

Significant Natural Areas Newsletter



Cape Campbell from Mussel Point

Significant Natural Area

Council implemented its volunteer SNA programme in 2001 to help landowners protect identified SNA sites. For 20 years, this volunteer programme has assisted with advice about site management and funding of fencing, weed control and native plantings to safeguard sites for the long term, with funding already provided to over 150 sites across Marlborough.

2023 SNA Project Numbers

Number of Sites: 778

Total Area: 75,145ha

Number of legally protected sites (QEII & DOC covenant): 155

Funding:

- \$200,000 spent by Council on managing threats in SNAs in 2023.
- \$1.6M spent by Council improving SNAs since 2003.

- \$4.6M total spent by all parties for the improvement of SNAs (landowners, Government and Council).

SNA Assistance Programme

Council funding is available to help landowners to protect identified SNA or wetland sites. We can help with advice about site management and funding of fencing, weed control and native plantings. Together, we have completed over 156 projects since 2003, but there are plenty more sites that would benefit from active protection to safeguard them for the long term.

During 2019/20, we passed a major mark with the accumulated amount spent since 2003 on improving SNAs through the Landowner Assistance Programme, reaching \$3 million. In 2023 it has reached \$4.6M, with roughly an even contribution between landowners, Government and Marlborough District Council. It's an impressive total and shows the voluntary commitment towards caring for these important

sites. The assistance programme continues to achieve milestones and is oversubscribed each year.

SNA Funding Opportunities

Protection of SNA sites generally adds value to the property and often improves the adjoining grazing management options as well.

Financial assistance is available towards the cost of protecting SNAs through the Council's Biodiversity Landowner Assistance Programme.

- Depending on the specific SNA site and its management objectives, protection work may include fencing, weed control, restoration planting and animal control. This is agreed between the landowner and MDC, with the input of an ecologist where needed.
- Council will also contribute towards the cost of covenanting through the QEII National Trust.
- A simple "Landowner Agreement" document is prepared setting out the works to be completed. Contractors are generally used but landowners can contribute labour as part of their contribution (i.e., fencing work).

Saying Farewell to Geoff Walls

Geoff Walls has been with the programme since its inception in 2000 when he worked with Philip Simpson and Paul Millen to map and describe the districts SNAs. In recent years, he has spent more time monitoring existing SNAs than describing new ones.

"Geoff's memory of sites has never ceased to amaze me as he recalls with apparent clarity the shape, condition and composition of sites he hasn't visited for over a decade," said Council Biodiversity Coordinator Mike Aviss.



Geoff Walls looking for rare plants on limestone in South Marlborough

"Geoff hasn't worked for the programme since 2021 and I have missed our forays together into the backcountry of Marlborough. His technical expertise and communication skills have been critical to the success of the programme since Day 1. We wish him very well," Aviss said.

Middlehurst: Restoring Nature in Awatere's High Country

It all started with a discussion at the Marlborough Environment Awards Field Day at Muller Station in 2016. Willie and Sue Macdonald were interested to know what special native species they had on their farm, Middlehurst, and what they could do to better look after them. Since then, Council and the Macdonalds have been working together to enhance the indigenous biodiversity that the survey found on their farm.



Mt Lookout. Middlehurst Station covers 16,550 hectares of land, with elevations reaching 2500 meters.

Queen Elizabeth II Trust also became involved and there are now two covenants registered on the property, a wetland near the homestead and a forested gully in Middlehurst Stream. They have been fenced and other restoration work, such as predator trapping and weed control, are under way.

Whiskers Wetland Covenant, named after the family cat, is 1km long. It is spring fed and slowly flows to the Awatere River. The entire catchment of the wetland is now fully fenced to exclude stock. Over 1ha of willows have been controlled and native vegetation is recovering.



Whiskers Wetland

As a result of the success witnessed to date in Whiskers Wetland, Sue is driving a plan to do the same with other wetlands on the property. They are planning to fence wetlands and plant the edges, as well as undertake weed control where necessary.

This high-country station has a severe climate with hot, dry summers followed by long, cold winters. Planting is difficult and despite their efforts they have struggled against drought, frost, rabbits and deer. Regardless, they have not given up and have recently decided it is time to enlist some professional assistance.

The wool marketing company, NZ Merino, which markets their Middlehurst wool clip is also onboard and sponsoring some of the work.

The SNAs on the farm support a diverse array of interesting and sometimes threatened plants. Middlehurst Gully has a forest of mountain totara, kowhai and broadleaf, along with pink broom which is endemic to Marlborough. If you look carefully, you will also find diminutive mistletoes, *Tupaia antactica* and the coral mistletoe, *Korthalsella clavata*, as well as the threatened vine, *Muehlenbeckia ephedroides*.

The property also includes the Winterton Wetlands, one of Marlborough's most significant wetland areas which is high up on the Inland Kaikōura Range.

Protecting and Enhancing Marlborough's East Coast

The coast from Marfells Beach south to our district boundary at Willawa Point near Kekerengu has been an important area for restoration, identifying issues related to the 2016 Kaikōura Earthquake. Coastal dunes are a nationally threatened ecosystem, as are limestone bluffs.

Aligning with Council's SNA programme review in 2016, this coast was identified as an important corridor for migrating birds to travel on their annual migrations. It joins many rivers and stream mouths, along with other wetlands. It also provides a habitat for plants and animals, many uncommon, endemic, or threatened.

Nationally, coastal areas are often highly developed. What remains is often home to endemic and threatened plants and animals. Shore birds include those that live and breeding there year-round, along with those that winter over on the coast after spending their breeding season elsewhere.

The coastal area running south of the Awatere River mouth to Wharanui is roughly 50km long. About 80% of this coastline has been recognised through the SNA programme for its important native species and ecosystems.



Marlborough Boys College students on the East Coast, planting earlier this year.

It became apparent that very little damage had occurred to SNAs as a direct result of the earthquake. Instead, the uplift caused during the quake had enabled access for cars and utility vehicles like never before, exposing wider beaches and reef areas. This activity alone has caused the most damage to these SNAs.

After extensive public consultation and hearings, a vehicle bylaw was created to promote the recovery of the natural environment and ensure the safety and enjoyment of the East Coast for all beach users. The East Coast Beach Vehicle Bylaw 2023 came into effect on 1 July, restricting vehicle access from the Awatere River mouth, south to the Marlborough District boundary near Wharanui. Under the new bylaw, ATVs and UTVs are allowed, with restrictions, south of Marfells Beach to Cape Campbell Airstrip. This Bylaw will be reviewed after three years.

As a result of local concerns, the East Coast Protection Group was established by landowners and has set up extensive predator traplines along the entire coast between Marfells Beach and the Waima/Ure River. It has also planted areas and sought to control marram. The group works closely with the SNA programme on much of this work.

Restoration work on the coastal SNAs has included control of marram grass and wilding pines and planting of indigenous sand plants – spinifex, pingao, sand tussock, sand coprosma, ngaio, akiraho, akeake and *Muehlenbeckia astonii*.

For more information about the vehicle bylaw, visit marlborough.govt.nz/your-council/bylaws/east-coast-beach-vehicle-bylaw-2023

National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity (NPS-IB)

In July 2023 the Government released the National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity (NPSIB). As part of New Zealand's response to biodiversity decline, it provides direction to councils to protect, maintain and restore native biodiversity on land (terrestrial) ecosystems. While the policy statement aims to provide increased clarity and direction to Councils on their roles regarding native biodiversity, we are still working through the implications of what this means for our existing SNA programme. Marlborough has had a voluntary SNA programme since 2000, with landowner funding available since 2003 for protection projects.

For more information about the new Government policy statement, visit the Ministry for the Environment website at environment.govt.nz

Myrtle Rust in the Marlborough Sounds

By Kristen Gerard

First discovered in New Zealand in 2017, the wind-borne nature of myrtle rust has helped it spread quickly and it has been seen widely through the North Island and the Top of the South.



Myrtle rust on Ramarama.

All native myrtle species are at risk – pōhutukawa, mānuka, ramarama, swamp maire and all the various rata species, along with introduced plants such as feijoa and guava.

The disease affects the young, soft, actively growing leaves, shoots and stems of the host plant. In severe cases, this disease may cause the leaves of the plant to become twisted and die.

Research is currently being undertaken to identify methods to manage and slow the spread of the disease. At this stage, there is nothing that can be done, although managing our weeds and pests to help support natural resilience may offer some help. Additionally, the advice is to report any wild sightings of myrtle rust to the iNaturalist website and then leave the plant alone to prevent the unintentional spread of the disease. If infection is found within the garden you may consider removing the infected plant.

For more information, including how to safely remove an infected plant, visit myrtlerust.org.nz

Contacts

For more information about Council funding assistance, our SNA programme, your SNA, or to remove yourself from receiving this newsletter, please email us at:

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