

Water of life Project Kaiwharawhara

By Dave Hansford

The Kaiwharawhara Stream doesn't just link suburbs. It's become a common thread for community groups, local government - even corporates - as it teaches us that while acting locally is fine, the big picture is every bit as important. And everyone's brushstroke counts.



Frances Lee is a dynamo, that's plain. New hip or no. We're walking and talking along the length of the Kaiwharawhara Stream, in "her" Trelissick Park, in the heart of Wellington's west-central suburbs.

As always, she's brought along her trusty grubber, and for today, a friend's mongrel called Kiwi. Not a weed escapes her practiced eye, and there are frequent halts to pluck some prickly invader from the stony river soil.

“See this one, it’s an *Impatiens* of some kind. Lovely flowers, but awfully difficult to get rid of.” She’s exasperated too, by the rolling carpet of *Tradescantia* – wandering willie. “All you can do is roll it with a herbicide, but it’s such a big job.” And then there’s the blackberry, tumbling down in thorny thickets from the railway line above. And sycamores, and willows, and Darwin’s barberry. I almost didn’t have the heart to point out the bone seed sprouting beside the old, now destroyed, armament magazine. “That’s a new one on me,” she sighs, plucking a leaf for future reference.

As we walk, she points out too, the various sewage terminals along the way, great grey concrete bunkers with attendant rusty pipes and foetid smell. “It’s so awful that we have to have these in the park,” she says.

But the real blow comes further up the gorge, where someone – teenagers by the look of the bottles left behind – has been holding some kind of bush-camp-come-party. Frances has known about this practice for some time, and she was happy to let them enjoy the place in their own way, but now there’s a blackened fireplace complete with burnt signposts.

She’s horrified. As a long hot summer closes, the park is as dry as it’s going to get. The thought of it all going up in smoke is something she can’t bear. She’ll be onto the council first thing in the morning.

Out comes the rubbish bag, and we spend a few minutes picking up the debris.

In the end, I’ve got to ask; “Do you really feel that you can win against all this?” She pauses in a way that tells me she’s thought about this in times of doubt. “When it gets too bad, I take a walk through the nicer parts of the park,” she says, “Where the native trees are doing well.”

You’ve got to wonder where the park would be without this fierce advocate/watchdog/warden. Frances is the secretary of the Trelissick Park/Ngaio Gorge Working Group, a loose alliance of locals drafted from various Resident’s Associations who want to see “The whole area restored to a nice wilderness.”

Which is all part of a much bigger plan, because all along the length of the Kaiwharawhara Stream, different groups are looking after their own patch. Nothing illustrates the nature of nature better. Each group’s success is largely dependent on how the others are doing their job, because the stream is a long, linked ecosystem in its own right. As Frances is quick to point out, the chippie packet thrown on the footpath in Karori eventually ends up in the sea. If it gets past her grubber.

In the upper headwaters, the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary is restoring its wetlands, re-introducing native waterfowl and looking at removing pest fish and algae. As the stream meanders through Wilton, it receives the tender care of the Otari-Wilton’s Bush Trust and Hosts. Below here, it’s joined by the bubbling Korimako, which is looked after by the

Ngaio Progressive Association as it tumbles down from the northern suburbs of Broadmeadows, Khandallah and Ngaio.

Now the two streams fall as one through the often steep reaches of the Ngaio Gorge, where Frances and her team are busy with their weeding and streamside replanting.

As the stream nears the sea, its monitored by Greater Wellington, where it eventually flows through a replanted, rehabilitated shoreline next to the Interislander Terminal. Beyond those groups with an intimate association with the stream are another tier of organisations with a more general, often advisory, involvement; the Wellington City Council, Forest and Bird, the Wellington Botanical Society. Then there are the Corporate sponsors like the Interisland Line and Port of Wellington.

Gael Fergusson is the Wellington City Council officer who looks after Wet and Wild, the Council's bush and streams restoration plan. She says the plan is a synthesis of the aims and aspirations of all the parties involved in restoring Kaiwharawhara Stream.

Two years ago, she says, she began looking at streams management. "It became apparent that the various groups working on Kaiwharawhara Stream were working in isolation, and struggling to put their case to council as a vision. A lot of the people were older - tired of beating their heads against a brick wall.

"So I got the groups together and said 'OK, do you want to start putting together an overall vision for the stream; where you want to go, and how the various projects you're working on fit together?"

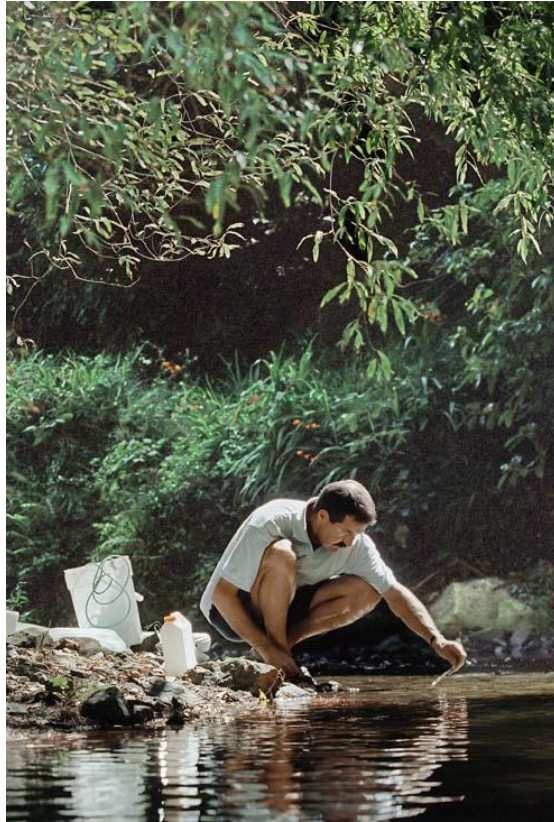
They did, and the brick wall fell down. Wellington City Council adopted the vision, making Kaiwharawhara a five-year priority. Gael hopes that Wet and Wild will now serve as a framework for other community-based stream plans in the region, as well as supporting a Greater Wellington habitat inventory and a future City Council Reserves Plan.

While, inevitably, there was less funding out of the plan than many would have liked, everyone agrees that the project now has a coherence and profile it would never have achieved otherwise.

And the scheme has become something of a model of how community groups and local government can help each other with the same objective.

All along the Kaiwharawhara, at eight different locations, volunteers are taking water samples to help Greater Wellington take the pulse of the stream.

Four times a year, Warrick Fowlie takes his measuring gear to the streamside in Trelissick Park, taking its temperature and noting turbidity, flow, conductivity and pH. He also keeps an eye out for any insect larvae and other invertebrates, which, he says, are key indicators of the stream's ability to support life, and therefore, its vitality.



He's helped out by other volunteers (One is an entomologist), before passing the data on to Greater Wellington, where John Holmes is collating a database to inform any future action on the stream.

A Resource Policy Advisor, John says the plan has other objectives beyond simply returning the Kaiwharawhara to health. Foremost, he says, is "Raising the idea that stream health is a product of what happens throughout the entire catchment."

It's not just about landscaping, says John. It's emphasising the point about an ecological corridor, and "The link between stream health, stream ecology and the streamside environment."

A major bonus, he says, was the way the projects raised community awareness about the stream. "People walk past and see the volunteers taking water samples. They want to know what's going on. In this way they learn about the stream and its values."

He says the efforts of the community are making a more complete picture possible, one that Greater Wellington would be stretched to take on its own. "It's important to have sampling at a series of sites," he tells me. "If you just sample water at the bottom of the stream, all you find out is that you have a problem somewhere in the stream. We have to be able to narrow that down."

A report filed by Ian Boothroyd in June last year found that, as urban streams go, the Kaiwharawhara isn't doing too badly, mainly because it flows through some relatively unmodified streamside habitats like the Karori Sanctuary and Otari-Wilton's Bush.

Which is not to say there isn't work still to be done, says Gael Fergusson. "There were spots, like just below the landfill - which has obviously modified the stream hugely - which needed cleaning up, and there were barriers to fish movement (which the Council has since removed), but on the whole, it was actually pretty healthy for an urban stream.

But Frances Lee says the price of stream quality is eternal vigilance. She's eyeing urban developments "Which affect us mightily" like the 140-house Harbourside development with obvious unease.

"Practically all that stormwater is going to be flushed into the Kaiwharawhara Stream," she says. "We dread to think what's going to happen.

"I don't think there's enough work being done on the impacts of these developments."

To that end, Frances is a semi-permanent fixture at planning hearings and the like, to the extent that people enquire after her health if she doesn't show up. "My name is mud at the council," she says, in a not-quite-joking sort of way.

But in spite of the bad days, she never lets go of the big picture. "We're responsible for passing on to the next generations what we received - if not more," she tells me, "In better condition than it was when we got it.

"If we don't do it, it'll never be done."