

Ground-breaking blue carbon research underway in Waihi Estuary

30 January 2024

Te Wahapū o Waihi (TWOW) and Toi Moana Bay of Plenty Regional Council (BOPRC) have partnered in a progressive blue carbon research project of international significance with The Nature Conservancy Aotearoa New Zealand (TNC NZ).

The kaupapa aims to explore the carbon sequestration potential of the salt marsh restoration on Cutwater Road, a new wetland that will be developed between the Pongakawa River and Pukehina Canal, on the margins of the Waihi Estuary.

The project officially kicked off in November last year, with fieldwork now underway to measure carbon stocks and fluxes in both the existing salt marsh, and an adjacent pasture earmarked for restoration as a coastal wetland.



Photo: Project group at Pukehina Marae where a pōwhiri was held to launch the project, emphasising the importance of community engagement, cultural relevance and partnership in environmental initiatives.

Professor Kura Paul-Burke, Project Lead for TWOW, is excited about the potential impact of the kaupapa.

"Iwi have led the way in highlighting the decades-long deterioration of our estuary. This partnership marks a crucial step towards understanding and harnessing the carbon sequestration potential of our coastal wetlands. By working together, we can make significant steps in environmental conservation and climate change mitigation."

Pim De Monchy, Bay of Plenty Regional Council Coastal Catchments Manager says: "We are proud to partner with Te Wahapū o Waihi and The Nature Conservancy, and support their work to measure changes in soil carbon stocks. Not only will this data be shared with us, there are also opportunities for training and/or involvement of our respective taiao teams in data collection. At the same time, we can be actively involved in

the further investigation of the potential for Blue Carbon credits for Aotearoa, similar to schemes that already exist in Australia and the UK.”

TNC NZ Nature-based Solutions Project Manager Olya Albot says local collaborations are critical in terms of achieving global environmental goals.

“TNC is committed to leveraging our global expertise to conserve vital ecosystems. Collaborating with local partners is essential in our shared mission to address climate change and protect the natural world. We’re excited to be working alongside TWOW and BOPRC as part of a global programme looking to demonstrate how blue carbon projects can help support these critical ecosystems. Restoring coastal wetlands at scale could offer multiple wins for climate, biodiversity and people.”

This kaupapa is part of a larger national initiative looking at carbon sequestration (storage) rates across various coastal wetland types, both natural and restored ecosystems and will feed into international research to establish whether blue carbon credits are viable. Scientists have shown blue carbon ecosystems can store significantly more carbon than forests—mangrove swamps can store four times more carbon—which is why halting their destruction and restoring and protecting them has become an international priority.

If the rates of sequestration are as high as in other countries, TNC is investigating whether ‘blue carbon’ could be introduced into the ETS, or whether a similar credit scheme could be introduced to raise funds to support the restoration and maintenance of further saltmarsh wetlands or offset the lost revenue from retiring pasture to create wetlands.

Professor Kura Paul-Burke says the collaboration offers a unique opportunity for knowledge exchange, community involvement, and potential advancements in carbon credit systems.

“As the project progresses, we expect to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which coastal wetlands may be able to mitigate climate change impacts. This iwi-led project seeks to provide benefits for our environment and collective mokopuna of tomorrow.”

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About Te Wahapū o Waihi

In June 2021, a collective of five iwi from the Waihi catchment joined forces to form Te Wahapū o Waihi and address the immediate need to improve the health of the Waihi Estuary. Once a source of plentiful kai for iwi and communities, the estuary is now

identified as one of the most degraded in Aotearoa. Te Wahapū o Waihi is committed to restoring the mauri of the estuary, so it will once again be a source of plentiful kai for our communities, whānau and mokopuna for generations to come.

More information: www.waihi-estuary.iwi.nz/

About Bay of Plenty Regional Council (BOPRC)

Toi Moana Bay of Plenty Regional Council's mahi guides and supports sustainable development for our region. Council manages freshwater, land, air and the coastal environment as well as public transport and economic development.

Balancing enjoying and using this environment now with protecting it for future generations, Toi Moana also has a responsibility for the economic, social and cultural well-being of the region and its people.

The Bay's plentiful region has more than 308,000 residents, 39 Iwi, 18 offshore islands, 12 lakes, eight major rivers and a rich landscape of geothermal systems, volcanoes, mountains, harbours and estuaries.

BOPRC serves 145,000 ratepayers and 308,000 residents across the Bay of Plenty.

About The Nature Conservancy Aotearoa New Zealand (TNC NZ)

The Nature Conservancy Aotearoa New Zealand is an organisation of dedicated staff, scientists and members advancing effective, lasting conservation in New Zealand. It is part of an international organisation working in more than 70 countries around the world.

TNC NZ's priorities are native species and habitat, healthy oceans and coasts, climate resilience and regenerative agriculture, and building the capability of the sector. It works in partnership with local communities, iwi, universities and central and local government. With their expertise in ecosystem conservation, TNC has been at the forefront of promoting the importance of blue carbon ecosystems in mitigating climate change impacts. And is working with global firms specialising in nature markets. As part of the national project, TNC is working on unlocking the carbon storage potential of blue carbon ecosystems in New Zealand.

More information: <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/asia-pacific/new-zealand/stories-in-new-zealand/blue-carbon/>