

Developing a greening strategy — a community effort in partnership with a City Council

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ABSTRACT

Greening Palmerston North, protecting the City's ecological areas, and improving the associated amenity values and recreational use of these natural areas have been key issues raised by the community of Palmerston North.

The need for a Greening Strategy for the City of Palmerston North emerged from the community network of environmental groups (Environment Network Manawatu or ENM), which identified the lack of an overarching strategy to provide direction, coordination, and support for the range of activities already happening that contribute to greening the City and biodiversity.

The Palmerston North City Council and Environment Network Manawatu agreed to develop the 'Greening Strategy' in a partnership approach. It was completed over a time period of two years and involved a broad brush Ecological Assessment, open days and workshops with private landowners of ecological areas, as well as workshops with community groups and individuals interested in 'greening' the City.

The Greening Strategy is a non-regulatory approach to addressing biodiversity issues in the Palmerston North City area and while biodiversity is seen as the main focus for the Strategy it also recognizes that recreation and amenity objectives contribute to greening the City and needed to be encompassed in this strategy. Both the City Council and ENM have agreed to a range of actions that they will be responsible for and will report on each year. This partnership will increase capacity and effectiveness. The strategy will be an incentive for the City Council to develop smarter practices for the environment to increase biodiversity and by the community to be more involved in enhancing green spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Greening the City, protecting Palmerston North's ecological areas, and improving the associated amenity values and recreational use of these natural areas have been key issues raised by the community. The unifying theme has been a desire to see the City improve its biodiversity and quality of green spaces. This Greening Strategy ties together the different issues and proposes ways of addressing them.

The need for a Greening Strategy for the City emerged from Environment Network Manawatu (ENM). ENM is an umbrella organization for the City's environmental groups. A key issue identified by ENM members was the lack of an overarching strategy to provide direction, coordination and support for the range of activities already happening that contribute to greening the City.

The Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) and Environment Network Manawatu agreed to develop the 'Greening Strategy' in a partnership approach. This strategy is the result of combined efforts of the Council and all the member groups of Environment Network Manawatu. It was completed over a time period of two years and involved the completion of a broad-brush Ecological Assessment, open days and workshops with private landowners of ecological areas, and workshops with community groups and individuals interested in 'greening' the City.

This Strategy is a non-regulatory approach to addressing biodiversity issues in the Palmerston North City area and contributes to the National Biodiversity Strategy and the Regional

Biodiversity Strategy. The Strategy seeks to coordinate the diverse range of existing activities, which improve biodiversity, beautify the City, or enhance opportunities to experience the natural environment. While biodiversity is seen as the main focus for the Strategy it also recognizes that recreation and amenity objectives contribute to greening the City and need to be encompassed in this strategy.

This Strategy will be a major mechanism for Palmerston North City Council in achieving sustainable development for the city. The principle of Sustainable Development, which encompasses economic, environmental, social and cultural spheres, highlights the importance of integration between the plans and policies of Council (e.g., PNCC 2004a).

This paper provides an outline of the basic process followed in developing this Greening Strategy for Palmerston North City. Included is an understanding of why the community environmental groups started to drive this development and how its partnership with the City Council developed.

ENVIRONMENT NETWORK MANAWATU INC

The Environment Network Manawatu (ENM) consists of a representative from each of the local environmental member groups.

I joined the ENM as the Coordinator in 2003 and this Network is the community partner to the Palmerston North City Council. My main experiences came from teaching, sociology and as a Royal Society Teacher Fellow assessing wetlands.

A City Councillor and a Strategic Planning Manager in council were instrumental in setting up the ENM in 2001. They were also both chairs of local environmental groups and in a position to see issues that had been developing over the years, including the need for:

- An umbrella organisation for Palmerston North's voluntary environmental groups
- An overarching strategy and vision
- Direction, coordination and support for Greening.

There was an urgent need for the different environmental groups in the city to know what each other were doing, as there had been cases of duplication, for example when one group planted an area on the Saturday and another group arrived to plant the same area on the Sunday! Another reason to set up the ENM was the need for some groups to have access to expertise. And lastly, there was a need to encourage some bigger picture thinking, to minimise ad hoc activity and to override being at the mercy of each newly appointed set of Councillors, especially when the Council's three-yearly environmental direction was so uncertain at that time.

These Chairpersons of the ENM initially got together with three other environmental groups to set up the collective with an enthusiastic post-graduate student, who became employed as the first part-time Coordinator in 2001. The collective and the strategy planners saw a need for a Greening Strategy, which they immediately initiated. The inspiration for this originated from national and international efforts to improve urban greening. The collective became an Incorporated Society and also decided to improve communication and continuity by developing a website that went on-line in 2003 (<http://www.environmentnetwork.org.nz/>).

However, in contrast to most other cities, there remains no Environmental Centre or Environmental Education Officer employed by the city.

BACKGROUND

When I moved to Palmerston North in 1990 from Dunedin, I thought the Manawatu lacked natural beauty like I had been used to, and there wasn't an obvious feel of the environmental character. Visitors to the Manawatu have often also shared this perception with me. There are hills, not too distant, but they looked bare, except for a few smallish dark patches of bush. There is the Manawatu River, strong-flowing and in places swimmable, but unattractive willows and weeds bordered it. You could walk beside the river for a short distance on a bridle track but the only direct access I found at first was through industrial shingle mining areas.

So for my mental health I walked each weekend in the small Ashhurst Domain forest area or the Manawatu Gorge walk, where I could enjoy the wonderful feel of these ‘real’ natural environments.

After I discovered more of the history of the Manawatu region and of the past efforts to clear the swamp forests and to drain the wetlands, I started to understand why I had those first impressions.

The Manawatu Plains are one of the most heavily modified ecosystems in New Zealand (like most other lowland ecosystems in this country), with only 2–4% of fragmented, indigenous remnants left. When you know the history of the Manawatu region you can understand that most of it is rural farmland using the once rich, silted floodplain soils now cleared and drained.

Furthermore, many of the past leaders that have been on Boards and Councils have also been landowners, farmers and businessmen who appreciated the economic values of this rural landscape and encouraged further clearing. A similar situation occurred in Christchurch City.

As a consequence of this legacy, there are now no remaining native bush corridors within or around the city, nor leading from the neighbouring native bush area of the Tararua Ranges into the city area.

This greatly reduces the potential for any present-day terrestrial indigenous biodiversity and makes it difficult for residents to experience and actually value it. The few bush areas that have been retained are either public esplanades, now with both native and exotic plants, or are on private land.

For me, this is the missing feeling in the Manawatu. I have come to appreciate that this area is also a place that has many other great benefits and is well worth the efforts to achieve an improved environmental native base.

PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

The main partner is of course the Palmerston North City Council that will be responsible for the Greening Strategy as an official document.

The officers are supportive of Environmental Network Manawatu, hosting the Coordinator and contributing towards the salary. They have also fully supported the actions in developing the Greening Strategy — providing facilities, financial support and expertise.

Whilst you may have heard of ‘Easy Living’ and ‘Easy Green’ promotions of the region, past greening of the city has really been through the achievements of particular individuals (the right person in the right place for a certain time). The last 20 years has seen most streets tree-lined and some bush areas planted-up and attracting native birds back into the city, judging by the number of bellbirds (or korimako; *Anthornis melanura*), kererū (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae*), New Zealand falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*), silvereyes (*Zosterops lateralis lateralis*), tūī (*Prothemadera novaeseelandiae novaeseelandiae*), and even kākā (*Nestor meridionalis*) seen in recent times.

It was always stated at the outset that any environmental strategy would have to take a non-regulatory approach in dealing with biodiversity issues for the area, similar to what is happening in other regions of New Zealand. It is ironic that the groups in the ENM prefer to avoid the use of the word ‘biodiversity’ when making first contact with the public. ‘Biodiversity’ is a term poorly-understood by some members of the general public and may foster negative connotations.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

After much discussion, the concept of a Greening Strategy was launched in July 2001 at the first workshop, where the public gave their views on the general areas of environmental concern, enhancement, values and future desires. Two further workshops followed during 2002, from which the ideas that emerged gave the direction for the Greening Strategy. The themes that arose from the three workshops were:

- Restoration and enhancement
- Corridor development
- Amenity and beautification
- Opportunities to experience the natural environment

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- Lack of information about ecological processes and areas in the City.

Restoration and enhancement includes restoring new areas and enhancing existing native bush. Developing healthy corridors encompasses bush, aquatic, riparian, bird and wildlife corridors, both out of and in the city, also through amenity and beautification, accepting the plethora of exotics and encouraging natives.

As there were interest groups involved in walking, fishing, cycling, horse riding and of course, tree planting, it was very important to include the outdoor experiences and activities that can assist greening in the city. These groups recognised that parks have been set-aside in new subdivisions for sports and recreation and that native planted corridor walkways continue to be developed. However, it was hoped that the Greening Strategy would eventually assist the development of areas just for conservation.

These workshops also highlighted the lack of any localised ecological database that could be used to order priorities.

ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

The Council prepared the brief and financed a broad-brush Ecological Assessment in November 2001. An ecologist from Boffa Miskell (a New Zealand-based consultancy specialising in environmental planning, landscape and urban design, and ecology) undertook the rapid assessment of the Palmerston North area (Boffa Miskell 2002). Ecological areas were identified in the assessment using a methodology of aerial photograph analysis and field reconnaissance using roadside and riverside views and high vantage points. Private land was not entered.

Letters were sent to all landowners of ecological areas advising them of the study and general findings. The letter outlined the Ecological Assessment and invited landowners to be involved in future workshops on how the City should be greened and to indicate if they were interested in participating in any programmes that emerged from the strategy.

This assessment process took six months and provided the Council with the data that emphasised a need for the Greening Strategy. The main findings of this assessment are:

- A total of 80 ecological areas are identified — representing between 12–15% of the total area of the City
- The total ecological area is heavily dominated by large areas in the northern Tararua Ranges and without these high country areas the City would have less than 1% of its total area or 300 ha as ecological area
- The majority of ecological areas are forest (44%) followed by scrub and shrubland (27%) and wetland (12%)
- The number and size of remaining ecological areas shows clearly the pattern and extent of habitat loss in the City
- The parks and reserves network is of key importance to ecological restoration in the City.

The Ecological Assessment identified 80 ecological areas and the importance of the catchment area of the Turitea Dam of some 3500 ha. The Turitea Dam catchment is mostly native bush and helps produce 'Palmy Pure' water to drink in Palmerston North (judged the best in the country by the New Zealand Water & Wastewater Association in 2003), and lies in the northern Tararua Ranges. This area is included within the city boundary but is mostly inaccessible to the public and therefore its value is largely unappreciated, except for those who have walked the Sledge Track opened by the Prime Minister early in 2003, as well as hunters, who probably do not want it to be more accessible.

The reserves, of which only a few contain native plants, and parks, that are mostly for recreation, are managed by the City Council and provide the green areas in and around the city and are appreciated by the general public.

Several ecological weaknesses were also identified. What stood out clearly was that the Tararua Ranges holds some 93% of the ecological area of the Palmerston North City Council — and the 300 ha of indigenous areas remaining are mostly small and narrow areas with full exotic edge effects, reducing any chances of sustainability.

The remaining wetlands are mostly cut off from their natural inflow by large stop-banks or engineering efforts and do not benefit the land or river in times of floods.

I have been told that 20% is the habitat area required to sustain any indigenous biodiversity in a given area (Helmut Janssen pers. comm. 2003; referred to by Boffa Miskell 2002, p. 37 as 'current New Zealand ecological thought'). So having only a 2–4% base in the Manawatu Plains where most people live, is a big ask of any endeavour (this figure excludes the Tararua Ranges, which is outside of the Manawatu Plains Ecological District). The Regional Council has prioritised some significant indigenous remnants, as High Value Conservation Areas but given the low overall percentage, every little bit in the Manawatu is significant.

The Ecological Assessment Report also makes a range of recommendations in relation to Council's land and management techniques. These include:

- Develop a priority list for corridor restoration and depleted eco-domains
- Policy development and guidelines to protect against further fragmentation and work towards a desired vision
- That a generic Ecological Management Plan for the City's parks and reserves be developed
- Systematic monitoring to provide an accurate database.

The recommendations included support for developing a Greening Strategy. The report also identified a need for more planning and guidelines to connect remnants and to develop management plans for retaining remaining remnants.

A Turitea Reserve draft management plan was approved late in 2003, but it was recommended that the northern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*) sites also need protecting from plant and animal pests.

Whilst the Palmerston North City Council has

developed some residential management guidelines to assist with developing local landscapes, there is a need for a bigger picture, to protect both urban and rural distinctive values.

Most of these recommendations are also included in the Greening Strategy, still in draft form¹.

DEVELOPING THE GREENING STRATEGY

Timeline:

- 2001: Community direction workshops
- 2002 August: The Ecological Assessment report presented to PNCC
- 2002 September: PNCC endorsed the development of the Greening Strategy
- 2002 November: Community and landowners workshops
- 2003: ENM group representatives workshop.

The more recent workshops developed the themes from the earlier workshops and asked for direction and priorities for the next few years for Palmerston North City. The main concern to protect biodiversity was to have both plant and animal pest control.

The community advanced the 'Mountains to the Sea' concept (not original but apt) for corridors to be developed from the areas of bush in the ranges through the plains to connect the small-scattered remaining remnants of bush. Although these are outside of the urban area, it was considered that Palmerston North could be the key to this corridor development and restoration (Fig. 1).

The information from the workshops was developed, in 2003, by the ENM members and Council officers to prepare goals, objectives and possible actions to include in the draft Strategy.

What stood out for me from the workshops that I was involved in, has been the commitment shown by the groups and the desire to move on from the frustrations with the City and Regional Councils' past environmental attitudes.

¹ Editor's note: since the time of writing, the draft Greening Strategy has been replaced (January 2005) by an interim Greening Strategy, available at <http://www.environmentnetwork.org.nz/91.html>.

The ENM member groups have acted in a collaborative way and focussed their communication to work on developing the Greening Strategy and putting the past, personalities and differences aside. In other words, looking ahead and working on what can be done with what is available.

OBJECTIVES AND SCHEDULE OF ACTIONS

Four Greening Strategy Goals were developed:

1. **Restoration and enhancement** — ‘To increase the health and extent of native biodiversity.’
2. **Corridor development** — ‘To develop an interlinking network of corridors throughout the city area that connect key places and spaces.’
3. **Experiencing the Natural Environment** — ‘Improve the range of opportunities for people to experience the natural environment while minimising impacts.’
4. **Amenity and beautification** — “To enhance the amenity of the city by increasing planting in order to create ‘green’ cityscapes.”

The first goal, restoration and enhancement, remains the main goal and over-rides all of the others. The second goal of corridor development has needed a bit of explaining to fully show the potential of combining some ecological and recreational goals. Experiencing the natural environment includes being a volunteer conservationist. In relation to the final goal, amenity and beautification, if you look at Palmerston North from the 5th floor of a building where I took this photo recently (Fig. 2), you can appreciate how green the city is, even if it is dominated by exotics. The native wildlife has adapted to some of these exotics judging by the number and variety of native birds making use of the gardens and street trees. This data on bird sightings was gathered from a 2003 Forest and Bird survey, and certainly demonstrates local improvements in biodiversity.

A major strength of the Greening Strategy is that it is not just a document stating there will

be improvements in the local environment; it specifically lists more than 75 actions that are intended to be achieved, or furthered, in the next five years. These have been itemised as having joint ownership between the City Council and members the ENM groups. It is exciting to read and is giving an incentive for new developments as well, both in the Council and with the groups. In other words, it has already gained momentum and other organisations such as Horizons Regional Council (Manawatu-Wanganui Regional Council) are coming on board along with DOC, Wellington Fish and Game and the local Crown Research Institutes.

ENVIRONMENT NETWORK MANAWATU RESTORATION GROUPS

To promote and acknowledge all of the voluntary effort (e.g., Fig. 3), the ENM groups and the theme areas they are working on are outlined (Table 1), although there is at times more overlap in some of their activities than indicated.

Twenty-two groups are current members of ENM, and there are many other non-ENM and service groups involved in the activity areas. All of the groups encourage other community groups and neighbourhood input, increasing the environmental stakeholder base.

All of the ENM groups are separate stakeholders in the city and have their own voice. They are also well supported through the network, which encourages collaboration.

COMPLETING THE PROCESS

The draft Greening Strategy document went out for consultation in July 2003². Although the Community-Council process and the Greening Strategy are not finalised, the strategy goals are spoken about by some Councillors and groups as an already agreed upon direction for the future of the environment in Palmerston North. Activity is continuing to occur with more enthusiasm and new projects being developed.

² The interim strategy that was subsequently produced is supportive of the fact that the Greening Strategy process is already being actioned but it is going to be a part of the 2006 review of the LTCCP by the Council.

Section 2: Nature Friendly Environments — Communities Making it Happen

To achieve the goals of the Greening Strategy, the ENM member groups need the support and funding from the Palmerston North City Council and in return, the City Council benefits from the voluntary seed capital and drive from the community. The effort made in developing the Greening Strategy has anticipated the process being invited by the Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP; PNCC 2004b) and though Councillors may be concerned about potential cost, any work requiring funding will still have to go through the normal annual processes of local government.

The next step of ENM is to encourage the neighbouring District Councils and Regional Council to have more active partnerships and Community-Council environmental efforts.

Whilst the need for an increase in indigenous biodiversity is the uppermost goal, most Palmerston North residents have had more exposure to exotic species (as have the residents of many other cities in New Zealand). This is the starting point any ENM project development has to consider when inviting the public to realise the value of increasing our own indigenous species.

Table 1 Environment Network Manawatu groups and their activities.

ENM Group	Activity				
	Restoration	Restoration with PNCC support	Amenity	Outdoor experiences	Advocacy
Ashhurst Action Group	+	+	+	+	+
CityScapes	-	+	+	-	-
Cycle Aware Palmerston North	-	-	-	+	+
Green Corridors	+	+	+	+	-
Manawatu Estuary Trust	+	-	-	+	+
Manawatu Forest and Bird	+	+	+	+	+
Manawatu Tree Trust	+	+	+	+	+
Open Space Action Group	-	-	+	+	+
Palmerston North City Environmental Trust	-	-	-	-	+
Pit Park People	+	+	+	+	+
Te Ao Turoa	-	-	-	-	+
Te Ngahere Environmental Education Trust	+	-	+	+	+
Urban Care	+	-	+	+	+
Walkways Advisory Group	-	+	+	+	+
Kahuterawa Back Track	+	+	-	+	+
Massey Environmental Group	-	-	-	+	+
Kiwi Conservation Club	+	-	+	+	-
Keebles Bush Memorial Trust	+	-	-	+	-
Conservation Corps	+	+	+	+	-
Ashhurst Domain Wetland care group	+	+	-	+	+
Running on Empty	-	-	-	-	+
Green Bike Trust	+	-	-	+	+

The Greening Strategy will hopefully lead the City in the right direction and ENM is confident that the value and long-term benefits will be appreciated in the future, if not now. Time will tell.

I would like to finish with words from a song that honours the physical features of the Manawatu and asking what our direction will achieve. It is a song that I wrote for the Ashhurst School and I think it sums up all that is really needed to do.

REFERENCES

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TE AO HURIHURI

I am your river, flowing through your land and feeling changes	Ko au tō awatapu Kei te hotu te manawa
Do you better understand the balance of your needs with Mother Nature?	Mārama āna ngā tūmanako o Papatūānuku?
These are the changes that I want to feel	Me rongu taku ngākau ki tōna whakaora
I am your hills, looking down at you and seeing changes	Ko au ngā pūtaka maunga E tiro iho i te whakaora o te ao
Are you more caring, more giving and more loving with each other?	Kia pupuri te aroha me te manaaki
These are the changes that I want to see.	Ko ēnei āku moemoeā mō te ao hurihuri.

Section 2: Nature Friendly Environments — Communities Making it Happen



Fig. 1 Treed cityscape taken from the Central Business District, Palmerston North City. (Photo: A. Leng).



Fig. 2 The diversity of trees seen growing in the City looking towards the Tararua Ranges. (Photo: A. Leng).



Fig. 3 Forest and Bird conservationists ranging in ages from 20 to 92 about to plant in the Keebles Bush link corridor. (Photo: A. Leng).