

Community involvement in urban biodiversity restoration

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ABSTRACT

An estimated 3000 community groups are involved in 3000 restoration projects throughout New Zealand. This is a recent movement that has come out of nowhere — from ordinary people doing extraordinary work.

The New Zealand Ecological Restoration Network is a service provider jointly owned by 300 of these groups to create a giant 'DIY recipe book' and to also make these restoration initiatives visible. A database-driven 50 000 page website (<http://www.bush.org.nz>) is used by members to store and share information. Print publications, field days and personal contact are all ways to share experience, raise standards and overcome isolation.

Community initiated and driven conservation efforts are the way to win hearts and minds.

BACKGROUND

In New Zealand there are an estimated 3000 community-driven conservation and restoration efforts. Estimates indicate that there are an equal number of community groups, schools and iwi involved in practical action on the ground. Most of these efforts have spontaneously begun in the last decade. While these conservation efforts are spread over a wide geographic area, most face similar challenges, including:

- Dealing with government type agencies
- Obtaining funding and resources
- Overcoming isolation
- Building up a body of experience
- Maintaining self-reliance.

The New Zealand Ecological Restoration Network (NZERN) was established in 1997 as a response to these challenges, to aid:

- a) **Conservation:** to aid conservation, restoration and protection of New Zealand

- native plant and animal communities
- b) **Community:** to engage all interested individuals, community groups and other organisations to participate in this work
- c) **Networking:** to build a shared self-help, non-partisan network made up of many individuals and independent organisations each with their own sites, nurseries, ideas and experiences
- d) **Resources:** to create and distribute useful resources where there is a common need, including nursery materials, tools and equipment, electronic, broadcast and print media, and educational resources.

ABOUT THE NEW ZEALAND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION NETWORK (NZERN)

NZERN is a non-profit, community-driven organisation dedicated to sharing knowledge and experiences about native habitat protection, management and ecological restoration in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

¹ Editor's note: Mike Peters is also President of the Addington Bush Society Inc. In 1994, a group of eight neighbours purchased a block of land and planted 2500 trees on this and their surrounding back yards. The bush area they created, known as Eel Creek Reserve, now has QEII Covenant status and contains plants that historically grew in the area. The success of this project, and the challenges faced, provided the incentive to create the New Zealand wide support network of restoration groups described here.

It has become a broad, membership-based network of individuals, families, whānau, farmers, community and conservation groups, youth clubs, schools, iwi, local and central government organisations, native plant nurseries, and pest control contractors. All are involved in the hands-on protection and ecological restoration of native habitat throughout New Zealand.

NZERN also has the active support and membership of many agencies who support community led conservation efforts, including DOC conservancies, regional and local councils, Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (QEII Trust), the World Wide Fund for Nature New Zealand (WWF-NZ), New Zealand Trust for Conservation Volunteers (NZTCV), Coastal Dune Vegetation Network (CDVN), the New Zealand Landcare Trust, and many others.

However, it is the community groups that run NZERN. Christchurch participants include, for example, the Addington Bush Society Inc., Bexley Wetland Trust, Travis Wetland Trust, and the Otamahua / Quail Island Ecological Restoration Charitable Trust.

NZERN is organised into regional branches and is run by volunteers from 200 organisations when they are not busy knocking-off possums or planting native trees.

SERVICES FOR MEMBERS

NZERN provides co-operatively owned support services that save duplication and scarce resources. This allows more planting, pest and weed control to get done onsite. The main emphasis is, and should always be, on undertaking the practical restoration work itself.

Most of the resources are shared via the web, but NZERN also organises and participates in field days, seminars and distributes resources for local restoration projects. Put simply, NZERN provides an informal network for swapping tips.

Because New Zealand is geographically spread over wide latitudes, a key issue was the difficulty in being able to readily share

ideas. Although the Internet is no substitute for meeting in person or distributing publications, it is an ideal way to store and retrieve information that is accessible by all. The NZERN website (<http://www.bush.org.nz>) has become a major tool for effective communication and establishing the national network.

The database-driven website, called Pipi, contains some 50 000 web pages and has taken 20 volunteers more than 12 000 hours to construct. NZERN has become overwhelmed by its success, and the website is currently undergoing a major redevelopment to meet the needs of some 35 000 visitors and 380 000 hits per month.

A comprehensive system is being developed that can support thousands of registered users. It will have many modules, including GIS mapping, a content management system, and groupware and decision support tools. These web-based tools will help a user choose the most appropriate plants for restoration projects and find out about controlling weeds, propagating native plants, and monitoring changes in native habitat (Peters 2004).

The new website will have a magazine format, and NZERN also hopes to provide web hosting for members.

Since the network was first established, NZERN have published and distributed Restoration Directories. These 'regional phone books' list the following information:

- Site information of all known restoration projects
- Contact details of restoration groups and organisations involved
- Native plant nurseries that ecosource
- Maps
- Pictures
- Resources
- Supplier advertising.

The directories are generated from the Pipi database, produced in 16 regional editions, printed and mailed out by the NZERN National

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Office in Christchurch. These useful resources are widely distributed and enable people to contact each other directly.

Other publications include Bush Telegraph (a seasonal newsletter mailed by post to all members of NZERN) and Kereru (a weekly email newsletter about ecological restoration in Canterbury for all community participants and organisations).

Additional services provided by NZERN include:

- A national Help Desk providing telephone assistance and a referral service putting individuals, groups, and organisations in touch with one another
- A national training program
- Organising field days, which enable training and sharing of information by participants
- Free plant materials for school and community nurseries in some areas
- A small video production service managed by the Bush Telly Trust.

In order to provide the best support possible, NZERN is keen to strengthen existing relationships and foster new linkages with agencies that actively support community led conservation efforts.

REFERENCES

Peters, M. 2004: Community-led conservation in New Zealand gets organised! *Australasian Plant Conservation* 13(3): 23. Available at <http://www.members.bush.org.nz>.