Aotearoa New Zealand 2021: A Year of Action

Year One in a Defining Decade

Today's environmental challenges are daunting. Our climate is already unstable and unpredictable, the scale of biodiversity loss is staggering, and communities around the world are suffering. In Aotearoa New Zealand—where we have always cherished our lands and waters and the gifts they give us—we've been hit hard. **We are losing species and ecosystems faster than nearly any other country.** In the face of these seemingly overwhelming challenges, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is determined to change the course. This decade will define the trajectory of our future. *Every year counts.*

2021 had its share of difficulties, but it was also a year filled with innovation, hard work, and strong partnerships dedicated to finding solutions that will slow climate change and the devastating loss of native ecosystems and the plant and animal species they support. Our accomplishments over the past year are shared with countless communities, organizations, and public agencies that refuse to be overwhelmed. We are proud to also share them with you.

Restoring Ecosystems: Kotahitanga mō te Taiao (KMTT) Alliance

A regional collaboration across 2.5 million hectares, Kotahitanga mō te Taiao is an alliance between eight Iwi, five councils, and the Department of Conservation, which TNC supports. As the managing partner of the "Restoring and Protecting Flora" project, TNC is working with alliance members to control weeds at ecologically and culturally important sites across the Buller, Tasman, Nelson and Marlborough Regions. This work will help restore native, natural ecology over large areas, including where people live. Our aim is to incorporate complementary conservation actions—such as planting and pest control—to provide more comprehensive protection of these critically important areas.

> TNC has provided the independence, coaching and global expertise that has grown our confidence to work at such a large scale. We have developed an environmental scorecard for 'what good looks like' … This tool has enabled us to identify the strategic priorities that we must pursue if we are to achieve our vision.
>
> ~ David Johnston & Martin Rodd, KMTT Co-chairs

We have commenced planning for several "at-place" projects, such as the Wairau Lagoon, an important estuary for Māori cultural and ecological values. The 3000-hectare lagoon and surrounding areas support a wide diversity of native species and is the earliest known human settlement in New Zealand. TNC is facilitating scoping work that is the first step toward restoring cultural and ecological values in these important wetlands. We are also working on wasp biocontrol to reverse the ecosystem degradation resulting from their introduction several decades ago.

Photos © Erik van Eyndhoven: View of The Gorge Creek from Takaka Hill; Wairau Lagoon

Reclaiming our Coastal Wetlands to Slow Climate Change

Coastal wetlands—such as mangroves, seagrasses and salt marshes—capture and store billions of tons of carbon from our atmosphere at concentrations up to five times greater than terrestrial forests. These areas and associated ecosystems also provide habitat for hundreds of species, such as the endangered Australasian Bittern/matuku hūrepo, and other benefits like sediment control and recreation opportunities.

Despite the numerous benefits these ecosystems provide, Aotearoa NZ has lost 90% of its wetlands. TNC New Zealand is part of a global TNC pilot to create voluntary carbon and climate resilience credits from the restoration of these coastal habitats. Carbon credits—which represent the stored carbon value of the restoration work—can be purchased by businesses looking to decrease their carbon footprint. The revenue can, in turn, support future restoration and protection, turning conservation into sustainable and profitable livelihoods for local communities.

We are incorporating six Aotearoa NZ sites in a feasibility assessment. Paired with critical restoration work that will help us reclaim these wetlands, the assessment will build a proof of concept and evidence base to bring blue carbon credits to market after 2023. Three of the sites are within the KMTT Alliance project area.

Conservation at Landscape Scale

With generous support from valued partners and funders, we launched our Conservation Coaches programme. Over the next four years, we will build the capacity of Aotearoa NZ's conservation and natural-resource management leaders to achieve conservation impact at a greater scale than ever before. By 2024, we aim to have up to 180 leaders from across the country trained in an internationally recognised conservation approach. We will also train up to 30 people as certified Conservation Coaches, who will then be able to empower even more conservation leaders throughout Aotearoa NZ, exponentially increasing conservation actions and successes. Our first workshop, delayed by Covid-19, is planned for early 2022.

Caring for the Waikato River

The Waikato River is a tupuna (ancestor), a taonga (treasure), and the mauri (life force) of Waikato Tainui and river iwi. It is the longest river in Aotearoa NZ, covering 14,260 square kilometers, or 12 per cent of the North Island's total area. Home to at least 19 types of native fish, it generates roughly 13 per cent of the country's power and all of Hamilton's, as well as 30 per cent of Auckland's water supply. But the Waikato is also the country's most intensively used river, and its waters have been heavily impacted by run-off from agriculture.

The Catchment Care Fund will enable restoration of the upper catchment and tributaries of the Waikato River, significantly reducing sedimentation and other contaminants. Restoration will also provide social, cultural and economic benefits to downstream water users. With Waikato Tainui, we commenced recruitment for a project manager to lead the Catchment Care Fund and our work in the Waikato.

Photos: Pūkorokoro Miranda blue carbon site © Carl McGuinness; Waikato River, North Island © Jeremy Bezanger

Investing for Impact: Regenerative Agriculture

Hawkes Bay is an important agricultural hub producing a variety of horticultural and pastoral products. And while erosion is a natural process, farming has accelerated the rate of erosion in Hawke's Bay and increased its impact. About 250,000 hectares of Hawke's Bay hill country is at high risk of erosion, and about 6.8 million tonnes of sediment eventually enters the region's waterways every year, detrimentally impacting water quality and aquatic life.

TNC is partnering with the Hawke's Bay Regional Council to scale up the Right Tree Right Place project. Tree planting on pastoral lands can stabilize soil, capture carbon, provide forestry revenue, and support alternative sources of income like honey production. Paired with other regenerative agricultural practices, this project will support profitable, sustainable farming that reduces waterway pollution and fights climate change.

> The results of our partnership with TNC could be profound for the region. TNC brings global investment market credibility, environmental research expertise and valuable networks to the project.
> ~ RTRP Project Lead Michael Basset-Foss

We are evaluating a $50-$100 million scale-up opportunity—through impact investing and other financing mechanisms—to understand how we can take Right Tree Right Place from a pilot phase to a programme that can be implemented across Hawke's Bay. In 2021, we launched our feasibility assessment and initial pilot.

TNC Aotearoa New Zealand Advisory Board Welcomes New Members

Dr. Helen Anderson and Mr. Lou Sanson are now members of the TNC Aotearoa New Zealand Advisory Board, joining Jo Breese, George Burrill, Donna Flavell, Tim MacAvoy, Sir Chris Mace, and Rob Morrison.

Helen was Chief Scientific Adviser and then Chief Executive at the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology until 2010 when she became a professional director.

Lou recently retired from the role of Director-General of the Department of Conservation (DoC), a post he held since 2013.

"Helen's deep knowledge of science organisations and governance skills and Lou's experience and passion for conservation will be of great value to The Nature Conservancy," said Advisory Board Chair Rob Morrison.

Returning Shellfish Reefs to Hauraki Gulf

Shellfish are ocean-ecosystem engineers, cleaning water and supplying food and habitat for fish, crabs and birds. Shellfish reefs also provide livelihoods for coastal communities and protection against climate-related storm surges and rising seas. Shellfish beds used to cover around 1,500 square kilometers of the Gulf's seabed, but the vast majority of these shellfish beds have been destroyed by dredging, sedimentation and habitat degradation. 2021 saw some significant milestones in our efforts to return shellfish reefs to the Gulf:

- In partnership with Foundation North, we launched the Hauraki Gulf Challenge Fund. Foundation North has challenged TNC to raise NZ $3 million for restoration efforts, and every contribution will be matched, dollar for dollar, by Foundation North.
- In partnership with Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, University of Auckland and The Mussel Reef Restoration Trust, we successfully deployed the first 60 tonnes of mussels into the Gulf at Okahu Bay. We are monitoring the survival and health of the restored mussel reefs to help us adjust our strategy as we move forward.

Mussels already getting to work filtering water after 24 hours in Okahu Bay © Shaun Lee

While we are proud to look back at what we have accomplished in 2021, we have critically important work before us. The research shows that if we pivot away from unsustainable practices and embrace the nature-positive tools and technologies we have today, a future where people and nature thrive is within our reach. Please join us in embracing—and working toward—that future.