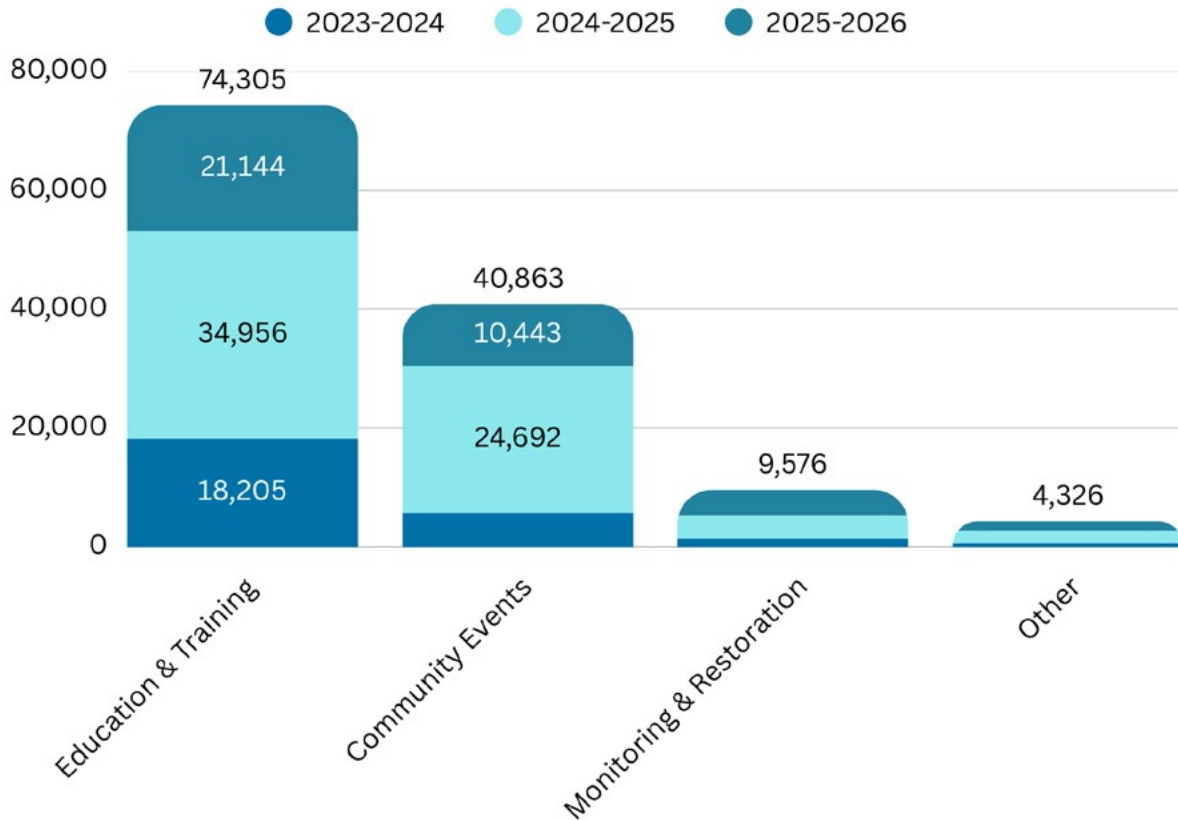
		Jobs for Nature Indicators - Actuals				
Focus Area	Metric	Year 1 Jun 23 - Jun 24	Year 2 Jul 24 - Jun 25	Year 3 Jul 25 - Jun 26	Total	Max per Quarter
Nature-based employment	Funding attributed to nature-based employment	4,409,460	7,791,277	4,474,845	16,675,582	2,186,333
	Number of people-hours worked in each project year	86,833	150,091	81,297	318,221	41,354
	Number of people in formal training this quarter	254	239	96	589	98
	Number of people completing formal training in this quarter. (People in formal training will also be counted here if they have completed the training in this quarter)	212	212	94	518	95
	Number of people currently employed on the final day of reporting period	101	168	95		169
	Number of employment starts in each reporting period	69	96	40	205	34
	Number of Catchment Groups Supported or Created	175	398	190		398
	Number of Wānanga	131	828	796	1,755	262

Table 1.2

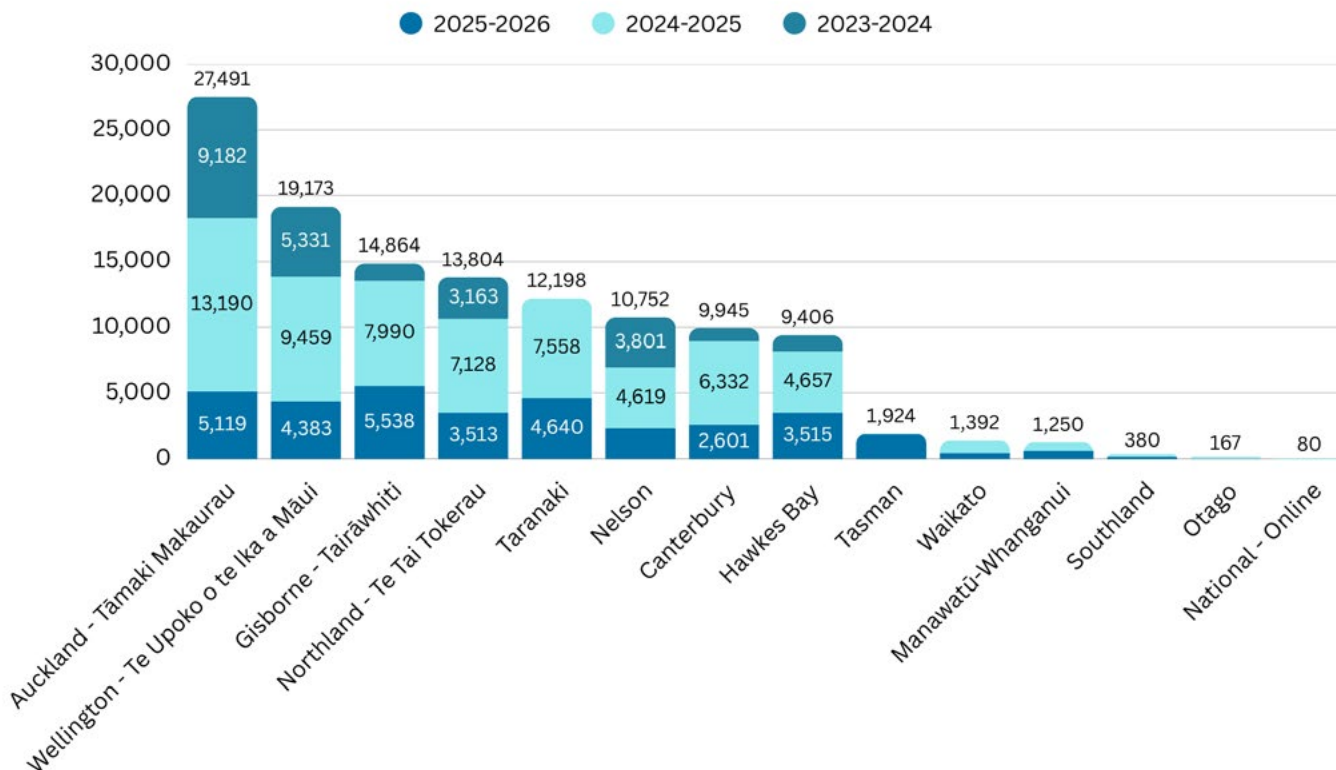
		Project Indicators - Actuals				
Focus Area	Metric	Year 1 Jun 23 - Jun 24	Year 2 Jul 24 - Jun 25	Year 3 Jul 25 - Jun 26	Total	Max per Quarter
Unique Project Indicators	Number of new catchment groups supported in each project year	25	86	30	141	39
	Number of monitoring plans created	12	89	40	141	26
	Number of restoration plans created	11	28	43	82	19
	Number of people receiving informal training (on-the-job) per project year	278	693	304	1,275	381
	Number of Catchment Coordinators trained	66	55	52	173	25
	Number of regions covered	10	13	13	13	13
	% catchment group coverage (Geospatial cumulative count) - what land area (GIS)	23%	36%	na	na	na
	Number of mana whenua groups supported in each project year.	31	73	60	164	

FCMS Indicators	Number of regions covered (EOS support)	8	12			
	Number of FCMS being worked on	10	35			
	Number of FCMS completed	4	48		48	
	Catchment group coverage (Geospatial cumulative count) - what land area (GIS). NOTE: Coverage of completed FCMS only.	415,229	3,099,617			

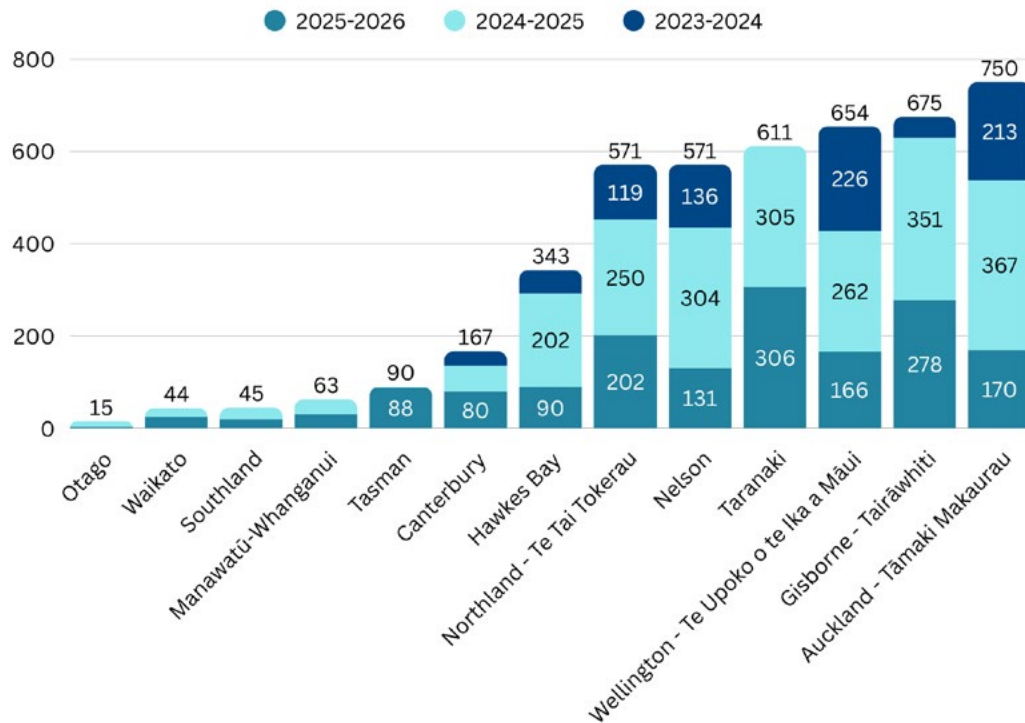
Engagements by Type



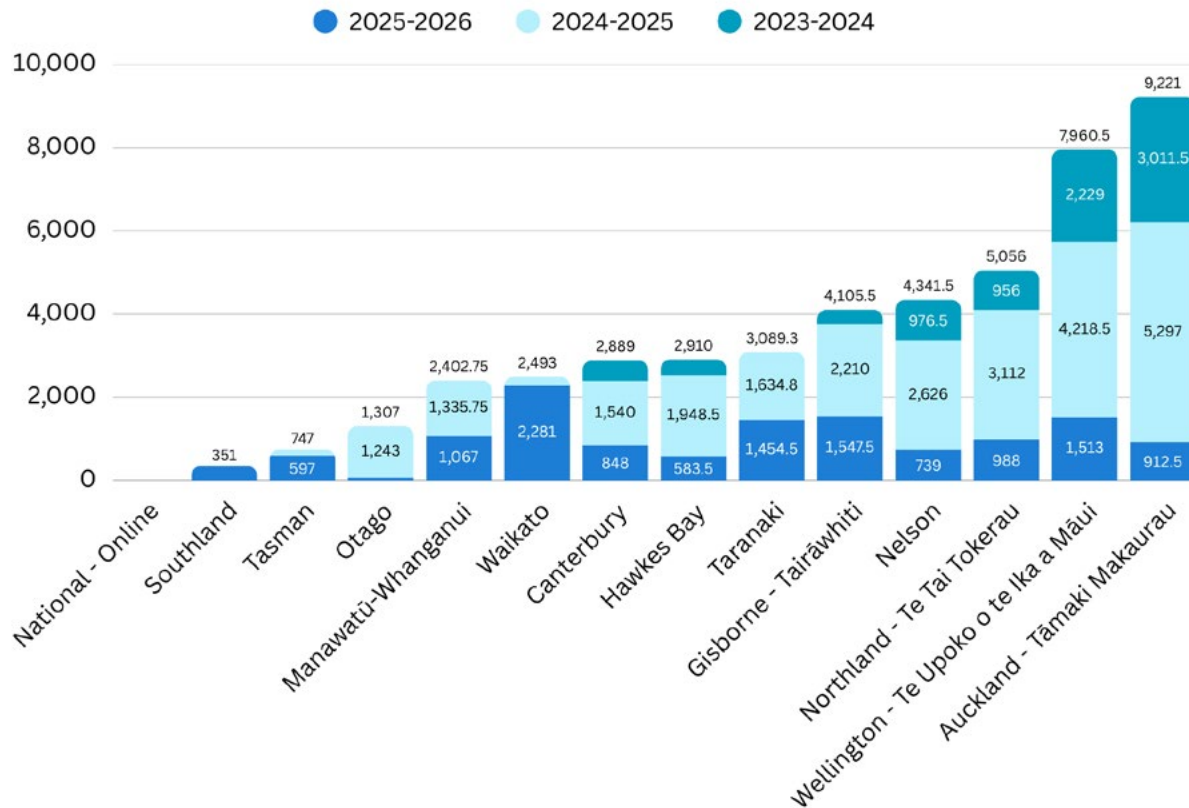
Wai Connection Engagements by Region



Numer of Community Events by Region



Volunteer Hours Donated by Region



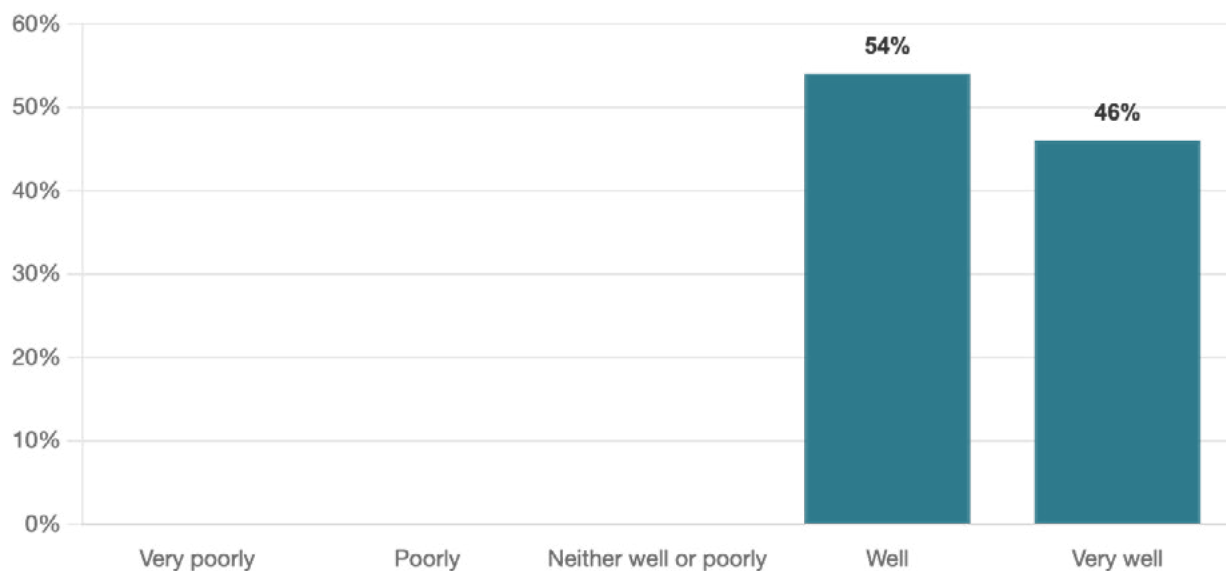
Monitoring and Evaluation Results

Year two saw the data collection and evaluation of the project by our evaluation partner Versus Research. This independent evaluation provided clear indication of the conditions needed for successful implementation at the catchment level, specifically identifying that strong community engagement, active leadership, and established partnerships were essential enablers, while also highlighting areas for improvement including the need for longer funding timeframes and enhanced early regional socialisation.

Drawing on anonymous survey data from 68 catchment groups, 30 delivery team members, 15 regional coordinators, and 31 stakeholders, evaluation findings demonstrated that catchment groups achieved consistent gains across all key areas, with **skill development rated as "always" successful**, leading to renewed confidence and passion among participants, while **knowledge growth was assessed as "almost always" achieved**, encompassing both general and environmental expertise alongside increased use of technical tools.

The evaluation data validates the programme's effectiveness with compelling evidence at the regional level: 100% of regional coordinators rating implementation as successful or very successful, while 87% of stakeholders provided positive assessments of programme outcomes. Noting, with respect, one grumpy stakeholder whose opinion differed.

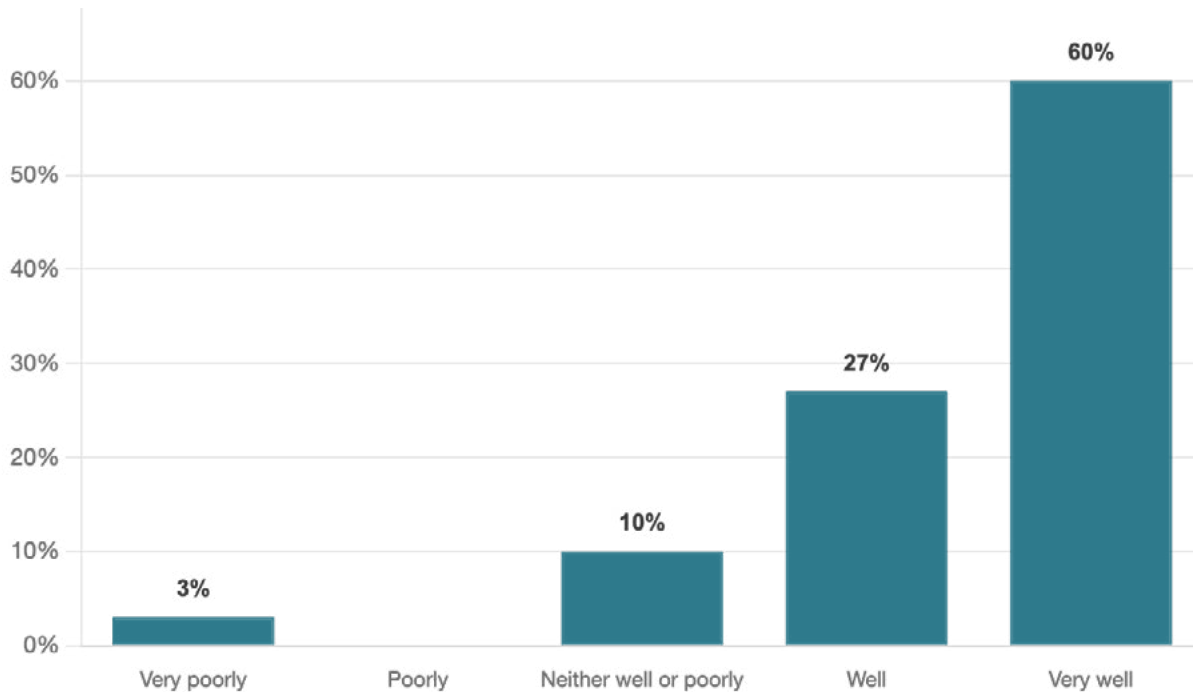
Overall, how well do you think the programme was implemented in your region?



Regional Coordinators' Perceptions of Implementation (N=13)

Stakeholder feedback

Overall, how well do you think the programme was implemented in your region?



Stakeholders' Perceptions of Implementation (N=30)

While education and training delivery has been a focus of the project, Wai Connection's positive impact was shown to be much more than just education:

"It has been brilliant; the education has reignited the passion and interest in this mahi for ourselves and our collective. It has been uplifting, supportive, and very reassuring." [Catchment Group Participant].

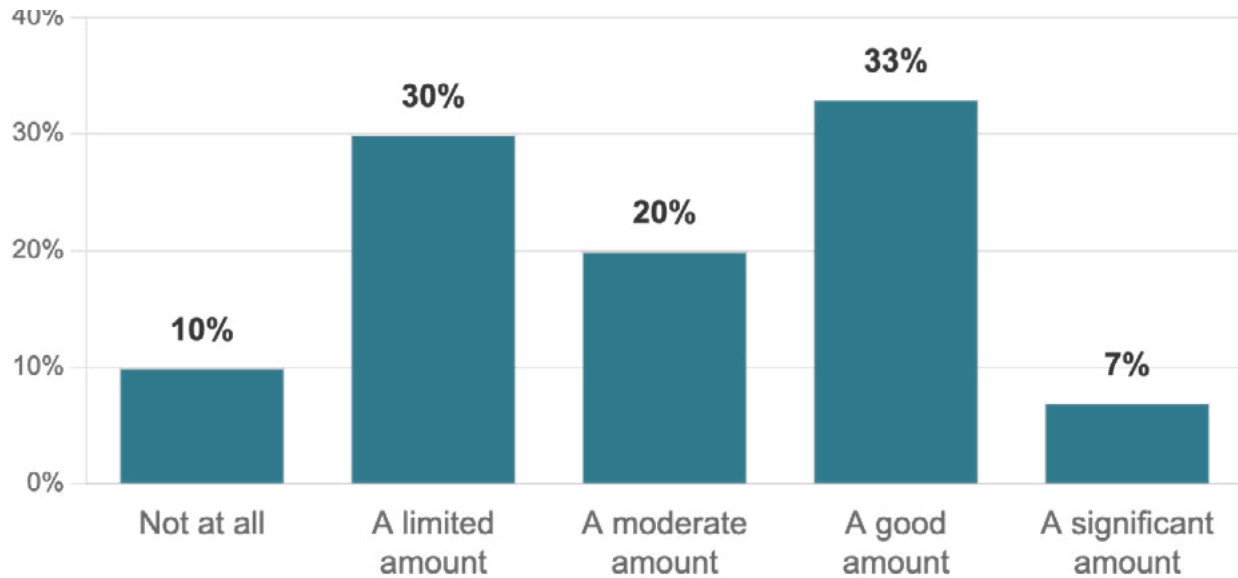
Regional coordinators echoed this success, with one noting:

"One of our biggest successes has been the time invested in building and developing relationships across the region. These relationships have strengthened connectivity with stakeholders, mana whenua, rural and urban communities, as well as regional and district councils. As a result, there has been minimal duplication of effort and greater capacity building across different entities" [Regional coordinator].

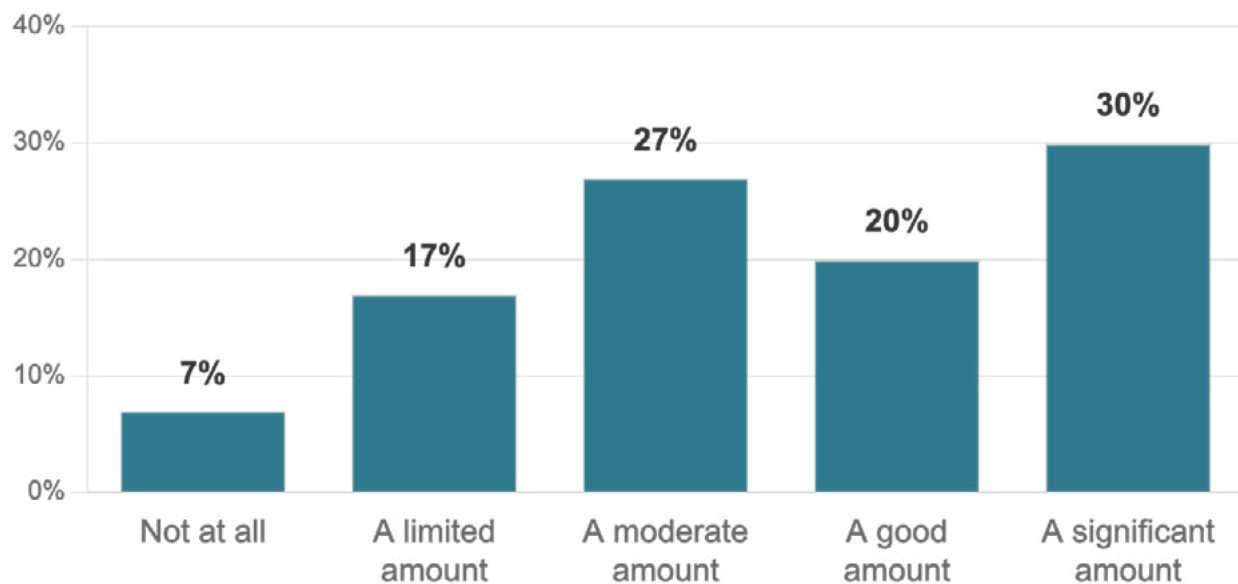
Additionally, around half of all delivery teams reported good or significant increases in catchment groups' practical capabilities and data-driven decision-making skills.

Delivery team feedback

Overall, to what extent has the Wai Connection programme improved the **CAPACITY** of the catchment group?

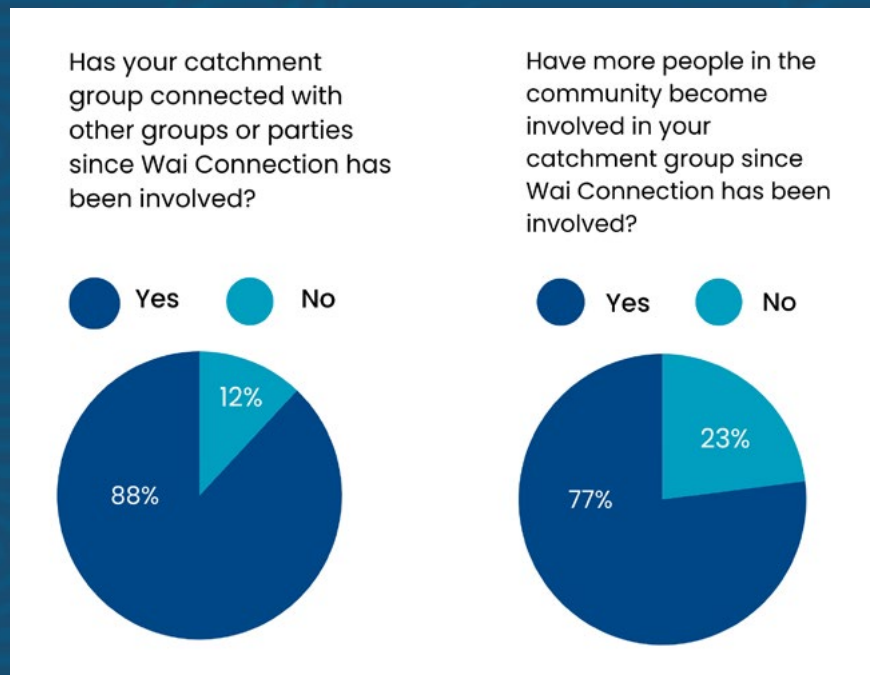


Overall, to what extent has the Wai Connection programme improved the **capability** of the catchment group?



Delivery Teams' views on the impact that Wai Connection has had on Catchment Group capability (N=30)

Catchment group feedback



The programme's value to catchment groups is further substantiated by evidence of strengthened community connections and **"increased efficiencies of resources, a strengthened sense of environmental stewardship, and brought parties together who may have previously been working in silos,"** [Evaluation findings] with groups experiencing **"a renewed sense of achievement and purpose through their involvement with this programme"** [Evaluation findings] and enhanced cultural understanding of traditional restoration methods. Increased connections were evident in catchment group responses.

Collectively, the evaluation demonstrated that the community-led approach effectively built the capacity and capability needed for sustainable freshwater stewardship across participating regions. At the same time, progress can only proceed at the pace of each group, and the capability and capacity gains cannot be maintained, nor built upon, without continued coordination and investment. Feedback consistently noted one crucial area for improvement was coordinated long term funding:

"Make the funding for a 5-year term. Programmes like this take 1-2 years to get up and running, resourced, and build the necessary relationships and trust to be highly effective. While we have delivered a lot in the time we have in the [region], we are essentially ceasing the programme when it is delivering at its most productive." [Regional Coordinator]



Key benefits for supported catchment groups



Confidence to Take Action

Funding has helped local groups feel more confident stepping into leadership. With support behind them, they're better able to plan, take action, and bring others along on the journey.



People in Place, Making Things Happen

Having dedicated coordinators or facilitators has been a game-changer. These roles keep the wheels turning — helping with communication, organising events, and building relationships within the community and with agencies.



Access to specialist knowledge = sound science, sound advice

Having technical specialists in freshwater ecology and catchment management as part of our delivery team (as well as through the national technical support team) allowed us to provide advice that is grounded in sound science.



Improving knowledge of catchment condition

Focus Catchment Maps have allowed groups to better understand their catchment and to plan for action at a catchment level, leading to a greater chance of future success around freshwater improvements.



More Monitoring, More Momentum

Groups have been trained to monitor their streams and catchments regularly. This local data is building a clearer picture of change over time and helping guide decisions on what to do next.



Better Connections with Councils and Agencies

The programme has created more open conversations between communities and agencies. For many, it's the first time they've felt truly heard or part of the decision-making process.

Benefits for the wider catchment community



Learning from Each Other

As funded groups build experience, they're sharing ideas and offering support to other groups just starting out. This peer learning is lifting everyone's confidence and helping grow the network from the ground up.



Raising the Profile of Community-Led Action

There's a growing recognition that communities have a vital role to play in looking after freshwater. The stories, data, and success from funded groups are helping show what's possible when locals lead the way.



Stronger National Connections

Being part of a national programme helped groups see they're not working in isolation. It's created a sense of collective purpose — and a chance to learn from what's working elsewhere.



Building the Case for Long-Term Support

The early wins and lessons from this programme are helping show that community-led freshwater work is not just valuable — it's essential. There's now stronger momentum for long-term, stable investment in grassroots action.



A National Programme but Delivered Locally

The support of a national programme (with national programme support and technical specialist support teams) to provide consistency in information and outputs, but the ability to then deliver locally in a way that will meet the needs of the groups.



Making Connections and Forging Relationships

Connecting and collaborating with others working within the catchment group support space helps minimise double-ups and maximise benefits for groups.

4

Regional Summaries





Auckland | Tāmaki Makaurau

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust

TPOS Approval Date: 14 November 2023

Regional Coordinator: Briar Broad

Total EFF budget excl. co-funding: \$2,831,604.39 inc gst

Team: Rhiannon Leddra (Catchment Connector), Anastasia Zaleta (Catchment Coordinator), Hana Aickin (Catchment Coordinator), Amy Sadler (Catchment Coordinator and Connector, 2023–2025), Carla Fonseca Paris (Deputy Regional Manager, 2023–2024), Teātaiti Tapurau (Assistant Connector), Luan Rose (Administrator, 2025–2026); Simone Bahr (Communications Coordinator, 2024–2025), Janey Taylor (Social Media and Volunteer Coordinator, 2025), supported by a trained MTSC pool. 22 people employed over the life of the project.

Catchment groups supported

Arapārerā River and tributaries

Arapārerā Community
Catchment Group,
Mataia Restoration Project

South Head / Waioneke, Kaipara Moana tributaries

South Kaipara Landcare,
Waioneke landowners

Whanaki and Waireia Rivers

Waireia / lower Whanaki
landowners

South Kaipara Marae rohe

Ōtakanini Haranui Marae; Te
Aroha Pā Marae; Te Kia Ora
Marae; Whiti te Ra o Reweti
Marae; Ngāti Whātua o Kaipara

Āwhitu Peninsula — Kauritutahi, Ōpoia and Ohiku Creeks

Āwhitu Landcare
View Road School
Ngaati te Ata

Harania Stream, Māngere

Māngere East Family Services
Te Korowai o Papatūānuku
Te Ararata Stream Team

Pāhurehure Inlet; Whangapouri Stream, Slippery Creek, Ngākōrōa Stream and Papakura Stream

Whangapouri Landowner
(Stychinsky Whānau)
Whangapouri Landowner (Napier
Whānau), Papakura cluster,
Beautification Trust, Papakura
Marae, CVNZ.

Wairaki Stream

Friends of Wairaki Stream

Mauku Stream

Whakaupoko Landcare
CREST

Taitua

Ngaati Te Ata

Te Wairoa River and

Urungahau Stream, Clevedon
Friends of Te Wairoa; Clevedon
landowners; Ngāti Kohua

Kohuroa Stream, Te Kohuroa | Mathesons Bay

Te Kohuroa Rewilding Initiative;
Leigh Harbour Valley Society,
Whangateau Harbour Care

Ōteha / Ō Te Ha, Upper Waitematā

Te Hōnonga a Iwi, Upper
Waitematā Ecology Network
(UWEN), Tauhinu Scouts,
Friends of Oratau Reserve,
Greenhithe Community Trust,
A Rocha, Restore The Landing,
Ngāti Whātua O Kaipara

Wai Manawa

Wai Manawa Catchment
Coalition, Restoring Takarunga
Hauraki

Rangitopuni

Pest Free Coatesville, Pest Free
Dairy Flat, Riverhead Scouts
Group, Riverhead Landowner
(Wilding Whānau)

Whau

Te Whau Pathway Project

Tāmaki

Otara Lakes and Waterways Trust

Regional Advisory Group:

Membership includes representatives from Department of Conservation, Auckland Council Healthy Waters, Auckland Council Environmental Services, Auckland Council Sustainable Schools, Ministry of Primary Industries, Kaipara Moana Remediation and an independent ecologist. Formed in 2023 as part of the RNA, updated monthly, meets quarterly.

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Community group facilitation
- Community engagement events
- Volunteer recruitment and management
- Environmental programme delivery (Whitebait Connection, EMR)
- Science communication
- Community Based Freshwater Monitoring training and support
- Stakeholder engagement
- Fish passage assessment
- Inanga habitat assessment and restoration
- Freshwater ecology
- Environmental management
- Wetland ecology
- Restoration ecology
- GIS
- Tangata whenua engagement
- First Aid

Training through Wai Connection

- Te Tiriti training
- ACE training
- First Aid training
- Dog safety workshop
- Invertebrate ID workshop
- VHF training
- Constructed wetlands masterclass
- Project management course
- Kayak safety training
- Estuarine monitoring training
- Integrated catchment management planning
- NZFSS conference

Catchment Group members

- CBFM training
- NISP training
- Wai Care training
- Integrated catchment management planning

Auckland Wai Connection Project Summary

15,598



Native plants planted

46



Catchment groups supported

9,716



Volunteer hours donated

7,600+



School students engaged

300+



Community events, with 20,000+ engagements

7 + 17



Monitoring + restoration plans

27,000+



People reached

What capability building looked like in Tāmaki Makaurau

Wai Connection | Tātai ki te Wai set out to connect Aucklanders to their local waterways and to build the community capability needed to care for them beyond the life of the project. From November 2023 to June 2026, the Auckland team - catchment coordinators, connectors and MTSCT support staff working across 14 focus catchments from Arapārerā and South Head in the north to Wairoa, Pāhurehure and Āwhitu in the south - supported catchment groups, community organisations, marae, landowners, schools and volunteers to learn about, monitor and restore their streams, rivers and estuaries.

Year 1 focused on building relationships and establishing foundations; Year 2 was the peak of delivery, with the region's widest reach across groups, schools and events; and Year 3 targeted consolidation, technical depth and handover - leaving groups with the skills, equipment, plans and connections to carry the mahi forward themselves.

Community science, community-led

The Arapārerā Community Catchment Group - formed in response to the 2023 floods - grew from strategic-planning

support in Year 1 to an exemplary catchment group and monitoring programme. Trained by MTSCT alongside Auckland Council staff, community members completed nine kākahi surveys in 2026, recording over 400 individuals, including the first records of the threatened *Echyridella aucklandica* in the catchment, with juvenile recruitment confirming a living population. The dataset underpins five kākahi-bed restoration plans, an \$8k Environmental Services connection for kākahi bed pest control, and a DOC Community Fund application for the group to sustain the monitoring for three further years.

Knowledge absorbed into the community kete

At Kauritutahi Creek on the Āwhitu Peninsula, an early īnanga spawning workshop with Āwhitu Landcare, Ngaati Te Ata, Auckland Council and landowners grew, over three years of training and planning support, into a 2,300-seedling community planting. This was prepared by the catchment group, funded by Council, and incorporated MTSCT's spawning-habitat recommendations without MTSCT needing to lead. The same group now offers water monitoring as a community service and hosts a SHMAK kit lending library.

Capability handed over, not just built

Transition work converted capability building into legacy: facilitation of Catchment Connections handed to Te Kohuroa Rewilding Initiative (TKRI), whose trained TKRI Rangers now run their own NĪSP surveys; SHMAK kit libraries established with Āwhitu Landcare and View Road School; community members turned trainers, with one Arapārerā member co-leading a kākahi workshop at the National MTSC T Wānanga; a socio-environmental restoration plan enabling Te Hōnonga a Iwi to strengthen and expand their impact and more widely involve their community; Friends of Te Wairoa leading their own tuna-awareness work in support of their goal of limiting the annual eel hunt; groups working directly with Auckland Council to deploy advanced monitoring technology such as the AquaWatch WaQA; and marae relationships matured into restoration and biodiversity plans grounded in rangatahi aspirations at Puātahi, Ōtakanini Haranui, Te Aroha Pā and Te Kia Ora. In Year Three, funding directed the team's work to rural catchments, so consolidation and handover focused there; the urban capability built earlier in the project had less support to carry it through to independence, leaving clear scope for continued investment.

Lessons learned and challenges

- Relationships take time. Trust and connection grow slowly and meaningfully when space is made to listen and understand. Building meaningful relationships, especially with iwi and marae takes sustained time and trust.
- In some catchments, especially urban ones, it was hard to get consistent engagement and communication. Busy lives and small volunteer numbers mean we need to keep finding new ways to connect people. Volunteers are very time and resource constrained.
- Weather and natural processes disrupted some planting plans, and sometimes, limited funding or capacity made it hard to follow through on great ideas.

Building skills and capacity for the future

Wai Connection formally closed in Auckland on 30 June 2026, but the mahi continues through the capability it built. Catchment groups and schools keep their freshwater programmes with trained teachers and equipment in place. Groups across Arapārerā, Te Kohuroa, Āwhitu, South Kaipara, Wairoa, Harania and Ō Te Ha hold their own monitoring and restoration plans, with continued MTSC T support through Foundation North, local board and council funding where available. The Arapārerā kākahi monitoring project awaits a DOC Community Fund decision that could sustain it for three further years. Partnerships — between marae and schools, landowners and landcare groups, agencies and communities — remain in place, focused on local values, mātauranga Māori and the mauri of Tāmaki Makaurau's rivers and streams.

Awareness of and interest in freshwater conservation has visibly grown across Tāmaki Makaurau: new and emerging groups continue to approach the team, having heard what others are doing for their awa and wanting to do the same.

“Hana’s involvement has been life-changing for us — we would not be where we are as a catchment group without the involvement of Hana and Wai Connection.”

— Arapārerā Community Catchment Group (Year 2)

“We have been so fortunate to work with the Mountains To Sea / Wai Connection team. They are all knowledgeable and experienced, and very gracious with their support. We would have faced significant capability barriers to freshwater monitoring and inanga spawning mahi without their help.”

- Anon. participant of Awhitu SHMAK training



Canterbury | Waitaha

Regional Summary

Provider Organisation: EOS Ecology

TPOS Approval Date: 10 November 2023

Regional Coordinator: Jessica Halsey (Regional Manager / Coordinator, Years 1–3); joined in Year 3 by Erron Henderson and Shelley McMurtrie

Total EFF budget excl. co-funding: \$2,765,028.20 (inc gst)

Team: 19 (6.35 FTEs)

Catchment Coordinators: Kate Montech (year 1) Jessica Halsey, Courtney Bosse (years 1-3), Helena Quilter and Briar Inwood (year 2), supported by Catchment Connectors and Senior Science Support across the three years including Emily Goldfinch, Nick Hempston, Oly Hall, Ariana Painter, Jesse Burns, Brooklyn Lea, Laura Jones, Kyle Dow, Chris Wilson, Marcus Rodger, Baily Lelieveld, Bronwyn Gay, Annabel Barnden, Catherine Grima, Alex James and Zoe Dewson. 29 people employed over the life of the project (6.35 FTE in year 2 and 4.40 FTE in year three).

Catchment groups supported

North Canterbury

Kaikōura Water Zone Committee, Jed River Catchment Project, Waimakariri Landcare Trust, Upper Waimakariri Pastoral Catchment Group, Sefton Saltwater Creek

Mid Canterbury

Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust, Wairewa Mahinga Kai Catchment Group, Le Bons Bay Environmental Trust, Ōnuku Rūnanga, Community Waterways Partnership (59 Groups), Upper Waikirikiri Catchment

Collective, Hekeao Hinds Hill Country Catchment Group, Koukourarata / Port Levy, Barkers Creek Catchment Group

South Canterbury

Ahuriri Community Catchment Group, Hakataramea Sustainability Collective, Burkes Pass Heritage Trust, Te Moana Catchment Group, Arowhenua Native Nursery, Waihao Rūnanga

Regional Advisory Group:

Membership includes representatives from MPI, NZ Landcare Trust, Environment Canterbury & EOS Ecology (Wai Connection). The group has been collaborating since the regional hui in September 2023, formally meeting as a group every two to three months, with additional catch-ups with members as needed.

Co funded, in-kind support, and collaborative programmes with:

- Rātā foundation
- Environment Canterbury
- Ministry of Primary Industries
- Christchurch City Council
- Bathurst Resources Ltd
- Ministry of Education
- New Zealand Land Care Trust
- Access 2 Experts
- Department of Conservation
- Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust
- Dairy NZ
- Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu
- Ōnuku Rūnanga
- Te Ngāi Tūahuriri Rūnanga
- Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua
- Fonterra
- Irricon
- Lincoln Agritech
- Living Landscapes South Canterbury
- Mid-Canterbury Catchment Collective
- Selwyn District Council
- Hurunui Landcare Group

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Strategic direction & business modelling
- Team, project & field operations management
- Systems, processes & office coordination
- Freshwater, estuary & coastal ecology
- Fish & macroinvertebrate ecology
- Wetlands, terrestrial ecology & restoration
- Surface water quality, erosion & sediment management
- Invasion ecology, ecotoxicology & community ecology
- Catchment planning & resource management
- Environmental assessments (EIAs/AEEs)
- GIS process design & spatial analysis
- ArcGIS, FME, remote sensing & UAVs
- Automation, cartography & data management
- Python & Agile methodology
- Science interpretation & communication
- Written, visual & graphic content development
- Audience engagement & brand design
- Community & school engagement
- Community-based monitoring & training
- Event coordination & facilitation

Training to date through Wai Connection

- EMR – MTSCT in house training
- First Aid
- Outdoor First Aid
- Fire extinguisher training
- 4WD training
- Wader & water safety training
- Child protection
- Te Reo Māori – Level 1 & 2
- FME course
- PADI online
- HR training
- Road inspector
- Plant ID (NMIT)
- Electrofishing
- UAV training
- Advance road safety training
- Hydric Soils Tool for Wetland Delineation
- Landuse capability training
- Catchment solutions project masterclass
- eDNA conference
- Hydrosoc conference
- NZARM conference
- NZFSS conference
- Outdoor Education NZ weather course
- Surveys around railways course
- Positive youth training in Aotearoa
- ACE Training
- Facilitation
- Wai Connection wānanga

Canterbury Wai Connection Project Summary

180



Native plants planted

82



Catchment groups supported

2,889



Volunteer hours donated

986



Education and training participants

167



Community events

5 + 15



Monitoring plans +
Focus Catchment
Maps

9,945



Individual participant engagements

What capability building looked like in Waitaha

Confidence to collect and interpret data

EOS Ecology has supported multiple groups to develop and strengthen water quality monitoring programmes through hands-on training, field support, and data interpretation. This included SHMAK kit training delivered in Timaru, Waimakariri, and Christchurch, water quality training and site ground-truthing with the Upper Waimakariri Pastoral Catchment Group, conductivity meter training with the Ahuriri Community Catchment Group, and ongoing support for Wairewa Mahinga Kai Catchment Group with data analysis and interpretation of quarterly water quality monitoring, as well as fecal source tracking. We have also undertaken detailed interpretation of eDNA water samples for groups, helping them to understand what their eDNA data means and what results are valid – combined with eDNA webinars, this has helped to increase groups' understanding of eDNA data. These activities have increased community understanding of freshwater health indicators and strengthened confidence in collecting and using environmental data locally. The Te Moana Catchment Group progressed from "a single curious landowner to a passionate and committed catchment group" with established committees and dedicated monitoring teams. The Upper Waikirikiri Catchment Collective has developed monitoring plans aligned

with national standards, collaborating with Central Plains Water to avoid duplication and enhance regional data coverage.

Confidence to turn data into action

The Ahuriri Community Catchment Group's Focus Catchment Map Series presentation and eDNA training workshop, combined with support through an Access 2 Experts application to integrate their water quality monitoring with regional council data, has moved the group from collecting data to using it – progressing their A2E application to the next stage and building toward subcatchment management plans and further on-the-ground training, which the group has identified as priorities post-June 2026. Communities have also increased their ability to use science and monitoring information to inform restoration priorities and catchment planning. Examples include erosion risk mapping and erosion and sediment control work for the Wairewa Mahinga Kai Catchment Group, stream gauging and contaminant load understanding with the Jed River Catchment Project, and support for water quality monitoring plans and funding applications with the Upper Waimakariri Pastoral Catchment Group. Technical support relating to UAV survey for orthomosaic mapping of wetland and waterway habitat, erosion risk mapping, and data

“I love the collaborative approach and views from the team, bringing in an outside perspective to things. The resources and information this brings is fantastic...”

- Canterbury Stakeholder (anonymous survey response)

dashboards have further improved the accessibility and usefulness of environmental information for community-led decision making.

Confidence to connect and collaborate

Another significant benefit has been the strengthening of relationships and collaboration across communities, iwi, agencies, landowners, and technical experts. Wai Connection has created opportunities for groups to engage more confidently with councils, funding processes, and environmental management discussions. Ōnuku Rūnanga's partnership with EOS Ecology - blending mainstream science methods with mātauranga Māori and support from a mātauranga expert at Environment Canterbury - has grown from stream days and an Akaroa Harbour Focus Catchment Map Series into a climate change adaptation planning framework centred on mahinga kai, now informing a large-scale catchment management and climate resilience project the Rūnanga is progressing directly with Christchurch City Council and Environment Canterbury. Regional collaboration has developed through sub-regional networks, such as the "Four Peaks Foothills" community in South Canterbury, where the Te Moana, Barkers Creek, and Waihi catchment groups are working toward shared goals. The Community Waterways Partnership in Christchurch has coordinated 59 diverse partners, delivering events like World Rivers Day that connect communities with urban waterways.

Lessons and challenges

The sheer size of the region was the initial challenge for the EOS Ecology team, and adapting to geography and distance was an ongoing theme in ensuring that catchment groups were well supported.

Catchment groups and communities are all at different stages of readiness, capability and capacity, and need different types and levels of support over time - reinforcing the value of a flexible, locally responsive delivery model over a one-size-fits-all approach.

Volunteer capacity and competing priorities were consistent barriers: community members balance environmental work alongside employment, farming and whānau responsibilities, which affected participation and timelines across many groups.

The reduced funding available in Year 3 meant the team could not sustain the same level of support provided in the first two years, which caused distress for some groups - a reminder of the value communities place on continuity once relationships and momentum are established. Funding sustainability remains a critical challenge.

Building skills and capacity for the future

Groups including Jed River Catchment Project, Wairewa Mahinga Kai Catchment Group, Upper Waimakariri Pastoral Catchment Group and Upper Waikirikiri Catchment Collective are continuing to build momentum around monitoring and catchment management, and Ōnuku Rūnanga is progressing a large-scale catchment management and climate resilience project directly with Christchurch City Council and Environment Canterbury. Technical capabilities have expanded across catchment groups, with communities now able to undertake water quality monitoring, habitat assessment, and data interpretation. The Hekeao Hinds Hill Country Catchment Group demonstrates this development, moving from basic water quality monitoring to understanding "how water quality affects aquatic life" through ecology days combining electrofishing, invertebrate sampling, and eDNA analysis with their long-term water quality data.

Relationships built between community groups, iwi, agencies, landowners and technical experts - including funding-application support, technical surveys, data interpretation, environmental education and community engagement - remain the platform for this work to continue, even as individual Wai Connection activities conclude.

"Personally as a co-ordinator of the Jed River Catchment Project I learnt so much through viewing the FCMS and the Map Series presentations that I feel I can confidently start conversations with my community about all the complexities of the land structure and land use that impact on water quality. This knowledge will help us make better decisions where and when to plant and what kind of restoration programs to prioritize for the best impact on water quality as well as build knowledge base and relationships through our community. We will be leaving one of our FCMS books at our local library for our community to have access to. This may help local farmers when they are looking at catchment scale impacts when writing their environmental farm plans."

— Heidi Tirikatene-Nash, Jed River Catchment Project Coordinator

"Ōnuku Rūnanga would like to acknowledge the EOS Ecology/Wai Connection team, led by Courtney Bosse for the incredible support and expert guidance they have provided to Ōnuku over the past year and a half. This support and guidance have helped the Ōnuku te Taiao team to develop a climate change adaptation planning framework, centred on mahinga kai which integrates catchment planning."

— Debbie Tikao, Ōnuku Rūnanga Te Taiao Portfolio Manager



Gisborne | Te Tai Rāwhiti

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: Tairāwhiti Environment Centre

TPOS Approval Date: 30 Jan, 2024

Regional Coordinator: Dr Sarah Boyle, Amy Hardy

Total EFF budget excl. co-funding: \$1,347,927.11 (inc gst)

Team: 5

Anne-Marie Vigeant - Catchment Coordinator

Sam Gibson - Catchment Coordinator

Kirsty Gaddum - Inanga spawning programme coordinator

Amy Hardy - Catchment Connector

Hana Hardy - Catchment Connector

Sam Rowland - General Manager, Tairāwhiti Environment Centre

Catchment groups supported

Rongowhakaata Iwi Taiao Group
Waikanae Awa Tipuna Group
Motu Catchment Group
Rere Community Catchment Group
Ngatapa Community Landcare Group

Whangara Catchment Community Group
Eastern Whio Link
Waimata Catchment Group
Uawa rohe (Initial meetings only)
Ruakituri Catchment Group

Regional Advisory Group:

Tairāwhiti Wai Connection attends the regional catchment management group facilitated by the council integrated catchments team. The 28 members are representatives of Tairāwhiti Environment Centre, He Awa Ora, He Tai Ora, Healthy Rivers, Living Sea Trust, Gisborne District Council, Hawkes Bay Regional Council, MPI, Beef & Lamb NZ, DOC, Project Crimson, QE II National Trust, Mangapoike Ltd, and Eastern & Central Community Trust.

Co funded, in-kind support, and collaborative programmes with:

- Rural Support Trust
- DOC Hawke's Bay
- Gisborne District Council
- Tairāwhiti Catchment Communities (formerly East Coast Leading From The Land)
- Wilderlab
- Beef & Lamb NZ
- Trees for Survival
- Department of Conservation
- Tairāwhiti EnviroSchools
- AgFirst
- Women's Native Tree Project Trust

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Trained educators (primary, secondary, enviroschools, outdoor instructor)
- Scientists (PhD/MSc/BSc Hons)
- Catchment group leader consultation, including tangata whenua engagement
- Community engagement events
- Volunteer recruitment and management (EMR)
- Environmental programme delivery (WBC, EMR, Community Based Freshwater Monitoring)
- Monitoring and restoration planning
- Inanga habitat assessment and restoration
- Wetland restoration
- First aid
- Catchment group facilitation

Training through Wai Connection

- Sea Kayaking Skills Course (Pacific Coast Kayaks)
- Workplace River Safety Course (Paul Eames, Te Mahi Ako ITO River Rescue unit assessor)
- Outdoor First Aid (Peak Safety)
- Facilitate Aotearoa - Facilitating Effective Catchment Groups 4 day course
- Strategic Grants Best Practice Workshop
- EMR Volunteer Training
- Wetland Restoration Wānanga (Waikōkopu Consulting)
- Whitebait Connection Programme Coordinator Training
- Environmental Programme Delivery (WBC, EMR, Community Based Freshwater Monitoring)
- NISP training

Tairāwhiti Wai Connection Project Summary

11,561



Native plants planted

9



Catchment groups supported

4,106



Volunteer hours donated

9,524



Education and training participants

684



Community events and activities delivered

13 + 16 + 4



Monitoring plans, restoration plans, Focus Catchment Maps

14,864



Individual participant engagements

What capability building looked like in Tairāwhiti

The Wai Connection project has strengthened local capacity and collaboration for environmental restoration by building momentum in technical data collection, strategic coordination, education and cultural integration. Catchment groups and their communities have been supported with animal pest management, wetland and habitat restoration, and the protection of terrestrial, freshwater, and inanga spawning habitats. Through learning gained from the wetland Wānanga, acoustic monitoring, and environmental baseline monitoring, the project has helped shape future strategy and direction for each catchment group with a stronger evidence base. It has also supported ongoing engagement through workshops with local hapū, farmers, and foresters, interwoven with mātauranga Māori principles. In partnership with Gisborne District Council, Wai Connection also helped organise and facilitate regional stakeholder meetings, bringing together representatives from councils, government agencies, trusts, and community organisations to share ideas, streamline resources, and improve collaboration in support of catchment groups across the region. A defining challenge for Wai Connection in Tairāwhiti was beginning in the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle, discussed below.

Dedicated Technical Support

Central to this work is the practical training provided in SHMAK (Stream Health Monitoring and Assessment Kit) protocols, creating water monitoring and restoration plans, salt wedge mapping, and inanga spawning habitat identification and restoration. These workshops have transitioned into long-term monitoring autonomy, supported by the provision of equipment and technical assistance. Collaborations with local experts have expanded community skills into native tree propagation,

nursery establishment, eDNA sampling, connections and relationships with iwi and hapū and enabling groups to identify rare species and implement targeted riparian restoration and erosion control. A dedicated inanga spawning coordinator ran saltwater wedge surveys across all 14 sites, searched for and identified inanga eggs, and helped groups build their own restoration plans. In the process, the surveys produced evidence that Tairāwhiti's actual salt wedge has shifted significantly from the location modelled by Gisborne District Council back in 2014 - a correction the council itself lacked the budget and capacity to make, and one that now has a more accurate, field-verified basis. The work also identified five entirely new spawning areas the region didn't know existed.

Trial planting of grasses and sedges in a frequently flooded spawning area allowed groups to test which species could survive before committing to full-scale planting - a model designed to be replicated at other flood-prone sites. One restoration event, facilitated by the regional coordinator, brought a local business and iwi together to align farm practices with cultural aspirations for the site, becoming an exemplar other catchment groups have since drawn on.

Strategic Coordination and Resourcing

Fostering collaboration via regional steering groups and connecting catchment groups with local iwi to build enduring, positive relationships has been a key success. These connections prioritise the collation of status reports on waterways and the development of evidence-based restoration plans. The Wai Connection team also provided essential administrative support by identifying funding opportunities and assisting

with applications. Strategic oversight ensures that local efforts are well-resourced, visible by regional funders, and aligned with broader environmental and cultural goals. Co-funded and collaborative work with Trees for Survival, the Department of Conservation, Tairāwhiti Enviroschools, Gisborne District Council, AgFirst, Beef + Lamb NZ and the Women's Native Tree Project Trust meant training sessions, planting days and specialist input could be shared and co-funded across catchment groups rather than duplicated - stretching a small coordination team considerably further.

Valuing cultural expertise

In partnership with Whitebait Connection, the program has scaled freshwater education by co-delivering curriculum with local hapū and iwi members that blends scientific monitoring with mātauranga Māori. This approach is exemplified by local leaders and catchment groups who now have the relationships to independently manage restoration projects and collaboratively educate tamariki on the historical and cultural significance of their awa. These efforts have bridged gaps between schools, landowners, catchment groups and whānau, significantly increasing community participation in field-based learning. Co-funding through Leading from the Land allowed mana whenua to be paid for their collaboration and cultural expertise rather than contributing on a volunteer basis. Valuing this input has enabled deeper, longer-term engagement with iwi and hapū than would otherwise have been possible.

Interactive education and training

Wai Connection Tairāwhiti hosted a series of multidisciplinary workshops for their catchment groups and wider communities covering important themes such as mental health for rural residents, wetland restoration, native plant nursery establishment, native seed collection, social media, strategic funding and cultural history. By engaging experts in migratory fish, inanga spawning, pest management and wetland hydrology, they equipped catchment groups with the technical skills to monitor their waterways, identify issues such as contaminants and sediment runoff, and design site and species specific restoration plans. Whitebait Connection and Experiencing Marine Reserves programmes reached 77 schools and 8,879 students across the region, including schools with no prior relationship to either programme, building a region-wide network of relationships between schools, whānau, catchment groups and hapū.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

- Timing/extreme weather. Wai Connection began while many farmers, landowners and community members were still recovering from Cyclone Gabrielle and needed to focus on getting their land and livelihoods back on track. Road closures and unsafe conditions further delayed delivery, and the loss of riparian margins left many groups uncertain whether replanting would even survive in the changed conditions — a question that took roughly two years to answer with confidence for specific sites. The project's first year was, by necessity, about community engagement and wellbeing. Real momentum has only been building in the last twelve months,

which is the hardest part of the project's timing: just as groups are ready and able to act, the funding is ending.

- Limited and restrictive funding. Because engagement has to be driven by catchment groups needs and readiness, the Wai Connection team were restricted by only being allowed to engage with specific catchment groups when other landowners or groups were more ready and willing to engage.
- Landowners are busy and often are working in the catchment group space in a voluntary capacity and are therefore time poor. The 'tapped out' nature of volunteer led groups remains a major hurdle. Paid catchment lead positions that we have seen in other regions may assist with this, but the majority of the group will still be volunteers.
- A learning is that catchment groups need a broad range of services including help with community engagement and volunteer recruitment, upskilling and expertise on very specific common issues in their region or catchment, as well as support to keep momentum going and come together to discuss challenges.
- Iwi/hapū have limited project funding and also require resources to help regenerate their taiao spaces and to contribute their expertise to catchment groups.

Building Skills and Capacity for the Future

- The Rere and Ngatapa groups have connected, as well as with catchment group facilitators at the council, to form catchment groups.
- In Motu, the Predator Control Plan developed through Wai Connection will inform their future strategy for restoration of habitat for terrestrial and freshwater native fauna species.
- Baseline environmental monitoring carried out with Eastern Whio Link, Waimata and Waipaoa will be used to inform future strategy and action.
- In Whāngārā, Waipaoa and Waimata catchments, coordinators highlighted increased motivation to pull all the environmental baseline monitoring carried out with Wai Connection to inform their future strategy and direction. They also noted intent to continue further workshops with the local hapū, farmers and foresters, interwoven with mātauranga maori principles.
- Improved management of animal pests, restoration of habitat for terrestrial and freshwater native species, alongside restoration of inanga spawning zones will all have long term benefits in Ruakituri, Eastern Whio Link, Uawa, Waimata, Ngatapa and Waipaoa.
- He Awa Ora, He Tai Ora Trust will continue to apply for funding to deliver MTSCT programmes, increasing knowledge of marine environmental effects from upstream degradation.
- Several individuals trained through our Wai Connection team have now positioned themselves into taiao roles in their iwi and hapū so they will continue with training from their team as well as support from He Awa Ora, He Tai Ora Trust.

"Post Cyclone Gabrielle, time, resources and funding have been scarce for our community group, but thanks to Wai Connection's support we've discovered threatened wetland bird species, bats, and in-depth knowledge about precious inanga spawning zones in our awa. We now have clear direction around wetland and river restoration."

— Sarah Williams, Whangara Catchment Group



Hawke's Bay | Te Matau-a-Māui

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: Sustainable Hawke's Bay

TPOS Approval Date: 28 June, 2024

Regional Coordinators: Stephanie Fowlie, John Bell, Campbell Leckie, Sam Paterson, Aimey Tahu, Emily Strong, Jeff Vredenburg

Total EFF budget excl. co-funding: \$2,451,407.18 inc GST

Team: Jane Gardiner, Serah Knight, Michelle Kang, Aimey Tahu, Emily Strong, Jae Whelan, Michael Shand, Chris Scott, Nathan Foote, Dana Hartley, Nick Ratcliff, Helen Joros, Alison Bell, Tamai Sinclair and Sonya Smith. 22 individuals, approx. 3.8 FTE in year 3.

Catchment groups supported

Ahuriri Tributaries Catchment Trust
Between Two Rivers Catchment Group
Central Coast Catchment Group
Guardians of Tūtira
Karamū River Catchment Collective

Kaweka Community Catchment Collective
Nūhaka Catchment Group
Ngāti Pāhauwera Development Trust
Pōrangahau Catchment Group
Save the Dotterels

Tukituki Landcare
Te Taitimu Trust
Waingōngoro Awa Charitable Trust

Regional Advisory Group:

The group includes representatives from Hawkes Bay Regional Council, NZ Landcare Trust, MPI and the Wai Connection team. The group meets quarterly to ensure we are supporting each other's work and not duplicating effort.

Co funded, in-kind support, and collaborative programmes with:

- Ahuriri Estuary Protection Society
- Beef and Lamb
- Biodiversity HB
- Cape Sanctuary
- Central Hawke's Bay District Council
- Department of Conservation
- EIT
- EnviroSchools
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Fish and Game Hawke's Bay
- Forest and Bird Hawke's Bay
- Garden to Table
- Has Green Academy
- Hastings District Council
- Hawke's Bay Regional Council
- Hirepool
- Hohepa
- Holcim Concrete
- Mana Ahuriri Trust
- Manaaki Whenua
- Massey University
- Ministry for Primary Industries
- Napier City Council
- Napier Port
- National Aquarium
- Ngati Kahungunu
- Ngāti Pāhauwera Development Trust
- NZ Landcare Trust
- Piringa Hapu
- Radio NZ
- Save the Dotterels Hawke's Bay
- Stout Trust
- Sustainable Coastlines
- Te Mata Park
- Te Ngahere
- Te Taiwhenua o Heretaunga
- Te Taiwhenua o te whanganui a Orotu*
- The Nature Conservancy
- Trees for Survival
- TUMU Group
- University of Dundee
- Waipureku Predator Trapping
- Wairoa District Council

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Catchment group facilitation
- Community & school engagement
- Environmental programme delivery
- Community Based Freshwater Monitoring
- Stakeholder engagement
- Monitoring and restoration planning
- Inanga habitat assessment and restoration
- Freshwater & marine ecology
- Freshwater monitoring
- GIS mapping
- Tangata whenua engagement
- Predator control
- Educational resource creation
- Drone operation
- PADI free dive certification

Training through Wai Connection

- Facilitating Effective Catchment Groups with Facilitate Aotearoa
- ACE Training modules
- River safety training
- Comprehensive First Aid training
- Child Protection training
- Community Based Freshwater Monitoring training
- National Inanga Spawning Programme training
- PADI freediving course (MTS Northland Wānanga)
- Fish passage barrier assessments (with Hawkes Bay Regional Council)
- Spotlighting fish surveying training
- Principles of native planting
- Pest and weed management (Hawkes Bay Regional Council)
- Microplastics surveying online training (Ocean Diagnostic)

Hawke's Bay Wai Connection Project Summary

2,397



Native plants planted

32



Catchment groups supported

2,910



Volunteer hours donated

1,620



Tamariki engaged via school programmes

6



Focus Catchment Maps created

31 + 4 + 9



Site plans, monitoring plans, restoration plans

9,406



Individual participant engagements

What capability building looked like in Hawkes Bay

Wai Connection, delivered through Sustainable Hawke's Bay, built effective community-based freshwater stewardship across the region over three years. Support grew from 7 catchment groups in Year 1 to a peak of 11 groups (39% of the region) in Year 2, before consolidating to 5 groups (21%) in Year 3 as the project closed out. A multidisciplinary team delivered water quality monitoring across 31 sites, CBFM training, and tools such as SHMAK kits, eDNA testing, and GIS dashboards, while the Whitebait Connection education programme reached impressive numbers of students each year (204, then 909 – 75% rural – then 487), engaging future landowners and mana whenua leaders in long-term stewardship.

Throughout, the project's central value was as a bridge between communities, mana whenua, and government agencies, using workshops, hui, and technical facilitation to enable coordinated environmental action. This culminated in initiatives like the Nūhaka-based catchment coordinator role, funded to secure further investment and bring mana whenua and agencies together around a large-scale wetland restoration project as Wai Connection's involvement wound down.

GIS as a force multiplier

In-house GIS expertise proved one of the project's most valued services from the outset, producing maps, science-backed strategies and interactive tools used by community groups and external collaborators alike. For Tukituki Landcare, GIS analysis of five key sites along the Upper Tukituki River – combining 2024 aerial imagery, LiDAR and 1950s historic photographs – mapped landscape change and river movement, then was embedded as an interactive tool on the Tukituki Landcare website so landowners could identify their own sub-catchment and waterways.

Catchment groups became monitors in their own right

Community-Based Freshwater Monitoring and eDNA training equipped groups such as Waingōngoro Awa Charitable Trust and Nūhaka Catchment Group to run their own water quality and species monitoring; donated Stream Health Monitoring and eDNA kits meant this capability outlasted the funded coordinator relationship. Across the life of the project, 31 water

quality sites were established, 11 monitoring and restoration plans created, and around 2,400 native trees planted.

Relationships were the deepest driver of change

Groups such as Karamū, Tūtira and Pōrangahau — predominantly farmer-based with limited prior contact with mana whenua — went on to deliver meaningful joint action once relationships were established; Pōrangahau's subsequent recognition in the Ballance Farm Environment Awards is a direct example. Feedback collected in Year 3 was strongly positive: seven surveyed catchment groups rated the overall usefulness of Sustainable Hawke's Bay's support at 4.7 out of 5, and all 24 respondents to event feedback surveys said they would recommend the event to others.

Lessons and challenges

The importance of trust and strong relationships. A key learning was the need to build and maintain trust and connections between not only sustainable Hawke's Bay and the respective catchment group, but also between catchment groups and Mana Whenua. For example, a number of catchment groups such as Karamū, Tūtira, and Porangahau had limited contact with mana whenua which in some cases was acting as a barrier to creating action. Now these groups have been able to go ahead and work together within the community towards projects to improve water quality within their catchment.

Timing. Cyclone Gabrielle raised awareness amongst catchment groups and the rural community to manage waterways for the protection and benefit of land and land use for the protection and benefit of waterways. Even at the peak of team delivery in Year 2, Hawke's Bay Wai Connection team reported turning away 1 in 3 requests for support and activities because the team was not big enough. Just as the groups supported were converting their new knowledge into action and picking up momentum with restoration projects, Wai Connection came to an end.

Needs vary depending on which stage the group is in, but they always need funding. Groups need baseline funding and expert support and coordination, and then project funding once they get to the 'action' stage.

Geography. Geographic distances within the Hawke's Bay region created challenges for upper-lower catchment collaboration and engagement. The need for adequate lead times and sustained commute when working across diverse community sectors was a challenge - the solution of funded catchment based coordinators worked well here, as long as there is also central coordination and skills/experience for coordinators to draw on.

Building capacity for the future

Sustaining Hawke's Bay focused on transition to prevent the loss of project outcomes: capturing and embedding key learnings with partner organisations, and placing accumulated equipment into a tool library for catchment and community groups to access and loan. Individual groups' prospects vary widely — Karamū River Catchment Collective is well resourced and equipped to continue independently, while Guardians of Tūtira and Nūhaka Catchment Group both need continued coordinator funding to move beyond 'keep the lights on' and assist fundraising toward their own restoration priorities. While much has been learned in Hawke's Bay and interest is high among rural communities, the Wai Connection team will be very much missed in the region. Catchment groups in Hawke's Bay continue to express the need for:

- Support to access and interpret catchment and sub-catchment-relevant environmental information. This baseline data is critical for sound catchment management strategies and restoration project designs.
- Water Quality monitoring training, project design, and in-field delivery support. Most groups want to monitor their waterways but lack the knowledge to begin. Wai Connection has been bridging this gap and there is a continued need to do so.
- Environmental education and events. Environmental illiteracy is a barrier to positive outcomes for landowners and communities. There is a need for continued opportunities to build community environmental literacy through engagement to support the work of catchment groups and communities.
- Connecting communities. There is a continued need to foster relationships between catchment groups, community groups, and mana whenua in Hawke's Bay.

"Most of our attendees are volunteers and taiao work isn't their day job... so we really appreciate when training and wānanga allow for that. Everyone had a great time, learned heaps, and we are very grateful for you and Sustainable HB making the wānanga happen for us.

Kathryn, Fish Passage Assessment workshop attendee

Manawatū-Whanganui

Regional Summary

This region was in the last tranche, so after consultation with Horizons, MPI and NZ Landcare Trust, MTSCCT were introduced to two catchment collectives that were mature enough to have completed their own needs analysis and prioritised those needs into a workable plan, but who would require additional funding to achieve their goals.



Provider Organisation 1: Whanganui Region Catchment Collective (WRCC)

TPOS Approval Date: 01 Nov, 2024

Regional Coordinator: None

Total EFF budget: \$172,500 inc gst

Team:

Natasha Cave - Catchment Coordinator

Tarsh de Rose - Catchment Coordinator

Manawatū-Whanganui: WRCC

Catchment groups supported: 9

Education and training participants: 165

Events delivered: 63

People reached: 1,250

Volunteer hours: 2,403

Native planting (co-funded): No data

Plans and maps: 13, whole catchment mapped through CarbonCrop

Catchment groups supported

Natasha Cave:

Upper Ongarue
Matiere; Tuhua
Taumarunui West
Whakapapa
Retaruke

Tarsh de Rose:

Manganui o Te Ao
Whanganui West
Okoia
Tararua

Regional Advisory Group:

Horizons ran a catchment advisory meeting in early April 2025 with the four catchment collectives and WRCC participated. More meetings are planned for the future.

Co funded, in-kind support, and collaborative programmes with:

Horizons, MPI (On Farm Support), Ngā Tangata Tiaki.

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Facilitation
- Freshwater monitoring
- Stakeholder engagement
- Farming systems background
- Farm operations

Training to date through Wai Connection

Non profit governance, catchment group facilitation and marketing and communications training has been completed. Wetland construction and restoration, project management, and eDNA.

24/25 Highlights - Communities in Action

The WRCC work plan co funded by Wai Connection and MPI and supported with in kind hours from landowners has delivered:

- Catchment monitoring - MCI testing
- Catchment monitoring - Tritium and nitrogen isotope testing
- Catchment monitoring - Collection of water samples and physicochemical monitoring
- Website and communications support - showcasing projects
- Community engagement events - Field days and workshops
- Analysing and presenting existing tritium and nitrogen monitoring data
- Community/iwi support with water quality monitoring
- Sub catchment events, e.g. Whanganui West data presentation
- Overheads, finance and administration costs for the period of the funding
- Small grants to catchment groups for specific activities

Following on from our discovery of a spring with high nitrate in the catchment, WRCC contracted EOS Ecology to help us understand groundwater age data from our catchments and assist us to interpret the data from the testing that we have done so far. They will present a webinar to unpack this topic on 29th July 2025.

Challenges, Lessons Learned & What's Next

Many of the groups Natasha and Tarsh work with are newly formed and all are made up of farmer/landowners who volunteer their time. In the first year of Wai Connection, WRCC identified the following needs:

- More clarity and forward notice on funding - nothing can be planned without funding, nothing planned = nothing done.
- The same for regulation - more communication on what will be happening with policy affecting catchment groups and farming communities.
- Longer funding terms are required for job security and the ability to plan long term action.
- Structure of funding - more flexibility is required in milestone

dates and funding deed end dates.

- Access to expertise and scientific research - one source of information that is always updated with the relevant information for catchment groups. There are currently too many sources of information and it is hard to know who to listen to when, for example, information on the council website, landcare trust, and ministry websites all say different things about the same topic.

WRCC had their EFF funding through MPI extended and moved to MfE, making them ineligible for further support from Wai Connection. Wai Connection's deed extension allowed WRCC to roll over its underspend into the next quarter, so training and events could continue to be delivered at the catchment group's pace.

2026 update

The last two years at WRCC have been spent both continuing to grow the WRCC membership and coverage as well as further deepen our current group's knowledge and understanding of their catchments and the environment within. We have added a new Upukongaro group just north of Whanganui, undertaken a restructure that has seen the employment of a 3rd coordinator based in Whanganui to support these groups and continued funding till June 2027. As a follow on from the Wai Connections funded report on the Whanganui West catchment groups baseline data, the group has undertaken stream walks to gain a better understanding of each waterway and the factors impacting it and set new water sampling sites to better understand the catchment.

We are continuing to work further with Matt Highway to better utilise the mapping outputs created and use them to help support resilient catchments.

And as we help build understanding about healthy waterways, focusing on more than just the physicochemical health of the water - we have used the MCI results to help grow knowledge around the importance of shading. WRCC are planning on taking out further MCI sampling at both existing and additional sampling sites across the catchment this summer.

Natasha Cave, GM WRCC
August 2026



Provider Organisation 2: Puketoi to the Pacific Catchment Collective (PPCC)

TPOS Approval Date: 01 Nov, 2024

Total EFF budget: \$267,754.50 inc gst

Regional Coordinator: June Mobley

Team: Lynda Balfour - Catchment Coordinator

Catchment groups supported

PPCC Collective (4)
Upper Akitio
Lower Akitio

Oawhanga
Wainui

Wai Connection funded work, in conjunction with MPI

- Understand our Catchment mapping line - rollout including setup to landowners
- Fish Passage remediation surveys and planning, in collaboration with the physical works undertaken by the regional council
- Communication - website & social media
- Communication - Iwi engagement including agreed strategy
- Strategy day
- Launch - water hui
- Enviro school education x 2 schools set up
- Enviro school education x 2 schools programmes over 36 months
- Weed education and eradication (four mile bush, pub, creeks)
- Sub catchment events
- Community events - field Days & workshops
- Overheads and administrative costs necessary to achieve the above.

Manawatū-Whanganui: PPCC

Formally launched in September 2024, PPCC had a committed board, a practical strategy and co-funding through MPI when they partnered with Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust through Wai Connection. Over the life of the Wai Connection project, Puketoi to the Pacific Catchment Collective (PPCC) established and now supports four active catchment groups across 138,000 hectares. Dedicated coordination and administration resources increased community engagement, strengthened relationships with landowners, and built local capability to identify and address catchment issues collaboratively.

Through catchment mapping and farm visits, 74 landowners

covering 72,205 hectares received property analysis, leading to the identification of 30,017 hectares of qualifying ETS land and increased awareness of environmental and land management opportunities.

The project also strengthened collaboration between landowners, PPCC and Horizons Regional Council through a successful fish passage programme, resulting in several barrier remediation projects that improved access to upstream habitat for native fish species.

Community capacity was further enhanced through the introduction of Enviro schools programmes at Weber and

Pongaroa Schools, empowering students to lead sustainability initiatives and develop skills in environmental stewardship, sustainability and Te Ao Māori. The development of a professional website and provision of regular newsletters has also improved communication, engagement and information sharing across the catchment communities.

Overall, the project has built four stronger, more connected catchment groups with increased capability, knowledge and confidence to work together towards improved catchment health and long-term environmental outcomes.

What capability building looked like in PPCC

Community/Landowner Engagement: Learning Together

- Community Haoura Day (Jan 2025)
- Level 1 First Aid training (March 2025)
- Predator Control Planning in Wainui (August 2025)
- Wetland & Riparian Field Day (September 2025)
- Pongaroa Country Market (PPCC stall, 2026)
- Four Mile Bush Spruce Up (December 2025)
- End of Year Bingo with Te Radar

Innovation & Resilience

- Ag Innovation brought together 11 Innovation companies presenting to 49 people. The afternoon covered a range of topics from new trapping technology and drone applications to AI carbon mapping, satellite communications and virtual fencing using Halter collars. (April 2025)
- Negotiation of member-only deals with a number of businesses
- Ongoing partnership with CarbonCrop, identifying land for ETS registration and developing catchment level datasets to identify critical source areas and enable decision making and planning in restoration, pest control, and so on.

Education and Youth Leadership

- EnviroSchools supported in Weber and Pongaroa Schools, including Beach Day (March 2025) and Green Week (2026) and Gnome Adventures (diverse planting showcase)
- Matariki Celebrations 2025 and 2026

Environmental Action

- Ongoing monitoring of fish and stream health in every subcatchment (eDNA, water sampling,
- Fish passage remediation in collaboration with Horizons: Saltwater Weir removal; fish ladders and flexi baffles installed in Upper Akitio, Coastal Ōwahanga, and Kohiku Road.

Engagement and Communications

- Strong relationships developing with Ngati Kahungunu and Rengitane
- Visits from Minister Hoggard (April 2025) and the

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (August 2025)

- Brands and signage installed for sub catchments
- Signage on coastal dunes at Cape to alert public to Dotterill breeding and other birdlife
- Website, newsletters and facebook (statistics now tracked)

Lessons Learned and Challenges

One of the key learnings from the project was that community interest does not always translate into ongoing participation. While there was strong enthusiasm for many activities, maintaining engagement over the life of a project was more challenging, particularly where volunteers were balancing farming, work, and family commitments. In response, we shifted our approach to focus on practical, locally relevant activities that provided clear value to participants and could be delivered in manageable stages.

We also learned that measuring meaningful outcomes is more difficult than measuring activities. While we could easily report on events held, participants engaged, and projects initiated, demonstrating longer-term environmental and community outcomes requires baseline data, monitoring, and clear measures of success from the outset. This has led us to place greater emphasis on outcome-based planning and evaluation.

Building skills and capacity for the future

The project has helped build local leadership, strengthen community networks, and increase awareness of environmental stewardship, creating a foundation for ongoing action and community-led projects.

PPCC has secured additional funding through other programmes and will continue to build on the momentum created by Wai Connection. Future work will focus on supporting catchment group-led projects, expanding environmental monitoring, progressing biodiversity initiatives, increasing landowner engagement, and delivering education and community outreach programmes.

The EnviroSchools programme will continue in local schools, helping to develop future environmental leaders and strengthen community awareness of sustainable land and water management practices.

While the Wai Connection funding is concluding, the capability, knowledge, partnerships and community networks established through the project will continue to deliver long-term benefits. PPCC remains committed to supporting catchment groups and developing new projects that enhance environmental outcomes, strengthen community resilience, and improve the health of our waterways and landscapes.



Nelson | Whakatū & Tasman | Te Tai Aorere

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: Tasman Bay Guardians

TPOS Approval Date: Nelson: 29 February 2024 | Tasman: 14 March 2024

Regional Coordinator: Jude Heath - Regional Wai Project Manager (Aorere/Tasman, Whakatū/Nelson, Marlborough and West Coast)

Total EFF budget: \$2,212,919.00 (incl. GST)

Team:

Jude Heath, Rosalie Bennett, Thalassa Kawachi, Elliot Easton, Scott Keen, Melanie McColgan, Monique Patterson, Kate Radolf, Willow Milligan, Syd Eru, Kiara Love-Duke, Caz Grey, Te Puoho Stephens, Stew Robertson, Vicki Smith, Rick Field, Vicki Karetai, Cab (Caroline) Chapman

18 people employed over the life of the project (11 female, 7 male; 6 Māori, 11 NZ European, 1 other). No separate FTE figure was recorded.

Regional Advisory Group:

TDC, NCC, Marlborough DC, MPI, Beef & Lamb NZ, Kotahitanga mō te Taiao Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, tangata whenua, Tasman Environmental Trust, Fish & Game, NZ Landcare Trust, and Moutere / Motueka / Mohua / Waimea / Roding catchment group reps.

Catchment groups supported

Wakapuaka

Wakapuaka catchment group, Ngāti Tama Manawhenua Wakapuaka, Corder Park Community

Nelson city — Maitai, Stoke, Enner Glynn

Backyard Brook, Brook Sanctuary Volunteers, Friends of Maitai, Friends of Haven, Enner Glynn, Marsden Valley Community, Stoke Industry

Waimea

Waimea Catchment Group, Wai-iti Community Group, Roding Catchment Group

Moutere

Williams Road Moutere Group, Moutere Catchment Group, Beukes Bush, Black Bird Valley Group, Tasman Valley Stream Residents, Tasman–Ferrers Creek Community, Friends of Arthur Marble Aquifer (FAMA), Friends of Fields Creek

Motueka (11 sub-catchments)

Motueka Catchment Collective — Orinoco, Greenhill Road, Baton, Win Valley, Dove, Tapawera/Stanley Brook, Brooklyn Valley, Tadmor/Glenrae, Rocky River, Waiwhero, Riuwaka; South Wai Atua–Riuwaka; Motueka Delta

(Whakapaetuarā, iwi-led with TDC); Thorps Creek; Ōtuwhero

Kaiteriteri / Marahau

Kaiterere

Takaka / North Takaka (Golden Bay)

Manawhenua Ki Mohua, Friends of East Mohua, Takaka Waterways, Onekaka, Parapara Valley Environmental Group, Pearl Creek Sub Catchment

Region-wide

All nine iwi groups across Te Tau Ihu

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Catchment group facilitation
- Community Based Freshwater Monitoring
- Mātauranga Māori
- Health & Safety
- Tangata whenua engagement
- Volunteer recruitment and management
- Stakeholder engagement
- Monitoring and restoration planning
- Freshwater ecology
- Freshwater monitoring
- Freshwater and marine community education events
- Inanga habitat assessment, monitoring and restoration and community engagement
- Estuary monitoring
- Seagrass and seaweed restoration and monitoring
- Integrated catchment management planning
- Environmental programme delivery - Whitebait Connection, Nurseries in School, National Inanga Spawning Programme, Experiencing Marine Reserves and Love Rimurimu

Cofunded and collaborative programmes with:

Councils & government: Tasman District Council, Nelson City Council, Marlborough District Council, Ministry for Primary Industries, Department of Conservation

Iwi & hapū: Ngāti Tama ki Wakapuaka, Ngāti Rārua, Ngāi Koata, Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō, Te Āti Awa o Te Waka-a-Māui, Ngāti Kuia, Mana Whenua ki Wakapuaka, Manawhenua ki Mohua, Rangitāne o Wairau, Ngāti Toa Rangatira

Science & environmental organisations: Cawthron Institute, EOS Ecology, Wilderlab, NZ Landcare Trust, Fish & Game New Zealand, Tasman Environmental Trust, Trees for Survival, Kotahitanga mō te Taiāo Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust (Wellington), Project Jonah, NZAEE, EnviroSchools, Otago NZ Marine Studies Centre, Marine Matters

Funders: Lottery Grants Board, Rātā Foundation, Nelson Building Society

Community & business partners: Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve Trust, Motueka Catchment Collective, Motueka Community Trust, Waimea Inlet Forum, Nelson Biodiversity Group, Nelson Haven Group, Abel Tasman Canyons, Abel Tasman Eco Tours, Abel Tasman Sea Shuttle, Sports Tasman, Tahuna Beach Holiday Camp, Port Nelson, NMIT, Sea Week, NZ Water Safety

Training through Wai Connection

- ACE training
- Facilitating effective catchment groups
- Whitebait Connection programme delivery endorsement
- National Inanga Spawning Programme
- EMR delivery endorsement
- Wader training
- First Aid training
- NISP training
- Community engagement events
- Volunteer recruitment and management
- CBFM training
- Stakeholder engagement
- Monitoring and restoration planning
- Freshwater ecology
- GIS mapping
- Tangata whenua engagement
- Integrated catchment planning

Nelson Wai Connection Regional Summary

7,448



Native plants planted

52



Catchment groups supported

5,089



Volunteer hours donated

9,094



Tamariki engaged via school programmes

661



Events delivered

7 + 43 + 27



Focus catchment maps, monitoring plans, restoration plans

12,676



Individual participant engagements

What capability building looked like in Nelson/Tasman

Tasman Bay Guardians delivered Wai Connection | Tātai ki te Wai across Te Tau Ihu from March 2024 to 30 June 2026, working with catchment groups, community groups, iwi, landowners, schools and volunteers to build freshwater stewardship skills from Wakapuaka to Murchison and the West Coast. Groups came on board in phases — most from the project's start, a second wave from late 2024, and a final round joining through 2025 into January 2026 — so late arrivals such as Thorps Creek and Williams Road Mouere Group had only a short run before the funding ended. Delivery combined SHMAK and CBFM training, īnanga spawning surveys, eDNA and habitat monitoring, restoration planting and fish passage work, school programmes, and iwi-led kaitiakitanga initiatives, underpinned by a genuine effort to connect groups with each other, with councils, and with technical experts. When two major floods hit the region in June/July 2025, the relationships Wai Connection had built were what let Tasman Bay Guardians move fast — coordinating volunteers, funding help and replanting for communities whose riparian work had been washed out. This is an important theme nationally: strong networks around waterway restoration become strong social and emergency networks in extreme weather events, limiting and remediating damage faster.

Learning About our Local Waterways

- Spotlighting events, science workshops, īnanga spawning workshops and a seagrass flower collection day drew communities and schools into freshwater and marine ecology.

- Whitebait Connection and Experiencing Marine Reserves programmes ran in schools across the region — Hira schools went on to support īnanga spawning habitat restoration on the Wakapuaka Stream after their WBC sessions.
- Comprehensive eDNA testing and EOS Ecology Focus Catchment Map Series (FCMS) mapping gave groups in Wakapuaka and the Maitai the data to plan restoration properly, rather than guessing.

Restoration in action

- Motueka Delta (Whakapaetuarā) — collaborative restoration with mana whenua, Tasman District Council and DOC has put more than 31,000 native plants in the ground over five years.
- Friends of Fields Creek — artificial spawning habitat, īnanga planting, a rodent trapping programme around spawning zones, and ongoing fish passage advocacy.
- Pearl Creek — community events around spring-fed streams and īnanga spawning, fish passage assessments feeding into council work, and eDNA-based health assessments.
- Stoke's Jenkins Stream — a new industrial partnership between Fulton Hogan, Nelson Airport and Tasman Bay Guardians ran an “adopt-a-spot” event where businesses learned to survey īnanga eggs, install spawning habitat and plant natives; other industrial players are now asking to join.

Mana whenua-led kaitiakitanga

- Support was tailored to each iwi's priorities — stream health and inanga monitoring, eDNA biodiversity work, Whitebait Connection education, Taiao Days, rangatahi engagement and catchment planning.
- Ngāti Tama: stream health monitoring and restoration planning for culturally significant sites, including wāhi tapu.
- Ngāti Rārua: freshwater and inanga monitoring plans for Kaiteriteri and Whakapāetuarā, with rangatahi doing the on-the-ground restoration work.
- Manawhenua ki Mohua: catchment planning, eDNA monitoring and the Waitapu Community-Guided Snorkel Day.

Schools and rangatahi

- Whitebait Connection or Nurseries in Schools reached 15 schools across Te Taihū — primary, secondary and kura kaupapa Māori — through monitoring, planting, fish passage education, nursery propagation and biodiversity surveys.
- Appleby School's community clean-up pulled roughly 120 kg of rubbish off the Waimea River riparian margin.

Partnerships and networks

- The Roding Catchment Group now has a full catchment management plan, FCMS mapping, detailed nutrient monitoring and drone mapping of riparian margins and weed infestations — built up from close to nothing.
- The Motueka Catchment Collective connected eleven sub-catchments through shared CBFM and SHMAKers workshops, a common QA framework, and a Freshwater Thematic Group for cross-catchment knowledge sharing.

Lessons learned and challenges

- Early engagement with councils and stakeholders matters — limited early buy-in in Marlborough meant no delivery went ahead there at all, and Nelson.
- Geographic spread has a real cost. It ate up time and travel budget that a more place-based, hub-focused model would have used better.
- Relationships and trust take time to build. That investment is hard to measure but was essential to the outcomes achieved, and staff changes on both sides occasionally slowed things down.

- Collaboration with some partners, notably NZ Landcare Trust, was inconsistent at times — managed through regular check-ins and stakeholder meetings rather than fully resolved.
- Groups that joined late (from around November 2025) had far less runway to build momentum than those on board from day one — a strong argument for early, sustained engagement over late-stage direct
- Ongoing funding for SHMAK kits, consumables and monitoring equipment is essential — without it, groups lose the ability to keep their core monitoring going.
- Regional steering groups would improve coordination between catchment groups and stakeholders going forward.

Building Capability for the Future

While Wai Connection fundin has finished, the project's clearest success is that many groups no longer need it to keep going. The Motueka Catchment Community SHMAKers network, Manawhenua ki Mohua, Friends of Fields Creek, the Roding Catchment Group and the Parapara Community group all now have the skills, resources, partnerships and local leadership to carry on independently.

Others still need targeted help — Tasman Bay Guardians is actively chasing funding for Pearl Creek, Wai-iti, Kaiteretere, Ōtuwhero and the West Coast farmers' groups, and continues to develop collaborative restoration, monitoring and engagement work across the Waimea, Marahau, Motueka, Tākaka and Murchison catchments.

Transition work has included the Changing Waters Workshop, which brought catchment groups, iwi, councils, agencies and environmental organisations together to talk about what comes next; a survey of participating groups on their ongoing needs; resource packs, monitoring resources and partner connections handed to every group; and a round of "What's Next?" presentations and hui to lock in relationships with key contacts before the project closed.

What groups need from here varies a lot. Backyard Brook and Brook Sanctuary Volunteers will lean on Nelson City Council for technical support and data interpretation; the eleven Motueka sub-catchment groups and several Golden Bay groups need continued data QA and trend interpretation; the iwi-led projects — Motueka Delta/Whakapaetuarā, Manawhenua ki Mohua and the nine iwi groups region-wide — need continued iwi-led technical advice and support securing resources; and newer groups like Thorps Creek, Williams Road Moutere Group, Black Bird Valley Group and Tasman Valley Stream Residents need facilitation and landowner engagement to build the momentum a longer support window would have given them.

“Wai Connection funding has been marvelous in helping get the water quality data. We have managed to monitor several sites along the river and now have an annual data management plan. This will be really helpful in future planning, and really helpful to monitor our progress.”

— Amy Robertson, Roding Catchment Group



Northland | Tai Tokerau

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust

TPOS Approval Date: 14 November 2023

Regional Coordinator: Andrea Booth

Total EFF budget: \$2,181,593 (incl. GST)

Team: Alexandria Going (Catchment Coordinator, 1 FTE), Tema'u Te'ikitekahioho-Wolff (Catchment Coordinator, 1 FTE), Patricia Hawkins (Catchment Coordinator, 0.5, Yr 2), Greer Morgan (Coordinator/Connector, 0.5 FTE), Rosie Palmer (Connector, 0.5 FTE), Tracey Phillip (Connector, 0.5 FTE), Ray Downing (Connector, 0.5 FTE), Raewyn Turner (Connector, 0.25 FTE), Jahlan Hook (Cadetship, 0.75 FTE), Adam Hughes (Cadetship, 0.75, Yr 2), Roxanne Pene (Cadetship, 0.75, Yr 2).

6.0 FTE in Year 3 (approx. 7 FTE / 11 people in Year 2); 12 people employed over the life of the project, including 3 cadetships

Catchment groups supported

Oranga Whenua Oranga Tangata
Taiao
Maungataniwha Ki Rangaunu Trust
Te Paatu Marae
Haititaimarangai Marae
Ngāti Kahu
Doubtless Bay Collective
Ngāti Kahu
Parapara Marae
Me He Wai | Te Rarawa
Kaitiaki Whangaroa
Ngāti Kura
Waimahana Marae
Me He Wai | Te Rarawa

Te Roopu Taiao o Utakura
Hokianga Harbour Care
Waimamaku Taiao Group
Maromaku farmers
Ngāti Teara & Ngāti Kopaki
Ngā Tirairaka o Ngāti Hine
Waikare Roopu | Te Kapotai
Ngāti Rangi
Ngāti Manu
Te Waiariki Ngāti Korora Ngāti
Takapari Hapū Iwi Trust
Whananaki Marae
Ngātiwai
Waiarohia Catchment Collective

Kohinui Landcare Group
Tinopai Resource Management
Unit
Hakaru River CG
Kōareare River Project
Within Nature
Te Uri o Hau
Piroa Conservation Trust
Rangitane Conservation
Volunteers; Te Uri o Hua Hapū;
Te Parawhau | Rewarewa Whānau;
Ngāti Taka; Te Roroa; Tangowahine
CG

Regional Advisory Group:

Membership includes representatives from Wai Connection, Northland Regional Council, NZ Landcare Trust, Whangārei District Council, MPI & Reconnecting Northland.

Cofunded and collaborative programmes with:

- Kaipara Moana Remediation
- Enviroschools Northland
- NZ Landcare Trust
- Me He Wai
- Department of Conservation

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Catchment group facilitation - vision, goals, practical plans
- Community engagement events
- Wānanga planning and delivery
- Volunteer recruitment and management
- Environmental programme delivery (Whitebait Connection, EMR)
- Community Based Freshwater Monitoring training
- Stakeholder engagement
- Monitoring and restoration planning
- Īnanga habitat assessment and restoration
- Freshwater ecology
- Freshwater monitoring
- GIS and basic catchment mapping
- Tangata whenua engagement
- Environmental education programme and project development
- Educational resource creation
- Funding and fundraising

Training to date through Wai Connection

- BFM training
- Grant-seeking training
- GIS training (WC co-funded training)
- First Aid training
- Animal pest control (WC did not fund training)
- ACE training (WC did not fund training)
- Pest plant management (WC did not fund training)
- Underwater camera training
- Capturing content on a phone
- NZFSS Conference
- Te Tiriti training

Catchment Group members

- CBFM training
- NĪSP training
- Grant-seeking training
- GIS training (WC co-funded training)

Northland Wai Connection Regional Summary

137



People attended
planning and funding
support sessions

32



Catchment groups
supported

5,056



Volunteer hours
donated

4,522



Tamariki engaged via
school programmes

577



Events/activities delivered

9 + 2 + 7



Monitoring plans,
restoration plans, focus
catchment maps

13,804



Individual participant
engagements

What capability building looked like in Northland

Wai Connection | Tātai ki te Wai set out to increase the capacity and capability of catchment groups in Te Tai Tokerau to engage, collaborate and work towards improved catchment health. From July 2023 to June 2026, the Northland team supported 32 unique catchment, marae, hapū and community groups across eleven Freshwater Management Units, from the Aupōuri Peninsula to the Northern Wairoa — the majority hapū-led, with community hui predominantly held as marae-based wānanga.

Northland's defining objective was self-sufficiency: groups equipped to continue their mahi independently beyond the project. Delivery centred on training and embedding — freshwater monitoring (SHMAK/CBFM) with follow-

up support in the field, īnanga spawning habitat restoration (NĪSP), strategic and operational planning, and grant-seeking — rather than delivery done on groups' behalf.

From nothing to a catchment movement

At Maromaku, in the upper reaches of the Kawakawa Catchment flowing into the Bay of Islands, there was no freshwater restoration activity before Wai Connection. Patient community engagement by a WC coordinator grew into community events, Regional Council funding for a catchment story map, further funding for wetland and riparian restoration, and a local school and community now establishing long-term monitoring.

Capability handed over, not just built

“Being trained as a WBC coordinator and SHMAK trainer has meant that I will be able to contribute towards building marae and whānau capacity in a way that will directly influence the health and wellbeing of our freshwater environments within Te Rohe o Te Rarawa.”

— Lilli Kolo, Me He Wai | Te Rarawa

Through an organisation agreement with Te Rūnanga o Te Rarawa's Me He Wai team, their education coordinator was trained and endorsed as a Whitebait Connection coordinator — making Te Rarawa the provider of the WBC programme throughout their own rohe, with plans to weave in mātauranga Māori and te reo. Three cadetships were hosted through the project; all three cadets secured ongoing employment on the strength of their new skills.

Monitoring and mahi that outlasts the project

Over 500 people received SHMAK training with deliberate follow-up in the field until best practice was embedded, and multiple groups now run robust, ongoing monitoring projects to their own fit-for-purpose plans — several incorporating mātauranga Māori environmental indicators. Support with strategic and operational planning reached 137 people, converting initial reluctance ('we just want to get on with it') into collective guiding principles, clear goals and successful funding applications. The Regional Steering Group produced shared training, coordinated support and MOUs with Kaipara Moana Remediation and Hokianga Harbour Care will also outlast the project..

Lessons and challenges

- **Volunteers set the pace** — most groups are volunteer-led, working evenings and weekends. Flexibility about when and how to hold hui (including short online evening sessions, and readiness to reschedule marae-based wānanga in the event of a tangihanga) was essential.
- **Capability can leave with people** — where trained, paid kaitiaki moved on with funding changes (Te Rarawa, Te Waiariki), new staff needed retraining. Capability building is not a one-off investment; refresher training and retraining must be planned for.
- **Leadership is the strongest predictor of group success** — groups with a paid coordinator or a committed volunteer leader who can administer, fundraise and engage the community achieved the most.

- **Planning has to be sold before it can be done** — groups often wanted to “just get on with it”. Working through the value of planning produced collective guiding principles, clearer goals, and stronger funding applications.
- **Groups want to learn from each other** — training wānanga and events like the Changing Waters workshop generated renewed enthusiasm and commitment. Ongoing connection opportunities are of real value beyond the project's end.
- **Farmer and landowner engagement takes sustained effort** — time-poor farmers rarely prioritise catchment groups. Working through trusted local channels (an established farmer-led group in Bream Bay, KMR connections, hapū groups requesting support to involve their local landowners) proved more effective than direct approaches.

Building skills and capacity for the future

Wai Connection formally closed in Northland on 30 June 2026, but support continues at reduced capacity through Foundation North funding, deliberately prioritised to the groups and activities where the best conservation outcomes can be achieved. Eighteen groups have identified continuing needs, including NĪSP surveys and restoration, CBFM, riparian restoration, planning and community engagement. The current Wai Connection funded team remains contracted in some capacity, and collaborative opportunities identified at the Changing Waters workshop are being explored with partner agencies. The skills embedded over three years in communication and collaboration, monitoring and restoration, planning and grant seeking, now sit with the groups themselves. Awareness and interest keeps growing: new and emerging groups continue to approach the team, having heard what others are doing for their awa and wanting to do the same.

"We have been so fortunate to work with the Mountains To Sea / Wai Connection team. They are all knowledgeable and experienced, and very gracious with their support. We would have faced significant capability barriers to freshwater monitoring and inanga spawning mahi without their help."

- Northland region catchment group



Otago | Ōtākou

Regional Summary



OTAGO CATCHMENT
COMMUNITY INC

Provider Organisation: Otago Catchment Communities (OCC)

TPOS Approval Date: 9 August 2024

Regional Coordinator: Craig Simpson (OCC Regional Manager); Judy Miller and Rebecca Begg

Total EFF budget: \$625,600 inc gst

Team: 1 Regional Coordinator, 16 Catchment Coordinators, and 1 Admin Coordinator. Catchment Coordinator roles totalled 3.7 FTE.

Catchment groups supported

NOSLaM	Lake Hāwea	Upper Taieri Wai
East Otago	Friends Of Bullock Creek	Mid-Taieri Wai
Otago South Rivercare Inc	Cardrona	Lower Taieri
Pomahaka	Glenorchy	Otago Peninsula
Lindis	Wakatipu	Aroha Kaikorai Valley
Manuherikia	Lake Hayes	Owhiro
Teviot Valley	Lowburn	Tomahawk
Wanaka	Thomsons Creek	Open VUE
WAI Wānaka	Ida Valley	Lauder Water Users Group

Regional Advisory Group:

The Otago Catchment Community Inc. steering group brings together seven catchment group representatives from across the region with senior Ministry for Primary Industries and Otago Regional Council staff, meeting monthly to set direction and monitor OCC's work plan, effectiveness and budgets.

Cofunded and collaborative programmes with:

- Arai Te Uru Marae, Kaikorai Valley, Dunedin
- Wilderlab
- Otago Regional Council (ORC)
- Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI)
- NZ Landcare Trust
- Southern Lakes Sanctuary
- Mammalian Corrections Unit
- NMIT
- Resolution Farming (software for Otago South River Care and others)

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Farm management
- Community-Based Freshwater Monitoring (CBFM)
- Facilitation
- Stakeholder engagement
- Finance & administration
- Farm environment planning
- ACE (Aotearoa Catchment Extension)
- Monitoring and restoration planning
- Freshwater ecology
- GIS mapping

Training to date through Wai Connection

- Facilitating effective catchment groups
- Strategic Doing facilitation workshop
- Engagement / communication workshops (one-on-one and group)
- Newsletter, social media and Canva training
- Website upgrades and development
- IT training
- GIS mapping
- Predator trapping workshops (incl. NMIT predator training)
- CBFM training
- Te Reo course
- NZ Landcare Trust's Aotearoa Catchment Extension course
- CCA and NZARM conference attendance

Otago Wai Connection Regional Summary

32



Catchment groups supported

1,307



Volunteer hours donated

152



Education and training participants

15



Events/activities delivered

5



Monitoring plans and focus catchment maps created

167



Individuals reached across all activity regions

What capability building looked like in Otago

Otago Catchment Communities delivered Wai Connection across Otago from TPOS approval in August 2024 (with delivery ramping up from around October 2024) through to 30 June 2026, taking a capacity-building approach that focused on around funding catchment coordinators from each catchment group through the Direct Group Fund, upskilling groups in engagement and communications, and giving them technical tools — GIS mapping, eDNA monitoring and pest/predator management planning — to act on their own catchment priorities across up to 28 groups region-wide. Tailored mapping of soil types, critical source areas and geophysical features became a focus in the second year as groups sought data on which to base their decisions and effort.

Learning about local waterways catches on

A Community-Based Freshwater Monitoring (CBFM) training day at Arai Te Uru Marae, Kaikorai Valley, Dunedin (11–12 June 2025) drew 11 attendees — five iwi, four catchment groups, one OCC regional coordinator and one Otago Regional Council staff member — to build shared freshwater

monitoring skills. Six groups explored their catchments through eDNA monitoring, and a GIS case study in the East Otago Catchment Group (Post Office Creek) showed other groups how mapping can be used to understand contaminant risk and identify optimum mitigation sites.

Tailored training and skill development

Sixteen catchment groups received funding for a coordinator role (3.7 FTE combined) covering accounting, communications, and volunteer and community project coordination. A three-day Facilitating Effective Catchment Groups workshop in Dunedin (10–12 March 2025) drew 18 attendees from nine catchment groups, four iwi, three ORC staff and two environmental group leads — each left with a facilitation plan to run with their own group in the following weeks — while a separate Strategic Doing facilitation workshop upskilled four OCC staff.

One-on-one engagement and communications workshops ran with six groups — Pomahaka (11 Feb 2025), Upper Taieri Wai (14 Apr 2025), Lowburn (28 May 2025), Manuherekia

(25 Jun 2025), Thomsons Catchment Project (25 Jun 2025) and Ida Valley (23 Jul 2025) — covering group purpose and goals, storytelling, audience and communications planning. Wānaka, Pomahaka and Lowburn catchment groups got website upgrades and Friends of Bullock Creek got IT support; predator trapping training ran at Lowburn (24 May 2025, with Southern Lakes Sanctuary and NMIT) and in Waikouaiti (25 May 2025, East Otago CG with the Mammalian Corrections Unit); and eight catchment group leads attended ACE Module 6 (Storytelling and Engagement) in Christchurch (13–14 June 2025).

Working together for our waterways

Joint training events — Facilitating Effective Catchment Groups and CBFM — gave iwi and ORC staff the chance to be part of training and build relationships directly with catchment groups. Engagement workshops run with Paul Southworth (Turboweb Ltd and Aroha Kaikorai Valley CG) let groups share different perspectives with each other, and an additional 0.5 FTE coordinator (Judy Miller) let OCC deepen its reach and connections across the region.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

- Building relationships with mana whenua takes time and needs to be approached without time pressure — a journey still underway.
- A tight delivery window (the programme only really got going in Otago from around October 2024) made consistent follow-up difficult, especially once the coordinator left near the end of the project.
- Geographic spread means some groups haven't really engaged — understanding their specific barriers is a next step.
- Getting groups to take up training and workshop offers, and find the time to participate, was a recurring challenge; some didn't take up eDNA kits or workshop invitations, likely due to the short delivery window.
- Building a quick, clear picture of where every group stood took longer than it should have in year one; regional coordinators plan to establish this from the outset this year so groups can be steered toward their needs sooner.

Building Skills and Capability for the Future

Four key areas of Otago's Wai Connection project were designed to provide support for groups beyond the project length:

- Upskilling in engagement and communication - to help groups in the long-term
- Mapping and tech support to allow groups to prioritise and develop mitigation strategies beyond the project length.
- Providing pest management strategies and training means groups are equipped with plans and skills beyond the project length.
- eDNA support allowing groups to understand the health and values of their freshwater systems

OCC has ongoing support from Otago Regional Council and MPI, and will keep supporting catchment groups region-wide with a freshwater management and environmental enhancement focus, including:

- Continuing to build relationships with mana whenua, and grow the connections Wai Connection helped start.
- Regional coordinators will keep steering groups toward their specific needs and next steps, with earlier visibility of where each group stands.
- Embedding the East Otago GIS findings by bringing in experts to help the group and local farmers interpret the data and start projects in the priority areas identified, and starting a second GIS case study in a different catchment with its own set of challenges.
- Continued access to expert help interpreting eDNA results (e.g. via Wilderlab); further relationship-building with groups that haven't yet taken up eDNA kits or workshops, to understand their barriers.
- Continued communications and storytelling support through engagement workshops, and website development where groups are interested.

Groups are left with plans and skills — engagement, mapping and mitigation strategies, pest management, eDNA understanding — and will continue to be supported by Otago Catchment Communities to achieve their goals.



Southland | Murihiku

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: Thriving Southland

TPOS Approval Date: 14 November 2023

Regional Coordinator: Sandra King

Total EFF budget: \$649,848 (inc gst)

Team: Sandra King - Regional Coordinator / Project Manager, and Senior Catchment Coordinator co-funded managerial support alongside Richard Kyte (in-kind from Thriving Southland). 1.7 FTE Wai Connection-funded across 5 people employed in total over the life of the project.

Catchment groups supported

Between the Domes
Lower Waiau

Orauea
Upper Aparima

Te Anau
Upper Mataura

Regional Advisory Group:

Catchment Coordinators have quarterly meetings inviting main agencies in the region to catch up on what everyone is doing in the sector (DairyNZ, Regional Council, Beef & Lamb, On Farm Support). Thriving Southland as an organisation holds a regular stakeholder breakfasts open to rural professionals and others to hear updates on Thriving Southland and the work that Catchment Groups are doing.

Cofunded and collaborative programmes with:

- Regional Council - joined in CBFM and NĪSP training and are collaborating on the soil mapping project in Te Anau
- Dairy NZ - water quality specialist interpreting water quality and eDNA results
- Federated Farmers - came and spoke to a catchment group

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Catchment group facilitation
- Community engagement events
- Stakeholder engagement
- Event management
- First Aid

Training to date through Wai Connection

- Community Based Freshwater Monitoring training
- NĪSP training
- First Aid training
- Facilitating effective catchment groups training
- Comms training
- Extension training

Southland Wai Connection Regional Summary

6



Catchment groups supported

351



Volunteer hours donated

82



Education and training participants

45



Events/activities delivered

380



People reached

What capability building looked like in Southland

Thriving Southland is a farmer-led catchment collective that connects and enables farmers to protect the waterways that support their businesses with practical projects that improve water quality, biodiversity, farm resilience, and community wellbeing. Wai Connection funding in the region allowed Thriving Southland to put catchment coordination support in for some under serviced FMUs, even reviving some dormant catchment groups and creating some cross-group projects (most notably through the three group Waiau Catchment soil-mapping project and Between the Domes wetland restoration programme).

Thriving Southland's approach works by placing dedicated and local Catchment Coordinators in catchments and backing them with technical expertise — soil mapping, water quality science and landscape ecology — that groups can act on together.

Farmer-led soil mapping across the Waiau

The Waiau Catchment Coordinator brought three previously separate groups together around a shared problem, and that collaboration grew into a multi-phase soil data project, integrating datasets into high-resolution soil management unit maps to support paddock-scale farmer decisions. The joint effort was strong

enough to secure additional funding beyond Wai Connection, including significant support from a local energy company.

Water quality science reaching the paddock

A landscape scientist's presentation on how landscape characteristics shape water quality outcomes gave groups a stronger foundation for joined-up thinking, and uptake of eDNA testing pointed to real interest in understanding catchment ecosystems. The Upper Mataura group took this further, testing water quality at nine sites across their catchment and having the results interpreted and presented back to them by a water quality expert.

Schools and communities getting involved

Twenty-five Garston School pupils took part in a catchment and in-stream health workshop, and a Dipton solar-vs-generator field day drew 20 attendees with experts on hand to share facts and figures — both reaching people outside the core catchment-group membership.

Between the Domes: wetlands and renewed connection

After completing wetland enhancement projects on two farms, the Between the Domes Catchment Group reconvened over a shared meal to hear from community leaders on the value of collective ownership of catchment challenges and solutions — a sign of a group regaining momentum after a dormant period.

Lessons learned and Challenges

- It takes time to build relationships and earn the trust of catchment group members.
- Groups need to own their own direction and projects — the coordinator's role is to support and join the dots, not to dictate what groups

should do or how.

- Groups tend to start with a small, committed core and grow as members talk to their neighbours and fellow farmers — farmers are the most effective messengers to other farmers.
- Recruiting and retaining a coordinator in a relatively remote area has been the main practical challenge, at times limiting continuity.

Building Capability for the Future

- Confirmed funding through MPI for four years means Thriving Southland can keep a Catchment Coordinator in place for this FMU, guided by what each group wants for future projects.
- Catchment groups play a vital role in building farmer resilience, supporting wellbeing and embedding sustainable change. However they need consistent resourcing, such as dedicated coordinators on long term contracts, to succeed.
- Maintaining the momentum built over the past three years depends on sustained, dedicated resources and funding.
- Science remains a powerful catalyst for change, giving farmers direct access to knowledge and evidence-based information to drive their own environmental progress.
- Achieving 10–20 year environmental goals requires sustained effort and consistent funding, not a one-off push.
- Groups will continue to be supported on a ground-up basis, shaped by what each one wants to achieve.



Taranaki

Regional Summary



WILD FOR TARANAKI

Tō Tātou Taiao – Maranga Papatūānuku

Provider Organisation: Wild for Taranaki

TPOS Approval Date: 13 June 2024

Regional Coordinator: Lisa Berndt

Total EFF budget: \$1,354,917.21 (inc GST)

Team: Timara Wallace (Catchment Coordinator/Connector, embedded within Te Kaahui o Rauru), Darlene Gibson and Brett Stewart (Catchment Coordinators, embedded within Te Ihowai), Nicky Toothill (Catchment Coordinator/Connector, embedded within Taranaki Regional Council, later transitioned to a Wild for Taranaki hub-based role), Emily Roberts and Timoti King (Catchment Coordinators/Connectors, embedded within Te Kāhui o Taranaki), Rachel Eckersley (EMR Coordinator in Year 1), Ngawai Terry (Īnanga Coordinator in Year 1). 5.25 FTE in Year 1 (2024/25), reducing to 4.75 FTE in Year 2 (2025/26); 13 people employed over the life of the project

Catchment groups supported

21 groups (plus 12 schools that have been part of a regular Wai Connection programme and continued local freshwater mahi rather than 'one off' school programme delivery)

Catchment Groups

Te Kāhui o Taranaki; Te Ihowai Ltd (representing Ngāti Te Whiti and Ngāti Tūparikino); Ngā Kaitiaki o Puketapu Hapū Trust; Ngāti Mūtunga; Te Kaahui o Rauru; Pātea

Catchment FMU (Coordinated through Council); Taranaki Catchment Communities (16 member groups)

Schools

Frankley, St Joseph's Waitara, Toko, Green School Oakura, Welbourn,

Omata, Uruti, Highlands Intermediate, Devon Intermediate, Spotswood College, Woodleigh, St George's

Regional Advisory Group:

He Hononga Taiao is an alliance between Ngā Iwi o Taranaki, Taranaki Regional Council, DOC and Wild for Taranaki. He Hononga Taiao was established in August 2020 in response to DOC's 'Jobs for Nature' Covid19 response funding, as the regional partnership mechanism to process the funding. The region is committed to this on-going leadership structure - strengthening a unified partnership to achieve our region's long-term environmental aspirations. The group has acted as the regional advisory group for Wai Connection providing regional oversight of the project.

Cofunded and collaborative programmes with:

- Te Kāhui o Taranaki
- Te Kaahui o Rauru
- Te Ihowai Ltd
- Taranaki Regional Council
- Taranaki Catchment Communities (only collaborative programmes not co-funding)
- Ngāmotu Marine Society
- Puketapu Hapū Trust

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Stakeholder management & engagement
- Community engagement
- Project management
- Communications
- Catchment group facilitation
- Tangata whenua engagement
- Community events
- Environmental programme delivery for schools and community (Whitebait Connection, Community Based Freshwater Monitoring)
- Monitoring and restoration planning and implementation
- Inanga habitat assessment and restoration
- Freshwater ecology
- Training facilitation

Training to date through Wai Connection

- Inanga spawning
- SHMAK training
- Fish barrier/passage training
- Taranaki - Wellington team knowledge exchange
- Sediment issues wānanga
- Mountains to Sea wānanga
- Catchment group facilitation training
- Capturing content on a phone

Taranaki Wai Connection Project Summary

21,832



Native trees planted
(co-funded)

41



Catchment groups
supported

3,089



Volunteer hours
donated

6,434



Tamariki engaged
through 164 school
programmes

262



Events/activities delivered,
with 4,039 attendees

20 + 7



Monitoring plans,
restoration plans

12,198



Participant
engagements at
events / training

What capability building looked like in Taranaki

Wild for Taranaki is the region's biodiversity trust and the regional provider for Wai Connection in Taranaki. Wild for Taranaki operates across the entire region (all six of Taranaki's Freshwater Management Units - FMUs) supporting more than 45 member groups and organisations working to protect and enhance the unique native plants, animals and ecosystems including freshwater within Taranaki.

Our purpose is to connect and enable our members, and advocate for the biodiversity sector in Taranaki. Our shared vision is a thriving Taranaki biodiversity which we achieve through skilled, energised and connected communities leading impactful regional scale restoration.

Wai Connection funding enabled us to support and build on the delivery of existing freshwater programmes in our focus areas: the Volcanic Ring Plain FMU, Southern Hill Country FMU and the Pātea Catchment FMU.

Embedding the Wai Connection team in member organisations empowered them to lead efforts to improve the health of their focus catchments. Wai Connectors and Coordinators were placed within Te Kāhui o Taranaki and Te Ihowai, Ngā Kaitiaki o Puketapu Hapū Trust (Volcanic Ring Plain FMU), Te Kaahui o Rauru (Southern Hill Country FMU) and Taranaki Regional Council (Pātea Catchment FMU). A strong collaboration with Taranaki Catchment Communities provided a single touch point for existing farmer driven catchment groups in Taranaki.

Strengthening Community-led monitoring

Te Kāhui o Taranaki's Taiao Team, after training with the National Inanga Spawning Project's national coordinator, adapted national protocols to identify inanga spawning across 11 sites — knowledge that barely existed locally before the project — and now maps and holds this dataset on their own GIS platform.

Beyond this, Wild for Taranaki extended a broad suite of technical training to both Wai Connection partners and its wider member groups, embedding skills that will outlast the project's funding. This included SHMAK (Stream Health Monitoring and Assessment Kit) training to equip groups with ongoing water quality monitoring capability, Catchment Facilitation training to build local leadership and coordination capacity, and Catchment Management training to support groups in developing and delivering their own long-term restoration plans. Fish Passage Assessment and Fish ID training gave groups the practical skills to identify barriers to fish migration and monitor native fish populations independently, while wetland restoration training built hands-on capability in restoration activities. Together, this training programme leaves partner organisations and community groups with the technical skills, protocols, and confidence to continue monitoring and restoration work well beyond the life of Wai Connection.

Embedding as a delivery model

Rather than deliver centrally, Wild for Taranaki placed coordinators inside partner organisations. The model was validated as the right approach for building trust. Due to the Wai Connection

scope changing mid-project to not include school delivery, an adjustment was required: the Taranaki Regional Council education-based role moved to a flexible, hub-based Wild for Taranaki role in Year 2 to stay responsive to catchment groups region-wide.

Restoration at scale, with cultural knowledge woven through

Te Ihowai integrated SHMAK, Mauri Compass Cultural Health Indicators with mātauranga Māori across six monitored waterways, planted around 13,800 native plants along the Waiwhakaiho Awa, and revived traditional practices — harakeke fish passage, whakaweku, and aruhe as a monitoring tool — alongside scientific methods.

Building strong relationships

Facilitated subject-based workshops (on biodiversity, wetlands, fish migration, and so on) brought together scientists, farmers, iwi, hapū and councils in one room. Individual partnerships matured over the two years: the collaboration with Ngāti Mūtunga on salt wedge surveys grew into a funded long-term monitoring programme; the relationship with Manukorihi Hapū Charitable Trust evolved from training delivery into freshwater monitoring designed and led entirely by their own uri. Catchment group members also extended these connections nationally, joining three Mountains to Sea wānanga — in Waimarama, Akaroa and Kaipara — to build cross-regional relationships alongside the hands-on skills.

Inspiring new freshwater champions

Multiple schools across Taranaki are now independently leading stream investigations and restoration planning, having invested in their own monitoring gear. Woodleigh School's creek survey, developed with Te Ihowai and Puketapu Hapū, saw senior classes present findings and action plans directly to iwi and hapū. Landowners supported by Te Ihowai gained the capacity to implement their own planting projects, and Te Kāhui o Taranaki's spawning-site monitoring programme now runs as a community-held dataset. Te Kaahui o Rauru's rangatahi took this further still: one kura secured its own funding to establish a forest school, strengthening ties with its local marae and leading collaborative planting projects, while rangatahi wānanga on leadership and climate resilience — alongside new partnerships with Tarapurūhi-Bushy Park and The Learning Environment — are building the next generation of kaitiaki beyond the project's own activities.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

Relationships can't be rushed

Every partner organisation arrived at this independently: building genuine trust with whānau, hapū and landowners takes sustained, patient engagement rather than a fixed project timeline. Te Kāhui o Taranaki found this meant constantly balancing whānau and hapū priorities against the volume of requests from external agencies, responding with flexibility rather than forcing a resolution when roadblocks appeared — an approach that kept momentum without

compromising local relationships.

Short funding cycles, long seasonal ones

Freshwater and wetland monitoring runs on natural rhythms — spring tides, planting windows, species lifecycles — that don't bend to a funding calendar. Where project timeframes were short, this made it harder to align activity with the right season and build sustained momentum, reinforcing that early resource and equipment allocation matters as much as the funding itself.

Covering a lot of ground with one person

Te Kaahui o Rauru delivered across the whole of South Taranaki as a sole staff member, which meant leaning on Wild for Taranaki for key monitoring activities, building new school relationships to meet health and safety requirements, and finding alternative monitoring sites when access to others was lost. Early community engagement started slow and grew only through persistence — travel between South Taranaki and Ngāmotu had to be carefully planned to make it sustainable.

Two knowledge systems make for deeper understanding

Te Ihowai's experience combining mātauranga Māori with scientific monitoring methods produced a more complete understanding of freshwater health than either approach would have given alone. It also underlined that restoration doesn't end at planting — ongoing maintenance, weed control and community involvement are what make the initial investment stick.

Building skills and capacity for the future

Wai Connection concluded in Taranaki on 30 June 2026 with no direct continuation funding, but its foundations carry forward through a new one-year Biodiversity Corridors initiative, broadening the remit from freshwater to whole-ecosystem connectivity, and an emerging fish passage community of practice. Partner organisations continue at varying capacity: Te Ihowai continues monitoring across all six waterways, Te Kaahui o Rauru is exploring contracted or marae-led support to sustain reduced-capacity delivery, Te Kāhui o Taranaki have employed the Wai Coordinator on a full-time basis and Taranaki Catchment Communities has secured its own funding to continue independently.

The knowledge now held in partner organisations will continue to serve the coordinated efforts to restore freshwater health, as will the trusted relationships built. Awareness and understanding is higher not just in communities and catchment groups, but in the region's youth — some of whom are now independently leading stream restoration planning with their schools. Gear and equipment purchased will continue to be used, and resources (including Taranaki specific fish species posters, maps and plans) will continue to provide value.

“Wai Connection has provided an amazing opportunity for Te Kaahui o Rauru to develop relationships with the community through hands-on training, storytelling, and support... Through training wānanga we have built knowledge, confidence and capability, in addition to forming valuable collaborations.”

- Te Kaahui o Taranaki



Waikato

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: GoEco (Waikato Environment Centre) in collaboration with
Piako Waihou Catchment Trust (PWCT)

K Collab (Mohi Korohina, Ngāti Hinerangi)

Pokaiwhenua Catchment Group (PCG)

TPOS Approval Date: 8 August 2024

Regional Coordinator: Norm Hill / Wendy Boyce / Hera Denton/Jo Wrigley (GM GoECO)

Total EFF budget: \$1,065,262.47 (inc gst)

Team:

Regional Coordinator (0.20 FTE); 2 x FTE Catchment Coordinators; 1 x 0.20 FTE Hapū Coordinator; 1 x 0.20 FTE Communications Coordinator; Mohi Korohina; Erina Wehi-Barton (Kaimahi Tiaki Taiao, Te Kura Taiao o Te Nehenehenui); Te Aroha Drummond, contractor (Kaimahi Tiaki Taiao, native tree/plant/seed expert); Hadleigh Putt, contractor for Pokaiwhenua Catchment Trust (Catchment Coordinator)

Catchment groups supported

Piako Waihou Catchment Trust (PWCT)

PWCT has ten sub catchment groups under their umbrella. This year they have formed a new alliance with the Western Firth Catchment Group.

Pokaiwhenua Catchment Group (PCG)

PCG has six main subgroups. This year they have formed a new alliance with Predator Free Tokoroa and Hodderville Farms Ltd, to connect rural and urban communities.

Waikato (Te Nehenehenui / King Country)

Te Kura Taiao o Te Nehenehenui (rangatahi-led immersion programme — 63 rangatahi engaged over 16 years); Ngāti

Hinerangi Iwi Collective; Topehaehae River Restoration; Friends of Hawes Bush (Waharoa Weedbuster). Became the dominant Year 3 focus area.

Emerging (2026)

Nau Te Rourou / Wai Ora (new 2026 funding); other farmer-led catchment groups; community-led groups; regional hub establishment underway in Waitomo and South Waikato.

Regional Advisory Group:

Wai Connection Waikato reports to the Waikato Regional Council Integrated Catchment Management Committee, a monthly, publicly open committee of elected regional representatives; individual Catchment Coordinators report in turn to their own Trust boards, which draw on local community representatives — for example Piako Waihou Catchment Trust's board includes representatives from Dairy New Zealand, New Zealand Landcare Trust, Fonterra and the Waikato Environment Centre.

Cofunded and collaborative programmes with:

Councils & government: Waikato Regional Council, Matamata-Piako District Council, Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI).

Iwi, hapū & marae: Ngāti Haua Mahi Trust, Ngāti Hinerangi marae, Raukawa Charitable Trust / Raukawa Trust Board, Ngāti Wairere (hosted the 2026 Regional Catchment Hui at Hukanui Marae), Te Ohaki Marae, Ngāti Haua.

Catchment groups, trusts & collectives: Piako Waihou Catchment Trust, Pokaiwhenua Catchment Group, Western Firth Catchment Group, Wharewaka Catchment Group, Waiorongomai Farms, Te Waihou Puna.

Other organisations & businesses: Waikato Biodiversity Forum, New Zealand Landcare Trust, DairyNZ, Farm Foresters, Manaaki Whenua Landcare

Research, Toimata Foundation, Predator Free Waikato, Predator Free Tokoroa, Hodderville Farms Ltd, Inghams Ltd, Bittern Conservation Trust, Waikato River Authority, Uru Whakaaro – Hauraki Gulf Forum

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Catchment group leader consultation, including tangata whenua engagement
- Farm management, soil science
- Communications, management, strategic planning, event management and facilitation
- Volunteer recruitment and management (EMR)

- Fundraising, project management, Health and Safety, and science communication
- Tangata whenua, stakeholder and community engagement; social science; evaluation; community-based social marketing
- Integrated catchment management, habitat restoration and pest management

- Environmental programme delivery (Whitebait Connection, EMR, Community-Based Freshwater Monitoring, restoration planning, inanga habitat assessment and restoration, freshwater ecology, GIS/mapping)

Training to date through Wai Connection

- Whitebait Connection certification (MTSCT) — 5 in progress
- Inanga Spawning certification (MTSCT) — 5 in progress
- Wai Ora (Kaupae 3), Te Whare Wānanga o Te Awanuiarangi

- Freshwater Conservation Course, Pest Control Course, Foundation in Conservation Course and Bird Identification Course (Bay Conservation Alliance)
- Marine species and diving (The Rock, Paihia)

- Tangata Tiriti Practices and Te Tiriti o Waitangi training
- Facilitating Groups
- Maramataka and Te Whakapapa o Wai (mātauranga-based wānanga learning)

Waikato Wai Connection Project Summary

397



Tamariki engaged
through 164 school
activities

29



Catchment groups
supported

40



Events/activities delivered,
with 4,039 attendees

5 + 4



Monitoring plans,
restoration plans

What capability building looked like in Waikato

Across the two years, capacity building in Waikato took shape less through any single training curriculum than through sustained investment in a small number of long-term relationships and platforms — a rangatahi programme, a hui series, and two catchment trusts — each of which grew markedly in scope and confidence over the life of the project.

Rangatahi environmental leadership as the flagship investment

Te Kura Taiao o Te Nehenehenui, a rangatahi-led immersion programme actively supported by Go Eco through funding navigation, has engaged 63 young people over 16 years, with 25 eDNA tests and 285 wānanga participants recorded through the programme. At the final Regional Catchment Hui, three rangatahi presented their own mahi with confidence and depth across portfolios including rākau Māori, pest control, water testing, and tuna and kiwi work — a visible demonstration of what sustained, long-term investment in rangatahi environmental leadership produces.

Weaving mātauranga Māori and western science together

Training combined mātauranga Māori with practical freshwater science throughout: maramataka observations and whakapapa o te wai sat alongside tā koura construction and monitoring, SHMAK assessments, eDNA sampling and water quality testing. Participants applied both frameworks side by side — for example comparing waka-based wai observations against scientific monitoring data over successive wānanga — and increasing awareness of mātauranga Māori was voted a top-priority trend by participants at the final hui.

Connecting a vast region

The annual Regional Catchment Hui series became Go Eco's central coordinating mechanism, bringing farmer-led and community-led groups, iwi and hapū, regional council and government agencies into shared, facilitated space to map effort, name needs and identify collaboration priorities.

Scaling up established catchment trusts

Piako Waihou Catchment Trust and Pokaiwhenua Catchment Group both used Wai Connection support to scale existing work rather than start from nothing. PWCT formed a new alliance with the Western Firth Catchment Group and built an on-farm biodiversity demonstration site showing simple actions — carex planting and soft engineering works — that moved water quality in small tributaries from grade 4 (degraded) to grade 2. PCG formed new alliances with Predator Free Tokoroa and Hodderville Farms Ltd, deliberately connecting rural and urban communities.

Lessons and Challenges

- Siloed effort and limited coordination were named at all three hui — a great deal of catchment activity happens across the Waikato with too little connection between groups, reinforcing the case for a funded regional coordination mechanism.
- Short-term funding, capped at three years, is structurally misaligned with taiao regeneration timescales; groups repeatedly reach a point of momentum only to lose their coordinator or project funding.
- Governance of any future catchment collective needs to be broader than farmer-led alone — hui participants were clear that a farmer-led collective does not reflect the full scope of catchment community effort in the Waikato without genuine iwi, hapū and community inclusion.
- A gap surfaced between the vision expressed at the hui — mana whenua in leadership, diverse voices included, long-term investment prioritised — and the emerging funding decisions being made by MPI, requiring careful navigation and advocacy from Go Eco.
- Community demand continues to outpace funded coordination capacity, particularly in South Waikato and King Country, where local communities have asked for dedicated Catchment Connector roles.
- Several proposed roles — a Taupō hapū coordinator/trainer, a Ngāti Maniapoto Marae PACT Trust Wai Trainer and coordinator, and a Tokoroa trainer/school

educator role — remain subject to funding rather than community appetite, which is the binding constraint on further growth.

Building Capability for the Future

- The Regional Catchment Hui series will continue beyond June 2026 as a community-of-practice model; the June 2026 "Changing Waters" hui doubled as both closure of Wai Connection and the opening of the next phase of regional catchment conversation.
- Go Eco has offered to collaborate on the MPI-funded Waikato Catchment Collective, advocating for iwi and hapū leadership, broad community inclusion, and alignment with Waikato River Authority and Waikato Regional Council priorities rather than duplicating existing infrastructure.
- Catchment coordination will continue to be embedded within Go Eco's Pou Kai and Pou Wai programmes, including ongoing support for Te Kura Taiao o Te Nehenehenui and the wider regional environmental education hub function.
- Regional hub establishment continues in Waitomo and South Waikato.
- New and renewed funding relationships are in train for Nau Te Rourou/Wai Ora (2026) and for other farmer-led and community-led groups, alongside continued co-funding navigation for Piako Waihou and Pokaiwhenua.
- Hui participants called for dedicated, well-resourced regional coordination infrastructure — estimated by experienced practitioners at \$600,000 to \$1 million a year for full operations — plus shared knowledge platforms such as a tool library and open-access skills repository.
- MoU discussions are underway for a Taupō hapū coordinator/trainer role and a Ngāti Maniapoto Marae PACT Trust Wai Trainer and coordinator role, both subject to funding.
- Go Eco continues to advocate for a shift in language and practice from short "funding" cycles to genuine long-term "investment", better matched to ecological recovery timescales.

"I've learnt a lot of new things from these wānanga that I can apply to my real life and mahi... and you meet a lot of cool people, I'd say if you wanna go. Just go."

- Kaleina Hodgson, Wai Ora - Pureora participant



Wellington | Te Upoko o te Ika a Māui

Regional Summary



Provider Organisation: Mountains to Sea Wellington (MTSW)

TPOS Approval Date: 9 November 2023

Regional Coordinator: Liz Gibson - Regional Manager, Mountains to Sea Wellington

Total EFF budget: \$1,065,262.47 (inc gst)

Team: A maximum 7.6 FTE Wai Connection-funded across 1 Regional Coordinator/ leadership, 6 Catchment Coordinator/Connectors, 1 admin/HR, 1 finance and 1 events & volunteer management role. 22 people employed over the life of the project.

Regional Advisory Group:

Rather than run a single dedicated advisory group — Wellington is already a crowded space for this kind of structure — Mountains to Sea Wellington meets regularly with its many partners kaupapa-by-kaupapa and place-by-place; Wai Connection funding simply bought more hours to engage with these existing groups and committees on the path to better catchment outcomes.

Catchment groups supported

Kāpiti (Waikanae, Mangaone Te Kowhai, Ōtaki)

Te Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai (Waikanae Awa ki Uta ki Tai Project), Ngā Hapū o Ōtaki, Friends of Te Horo, Te Horo/Waikanae catchment group

Porirua (Porirua Stream, Kenepuru, Kahotea, Pāuatahanui & Horokiri)

7 community groups; partnerships with Porirua City Council and Ngāti Toa Rangatira

Te Whanganui a Tara Catchments

Taranaki Whānui ki te Upoko o Te Ika and Ahumai (Te Kura Takai Rangi), FOWKS, Kumutoto Stream Restoration, Ngaio Climate Crew, Chartwell Reserve

Te Awa Kairangi (incl. Mangaroa, Hulls Creek, Pareraho, Korokoro, Opahu, Waiwhetu, Haukaretu)

Pareraho Forest Trust, Haukaretu restoration project, Korokoro Environment Group, Opahu

Stream Community Group; school partnerships (Silverstream, Fergusson, Trentham, Totara Park, Wainuiomata schools)

Wairarapa (Rūāmahanga & East Coast catchments)

12–14 groups via the Wairarapa Catchment Collective (WCC); Wairarapa Moana Inanga Spawning kaupapa with Ngāti Hinewaka and Kohunui Marae; new Wairarapa Māori Taiao rōpū

Cofunded and collaborative programmes with:

• Councils & government (co-funders marked *):

Wellington City Council*, Greater Wellington Regional Council*, Porirua City Council, Kāpiti Coast District Council, Ministry of Education*, Department of Conservation*, MPI On Farm Support, Carteron District Council, Hutt City Council, Masterton District Council, Upper Hutt City Council

• Iwi, hapū & marae: Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Te Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngā Hapū o Ōtaki, Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, Rangitāne o Wairarapa, Papawai Marae, Kohunui Marae, Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, Tāmaki nui-a-rua Settlement Trust

• Science & environmental organisations: NIWA / Earth Sciences NZ, Wilderlab*, Zealandia Te Māra a Tāne,

Ahumai Ltd, Enviroschools, Conservation Volunteers NZ, Wairarapa Environmental Educators Network, Wellington Region Environmental Educators Forum, KETE, Wairarapa Dark Sky Society, WaiP2K, Wai Wetlands - Wairarapa Moana Wetlands Project, Traverse Environmental, Te Waimāori Trust, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, Sustainable Coastlines, Ruamāhanga Restoration Trust, Ruamāhanga Farm Foundation, Pukaha Mt Bruce, Potangaroa Education, Parahamuti Restoration Project, Makahuri Community, NZDF - Trentham, NZARM, Pae Tu Mokai o Tauria, Ngā Manu Nature Reserve, Morpium Environmental, Forest and Bird, EPA-NZ, Capital Kiwi

• Collectives: The Wairarapa Catchment Collective, Te Hononga ki Te Upoko, Waikanae ki Uta ki Tai

Team Capability / Expertise:

- Catchment group facilitation, from formation through to action and celebration
- Community engagement events — stream walks, taiao engagement days, spotlighting, community snorkel events, seaweed fest
- Volunteer recruitment and management
- Education programme delivery (Whitebait Connection, EMR, Love Rimurimu)
- Community-based freshwater and marine monitoring
- Cultural health monitoring programme development and training with mana whenua
- Wānanga planning and delivery

- Stakeholder engagement
- Monitoring and restoration planning
- Inanga habitat assessment and restoration
- Marine, estuarine, coastal and freshwater ecology
- GIS
- Tangata whenua engagement and collaboration
- Communications and storytelling
- Seaweed spore collection, aquaculture (lab growth) and plant-out
- Data analysis, interpretation and science communication
- Grant writing and project management

Training to date through Wai Connection

- Facilitating Effective Catchment Groups (Facilitate Aotearoa)
- Water Safety and First Aid
- Programme delivery endorsement (WBC, CBFM)
- ACE training through NZ Landcare Trust
- Child Protection Training
- Te Kuaha Te Tiriti training workshop

- Massey University Constructed Wetland Course
- ArcGIS Online Basics; ArcGIS Survey123 Basics, Creating & Publishing Surveys, and Connect
- Water quality data analysis and interpretation, and algae identification and survey protocols (with Traverse)
- CBFM interpretation training through MTSCT wānanga
- NISP (National Inanga Spawning Project) training

Wellington Wai Connection Project Summary

17,537



Native trees planted
(co-funded)

51



Catchment groups
supported

7,961



Volunteer hours
donated

663



Events/activities
delivered

25 + 5 + 5



Monitoring plans,
restoration plans, focus
catchment maps

19,173



Participant
engagements at
events / training

What capability building looked like in Wellington

Over three years, Mountains to Sea Wellington delivered tailored, place-based support for community, mana whenua and catchment groups across five sub-regions — Wairarapa, Kāpiti, Porirua, Te Whanganui a Tara and Te Awa Kairangi — reaching more than 19,170 people with 660+ events and activities, monitoring 72+ sites, and connecting more than 50 partner organisations while actively improving and iterating on their event and activity offerings to maximise community engagement in freshwater health.

Mountains to Sea Wellington made great progress in enabling community based freshwater monitoring and restoration across the region through the Wai Connection funding. New discoveries kept surfacing as monitoring matured: piharau juveniles in the Waikanae catchment; the first recorded case of lymphocystis in bullies (feeding into a forthcoming Cawthron paper); and lātia limpets in Wairarapa Moana. This is encouraging evidence that citizen science is generating genuinely new regional knowledge, not just tracking the known. The knowledge and technical outputs from this monitoring have been owned and acted on by the groups themselves.

Turning monitoring data into community-led action

Ecological health reports and presentation sessions helped

groups interpret their own data, and that understanding translated directly into action: catchment groups developed action plans, trialled permaculture-inspired restoration methods, initiated SedNET modelling to identify sediment hotspots, and secured funding for willow removal and pest control. Kahotea Stream Restoration used their own water quality data to advocate to council for faecal pollution investigation and policy response, alongside a co-designed eDNA project with Ngāti Toa.

Signature community engagement events

The "Awa After Dark" spotlighting series became a flagship format used right across the region — alongside community snorkel events, seaweed fest, and catchment open days — raising both community participation and Mountains to Sea Wellington's regional profile as a trusted local presence.

Iwi-led monitoring woven with mātauranga

Te Kura Takai Rangi, a cultural monitoring programme co-designed with Taranaki Whānui ki te Upoko o Te Ika, is now being trialled in the Kaiwharawhara, with an iwi coordinator trained to lead it. Piharau juvenile population monitoring — run with DOC, Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangatira and Ngā Hapū o Ōtaki — is building iwi taiao team capability

toward one day restoring sustainable piharau harvest. In the Wairarapa, the Wairarapa Moana Īnanga Spawning kaupapa combined mātauranga Māori with GIS site mapping across 9 potential spawning sites and 3 artificial spawning habitat installations, guided by wānanga with Ngāti Hinewaka and Kohunui Marae that have since spun off a standing Wairarapa Māori Taiao rōpū.

Schools as long-term catchment partners

Whitebait Connection connected 12 catchment groups with more than 18 schools across the region, building a more resilient, ongoing volunteer base rather than one-off school visits. Southend School has taken on continuing water quality monitoring and moss translocation for the Mangatarere catchment group, and Whareama School ran Īnanga spawning artificial habitat trials before presenting their findings back to their local catchment group.

Lessons learned and challenges

- Two coordinators were not enough for the Wairarapa — adding part-time field support in Year 3 was a major success and continues into 2026/27.
- The need has developed for a 2IC for the Regional Manager role built resilience and shared the load of staff, work programme management, reporting and delivery.
- Some groups form slowly — it takes more than a few keen individuals on board for action to be lasting; a good conversation at the café or pub with a trusted local face is often the thing that gets the wheels turning.
- Paid coordination for a group leader consistently strengthens community engagement.
- Funding continuity and volunteer capacity are the two biggest structural pressures — short funding cycles and shifting local-government settings are adding real unease in communities during an already difficult time; fixed-term contracts don't offer job security, and good people leave before new funding is secured. Organising continuation funding early pays off.
- Equipment theft at high profile sites emerged as a new problem in the project, shifting the way we use hinaki for community engagement and monitoring at some sites
- Storm damage to awa, engagement sites and travel routes — especially in South Wairarapa — has forced changes to monitoring sites, cancelled programmes, and pulled team capacity into resilience and response work instead.

- Collaboration across many schools, agencies and community groups gets a lot done, but coordinating it all has real overheads — earlier, dedicated strategic planning forums across the network would help.
- Reduced continuation funding means resetting expectations and learning to say no more often; some relationships built around specific project components may be hard to re-establish once that funding ends.

Building Capability for the Future

- MTSW have managed to fund their team for another year, largely through Greater Wellington Regional Council, the Ministry of Education and Wellington City Council, with discussions underway for longer-term funding past the 2026/27 financial year.
- A planned shift in team capacity toward more strategic, focused work — leaning into what the team does best rather than spreading thin.
- Expanding the Wairarapa Īnanga Spawning project from monitoring trials into training, restoration and the East Coast catchments, in partnership with catchment groups and mana whenua.
- New catchment expansion into Wainuiomata, Mangaone, Makara Ohariu, Pāuatahanui and Te Horo, building on fledgling rural catchment groups there.
- Transitioning established Porirua catchment group monitoring programmes to group-led leadership with as-needed training refreshers, rather than ongoing direct delivery.
- Continuing support for mana whenua partners' own taiao monitoring, restoration and events programmes, including a Porirua Īnanga spawning programme with Te Rūnanga o Toa Rangatira and an iwi waimāori coordinator role being established for Taranaki Whānui.
- New regional independence to endorse marine coordinators and refresh current coordinators' training without going through the national Trust — giving more flexibility to bring on new staff as workload demands.
- New opportunities opening through the Porirua Harbour Accord and Te Wā o Te Taiao programme, and a review of Te Whanganui-a-Tara's WIP and Te Mahere Wai to build a strategic 2-year community action plan for urban waterways.

“...Mountains to Sea not only provide scientific knowledge to our group via water monitoring but also provide leadership and structure within our group. They are also experienced in relating to community groups and have developed a valuable connection to all our members, creating a pleasant and friendly environment which encourages more people to come along time after time. With a focus on hands on activities rather than meetings, our group thrives on the leadership and knowledge that MTS provide and will be lost without their guidance!”

- Anon, catchment group feedback survey for evaluation report

5

Wai Connection: What We Learned



Supporting Regions and Groups at Different Stages

Improving outcomes for something as complex as catchment ecology and freshwater health requires a systems approach and a multi generational timescale. Policy, funding, and government activity is siloed and short term.

Jobs for Nature was an opportunity to apply considerably more funding to environmental outcomes than previously,, and the EFF was a cogent attempt to fund multiple parts of the system to improve outcomes. Wai Connection played a large role in connecting the parts within the EFF and uplifting catchment communities to be ready to engage with government policy and regulation change.

The change in government and subsequent flood of change in all levers (policy, regulations, power relations, budget, and the structure and function of government ministries and agencies themselves) had a cooling effect on action in some places, but not all places. Catchment communities with mature groups, existing plans and established support were better equipped to continue with their work to achieve their aims regardless.

Regions where this change had the most negative impact on work at the catchment group level (measured as getting on with activity planned by the group) were those where collaboration between groups, communities, agencies and other organisations was starting from a low baseline. One of the key findings of the year two evaluation - that the best opportunity for Wai Connection to have impact were in regions with good social infrastructure focused on catchment management - was expected. This benefit also applies to resilience to change: those regions with many mature groups and that gained early support from Wai Connection were much more resilient to what was perceived as a wholesale deprioritisation of environmental (and therefore catchment) outcomes.

The Year Three extension was very welcome in all regions. It countered the opinion that the government had deprioritised catchment health, allowed for a more thorough and planned transition, and allowed Wai Connection coordinators to focus on supporting groups with fundraising and resource sharing as well as hand over project knowledge, tools and resources.

Lessons Learned and Challenges



The table below shows the themes and recurring lessons reported by each region in their project summary reporting.

Theme	Regions mentioned	Mentions in Closure Reports
Relationships are the real mechanism of success, and take longer to build than delivery windows allow	Northland, Auckland, Taranaki, Nelson/Tasman, Canterbury, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay	6
Funding cycles capped at ~3 years are structurally misaligned with relationship-building and taiao regeneration	Waikato, Taranaki, Auckland, Wellington, Hawke's Bay, Nelson/Tasman, Southland	4
Capability erodes when people leave — refresher training and continuity planning are needed	Auckland, Otago, Nelson/Tasman, Wellington, Southland	4-5
Volunteer capacity is a hard ceiling — farming, work and whānau commitments limit pace	Manawatū (PPCC), Canterbury, Auckland, Northland, Otago, Southland	4
Geographic spread and travel cost limit delivery depth — favouring place-based/hub models	Nelson/Tasman, Otago, Waikato, Hawkes Bay, Canterbury	2
Outcomes are harder to measure and demonstrate than activities, without baseline data and KPIs	Manawatū (PPCC), Auckland, Northland	2
Severe weather/cyclone recovery disrupted timing and absorbed early capacity and disrupted delivery	Wellington, Gisborne, Hawkes Bay, Nelson Tasman	2
Early engagement with councils and stakeholders is essential — late engagement causes lasting setbacks	Nelson/Tasman (explicit); Auckland raises a related but inverse point	1-2
Mātauranga Māori combined with scientific monitoring gives a fuller picture than either alone	Taranaki (as a Key Learning); echoed as a Key Success in Northland, Waikato and Auckland, built in to Wellington delivery	4

Throughout the three years of the project delivery, several related themes were reported by multiple regions as having have significant impact on Wai Connection delivery, including:

Geographic scale and population density presented coordination challenges throughout the roll out and delivery of the project. Larger regions and lower populations were of course slower to socialise and implement the project, and in the case of West Coast we could not even find a region-wide delivery partner within the stage gate deadline.

Within regions and even catchments, the large distances between upper and lower catchment communities was a consistent barrier to collaborative work, even when Wai Connection was able to provide resources and coordination.

Community and group readiness has varied significantly, with some groups requiring paced, relationship-based approaches, while others needed immediate, defined actions and activities. The key lesson has been the importance of adapting support to group needs rather than applying standardised approaches.

Technical complexity has required careful balance between scientific rigor and community accessibility. Again the flexibility of the Wai Connection project meant that technical expertise could be provided appropriately: by embedded coordinators, shared coordinators, the national technical support team, other agencies and organisations and both local and national technical subject

matter experts. This has meant that Wai Connection support has ranged widely in terms of technical outputs, many of which could not be captured in our reporting data.

Good data is key to creating the right action in the right place at the right time. So many groups were unaware of the sheer number of data points already available about their catchments, and often were very keen to collect their own data to inform their decisions and planning. The many options and many technical choices required were often overwhelming for groups, who needed to outsource to others to try to limit the complexity and plan clear actions. Clear and coordinated environmental data guidance would be hugely beneficial to groups right now, as groups contemplate a dizzying array of tools and platforms available from a mix of government and corporate sources. This is something that the social infrastructure built through Wai Connection could help with, with a small amount of ongoing baseline investment in MTSC's Wai Collective community based freshwater monitoring digital tools, nationally coordinated/locally delivered programme and trainers.

Funding sustainability remains a critical challenge, particularly for ongoing technical support and for coordination on the ground. The refocusing of access-to-experts funding criteria in year 2 and the provision of operational funding only to farmer-led groups created disappointment for many groups, highlighting the need for diversified funding approaches and continued advocacy for community-led environmental work.



Support needs to be tailored and multi-channel



These comments come from the Auckland Wai Connection Manager and environmental scientist Briar Broad, but helpfully summarise findings nationally very well.

"Catchment Groups can be an effective unit of change for restoration when supported with operational funding, scientific expertise, and engagement assistance - but not just one or two of those things."

Catchment groups are highly effective in bringing communities together for catchment-scale restoration, and innovative programmes like Wai Connection are very effective in supporting them. Connection leads to understanding and stewardship, but it takes time, and funding needs to match that time requirement. Ultimately three years is only the beginning of these relationships and the work that can be achieved in supporting these catchment groups is deserving of a much longer timeframe.

Relationships are the mechanism by which genuine wins are achieved; actions must be developed collaboratively, and each catchment's unique complexities need to be met individually rather than with a one-size-fits-all approach. Urban catchments need constant reinvention of engagement approaches given busy lives, social disconnection and small volunteer pools. Volunteer

capacity is a hard ceiling and this must be taken into account with all catchment management policy and funding - even the most dedicated individuals have limits to the time that they can contribute. Environmental outcomes cannot be the responsibility of volunteers.

Finally, handover must be designed, not assumed: Year 3's deliberate transition work is what converted three years of delivery into lasting community capability. However, transition should not be used as a convenient mechanism to hide what is lost when funding is withdrawn. Ongoing training and support opportunities also matter beyond the life of any single project. Role turnover within catchment groups, marae and partner organisations means that capability built once cannot be assumed to persist — skills leave with people, and refresher training, retraining of new members, and accessible technical support are needed to keep monitoring and restoration knowledge alive within groups. Just as importantly, community members need to continue feeling supported and connected to others doing the same work: networks, hui and catchment connection opportunities sustain the motivation and shared learning that keep volunteers engaged long after formal delivery ends.

Support needs to be equitable and transparent

Wai Connection was able to achieve impact by meeting regions, communities and groups where they were in their catchment management journey and co designing actions from there. When the project was extended to Year 3 with a focus on established farmer-led, the opportunity to support new and fledgling groups was lost.

Similarly the opportunity to maintain a national network for the organisations and individuals who support catchment groups will be a loss in terms of the role modeling, mentoring and momentum that was created across catchments and even regions with Wai Connection funding. The organisations, the relationships, and the catchment groups will continue to work towards improving freshwater outcomes. But a coordinated approach from agencies and a transparent, simple and equitable funding mechanism will be needed.

At the conclusion of Wai Connection, MPI had an increased allocation of ~\$13.5 funding for operations for commercial farmer-led catchment groups. With forestry included in MPIs productive land test, depending on how much of that is used for MPI On Farm Support

administration and overhead, this means the majority of established groups will have their operational needs met. They will need to fundraise for project work and source their own scientific and professional advisors, trainers and community engagement assistance.

This leaves catchment groups outside this definition (iwi/hapu, tangata whenua who are not commercial farmers, lifestyle block owners, urban catchment groups, community groups, etc) with not only no way to access operational funding, but also no channels to be included in any national network or knowledge sharing or, more importantly, decision making or power sharing.

This comes back to a central issue that the EFF appeared to address: bringing up the capacity and capability of all those interested in catchment health to be able to engage in and inform the roll out of freshwater policy and national benchmarks. Engagement now will definitely include farmer led catchment groups which is vital, but it excludes many in the community that are directly impacted by poor catchment health and willing to engage in its improvement.



After Wai Connection

Strategic investment in community-led catchment management delivers measurable environmental and social returns that strengthen over time. As established regions transition toward independence and newer regions build capacity, the opportunity exists to support more communities through this proven pathway.

Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust will continue to seek funding for projects and people that are ready and willing to create direct positive impact on catchment health.





Wai Collective has evolved out of the continued need of catchment communities for easy access to a 'one stop shop' for freshwater monitoring data.. This initiative takes standard freshwater monitoring across New Zealand and connects local volunteers, trainers, and digital tools so everyone can work together to care for our rivers, streams, and lakes.

This is not just a new name. Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust (MTSCT) has been building this nationwide network since 2005 through successful programs like Whitebait Connection. Wai Collective takes that work further by helping local groups share their information to build a clear picture of water health across the country.

The main goal is to keep local communities connected to expert advice, scientific support, monitoring tools, and traditional Māori knowledge. It also protects the strong working relationships MTSCT has built over many years with local councils, iwi and hapū, research institutes, universities, community groups, and government agencies.

To make testing easy and accurate, MTSCT has created practical digital tools, including a simple online monitoring data dashboard and mobile apps. These tools bring to life the official Quality Assurance Framework for Community-Based Freshwater Monitoring, which MTSCT developed and manages. The system includes

clear guidelines and step-by-step instructions for training people to test water correctly, as well as simple guides on how to understand the results. Groups across New Zealand are already testing and using these tools in the field.

Even as national policies change, Wai Collective remains guided by the principle of Te Mana o te Wai - the belief that the health of the water must always come first. MTSCT is fully committed to this approach, no matter how official policies shift.

If community and catchment groups across New Zealand adopt Wai Collective on a large scale, all their information will flow into a single, shared GIS database. This map-based system will act as a trusted, single source of truth for freshwater data. Having reliable, consistent information in one place will help councils, government agencies, and community groups make smart decisions to protect and restore our waterways.

However, strong networks do not run on their own. Once government funding ends, it takes ongoing support, clear leadership, and funding to keep these groups, tools, and partnerships connected. MTSCT is actively taking on this challenge. By working together, we can build a strong, nationwide community monitoring system that improves our shared knowledge of our waterways and leads to healthier freshwater for all of Aotearoa New Zealand.







WAI
CONNECTION
TATAI KI TE WAI


MOUNTAINS
TO SEA
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