



MARLBOROUGH
DISTRICT COUNCIL

2025-2026

Summary Report on the Results of the Significant Natural Areas Project





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Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

Through the Resource Management Act 1991 and provisions in the Marlborough Environment Plan (MEP), the Marlborough District Council has a role in maintaining and protecting indigenous biodiversity and significant natural areas in the Marlborough region. Since 2001, for 25 years now, the Council has implemented the “Significant Natural Areas” (SNA) project, which has involved extensive field based ecological survey work and a subsequent protection and monitoring programme.

This report provides a summary of results of the SNA project over the one-year period from July 2025 to June 2026. It summarises the results of:

- Ecological survey.
- Environmental protection work carried out through the SNA Landowner Assistance Programme.
- Significant Natural Area monitoring programmes.
- Community outreach; and
- The East Coast Vehicle Bylaw.

Ecological Survey Work

Since 2001, extensive field based ecological surveys have been carried out on private land through large parts of the Marlborough region. The majority of the work was carried out from 2001 to 2009 and since that time properties have been visited opportunistically.

There are a total number of 974 sites (807 Significant Natural Areas and 167 Recommended Areas for Protection) currently mapped and identified in our database, an increase of 8 sites in 2025/26.

Managed Site Protection Programme

Established in 2003, the Landowner Assistance programme has contributed funding and expertise to protect and improve biodiversity in 195 SNAs over 23 years.

There were 37 projects funded in 2025/2026 financial year. Of these, nine were new projects initiated during the year and 20 were ongoing projects.

This programme to assist landowners to improve the condition of their SNAs resulted in the investment of \$517,781 into indigenous biodiversity on private land in 2025/26, of which Council paid about 56%. While five of the projects were for restoration planting and the other 32 were for pest control, the five planting projects used 54% of the funding.

Total Funding Contributions for Biodiversity Protection Projects on Private Land 2025 – 26 & (for comparison) 2024 – 2025 (GST Inclusive)

	2025/26	2024/25
Marlborough District Council Funding	\$196,776	\$230,337
Central Government	\$74,000	\$31,950
QEII National Trust	\$2,350	\$12,500
Landowners	\$181,166	\$269,914
Total	\$454,292.00	\$544,701

Monitoring

Monitoring of sites tells us if we are achieving gains and gives direction to the Protection Programme. Monitoring in 2025/26 resulted in visits to 40 Managed sites and 41 Unmanaged sites. This made for a total of 81 sites monitored on 36 properties for the year, spread over eight Ecological Districts.

Results from this monitoring were encouraging as all but two Managed sites were in Fair or Good condition with a trend over time of Stable or Improving for all but one. The Unmanaged site results were less impressive but also welcome with all but 8 out of 41 in Fair or Good condition, however a larger percentage 11 out of 41 were Deteriorating in some way. Possums and old mans beard vine were the greatest threat that we observed. Some of these sites are now being managed.

Seed collection

Contract seed collection was carried out between February and May 2026 with the usual focus on collecting kahikatea, tōtara and matai seed for local planting projects. It was sent to a number of commercial nurseries, including Selmes, Morgans Road, Ngati Kuia and Titoki. Additional seed was collected from spinifex and pingao for beech planting and is being propagated by Selmes Nursery and Riverside Horticulture.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Significant Natural Areas Project reached a major milestone this year, with a quarter century of service to the Marlborough community. The project in Marlborough continues to grow with new sites being added every year and 2025/26 was no exception. Much of the recent growth was on properties owned by landowners already in the system, although every year we also engage with new landowners and get to visit and describe new properties which often harbour significant areas of indigenous biodiversity. Every year we reconnect with landowners who have sites already described on their properties, but which haven't been monitored since they were first described in the early 2000's. Landowners are, generally speaking, very proud of those special places in their care and regard them as important. They are also keen to invest in them, especially if Council goes into bat and matches that investment, and they get some direction on what they are best to invest in. The Landowner Assistance Fund has been a very important way to encourage a lot of positive biodiversity action out there in Marlborough.

In 2025/26, we achieved a higher level of monitoring than previous years, with 81 sites visited in the district, compared to 69 last year and 31 in 2023/24. Over 60% of these were in South Marlborough, which has the highest level of threatened habitat types and the lowest percentage of indigenous vegetation cover. Our Landowner Assistance Fund assisted with about equal number of sites in North and South Marlborough.

Collaborating with other organisations is also a good way to get greater value for Council dollars. Most years we have been doing work with the Marlborough Sounds Restoration Trust undertaking animal pest control and wilding pine control in the Sounds, to the benefit of SNAs. We are also working with the South Marlborough Landscape Restoration Trust to help in their programme of wilding pine control on private land, when there are landowners with SNAs who are contributing to the work. In Molesworth, we have joined forces with Ecan, DOC and, more recently, LINZ to eradicate willows from the Acheron catchment. In Para Swamp we have joined forces with Fish & Game to control weeds in the wetland. All these projects are linked to SNAs and Significant Wetlands.

There has been a continued involvement with landowners and the community on the east coast, south of Marfells Beach. A high percentage of this coast is Significant Natural Area, Outstanding

Natural Landscape, Nationally Important Wildlife Corridor and habitat for Threatened and Highly Mobile species.

The Council implemented the East Coast Vehicle Bylaw in 2023 after an extended period of consultation with iwi and the community. This has seen most of the coastal area from the Awatere River mouth to the Waima/Ure River designated vehicle free. A 9km section, from Marfells Beach to the Airstrip south of Cape Campbell, is open to ATVs and UTVs, with a number of conditions. South of the Waima/Ure River mouth to the MDC Boundary at Willawa Point is designated as open to all vehicles. The Bylaw has been challenged in court and has had mixed success with our monitoring showing that vehicle tracks are still widespread along the closed areas of the coast and banded dotterels are still declining dramatically.

Despite this, we continue to restore indigenous biodiversity along this precious coastline with our successful planting programme, which is restoring coastal forest as well as helping to create indigenous dunes on the beaches uplifted in 2016 Kaikoura earthquake.

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1. Introduction

The Significant Natural Area project was established in 2001 to enable the Marlborough District Council to meet its obligations under section 6(c) of the Resource Management Act which requires that, in relation to managing the use, development and protection of natural and physical resources, the protection of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna, shall be recognised and provided for as a matter of national importance.

The Council of the time decided to meet these obligations through a proactive but non-regulatory programme to identify significant natural areas and offer landowners support to protect and enhance these areas. Integral to this approach was a commitment to hold the property specific information confidentially rather than scheduling it for regulatory purposes.

A working group was established to assist the Council to manage the programme. The group included Councillors and staff, Department of Conservation staff, three landowner representatives and the local QEII representative. The working group has played an important role in guiding the direction of the project over the years.

It is safe to say that the project has been an unbridled success with a high level of buy in from the Marlborough community. Over 25 years a huge number of sites have been identified and a good number of them have gone on to be protected legally with covenants and physically through the Landowner Assistance Programme.

The Marlborough Environment Plan requires that Significant Natural Areas are identified based on set criteria that must be met for a site to be considered Significant.

Information collected through the Significant Natural Area surveys is held in a database and is only reported publicly in a general sense, as the information is confidential to landowners. The two main ways the information is used are, firstly, to provide a regional overview of significant natural areas and biodiversity on private land in the Marlborough region, and secondly, to provide a basis for developing protection programmes with landowners interested in proactively managing and protecting these areas.

Central Government released the National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity (NPSIB) on 7 July 2023, and it came into effect on 4 August 2023. The NPSIB was then amended in December 2025. The framework for identifying and managing Significant Natural Areas (SNAs) remains within the NPSIB, although the Government has separately suspended the requirement for councils to implement new SNA provisions while broader resource management reforms are progressed. Marlborough District's long-standing SNA programme will therefore need to continue responding to national policy direction and legislative change as these reforms are implemented.



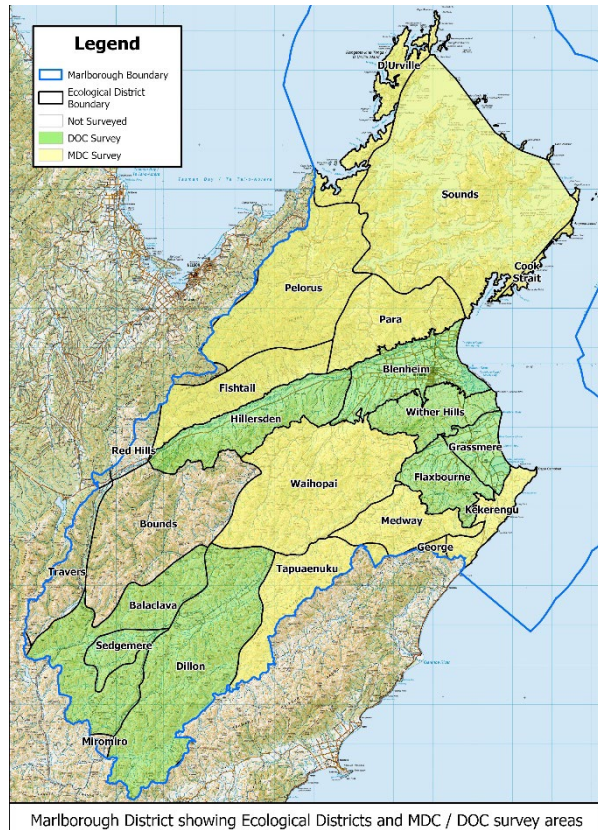
Figure 1: Virgin beech/mixed podocarp forest in Rai Valley.

Part A: Ecological Survey Work

2. Field Based Ecological Surveys – Background and Overview

Since 2001, extensive field based ecological surveys have been carried out on private land throughout large parts of Marlborough District. This work has been approached as a partnership with landowners, who have participated voluntarily. Through the results of the ecological survey work, it has been possible to analyse the extent and type of ecosystems remaining and the severity and types of pressures these remaining areas are subject to.

Ecological districts have been used as the survey units. The Marlborough District Council carried out the majority of the survey work overall (Kekerengu, Medway, Waihopai, Tapuaenuku ecological districts in South Marlborough and Para, Fishtail, Te Hoiere/Pelorus, Rangitoto ki te Tonga/D'Urville, Sounds and Cook Strait ecological districts in North Marlborough – (see yellow shaded areas on map). However, the Department of Conservation also carried out a substantial part of the survey work as part of the Protected Natural Areas (PNA) survey of the Wairau and Molesworth ecological regions, which included eight ecological districts in South Marlborough - Grassmere, Flaxbourne, Wither Hills, Blenheim, Hillersden, Balaclava, Dillon and Sedgemere, (see green shaded areas on map).



There are still some gaps in coverage in some of the districts which we have already surveyed, especially in the Te Hoiere/Pelorus, Waihopai, and Flaxbourne, which are being addressed as opportunity allows.

As each SNA is visited for monitoring, the opportunity is taken to reassess the boundary to ensure it still reflects the extent of significant habitat. The inaccuracies mainly stem from the quality of mapping that was available 25 years ago, compared to what is used today, however they also show where changes in land use have allowed some sites to expand and recover, or where landowners have decided to grant access which was previously withheld.

This ecological survey work has resulted in a large amount of information being collected. It provides both a regional scale overview of the extent and state of biodiversity resources on private land, and a more detailed property scale assessment which is useful for implementing practical protection measures such as fencing and pest control. While the emphasis has been on terrestrial vegetation and habitat values, wetlands and some waterways have also been assessed.

2.1. Summary of Results – July 2025 to June 2026

2.1.1. Property Surveys

Nine new sites measuring 1241.3ha were added to the database this year. They were on six properties in Flaxbourne, Kekerengu, Tapuaenuku, Pelorus and Sounds Ecological Districts.

While monitoring SNAs in Rai Valley, we were given access to previously unsurveyed parts of the property including an outstanding site, a hidden gem holding dense tall old growth podocarp forest which had survived the colonial era of native forest clearance. This added 194ha to the database.

Another visit to monitor an existing SNA on a Sounds property uncovered one of the most important, and previously unknown, swamp maire stands in the region. This threatened plant is at its southern limit here and while we were not strictly surveying, we were able to use LiDAR to help pinpoint where swamp areas were likely to be in the beech forest and visit them specifically to locate these trees. Another limestone outcrop hiding in plain view in Kekerengu ED was visited and found to be holding six threatened plants, and another three plants endemic to Marlborough.

The cost to Council of the surveys and reports was \$9602.50.



Figure 2: Old native forest with regenerating matai forest below, on the farm edge.

2.1.2. Results

The tables below show the summary of ecological results from the Significant Natural Area surveys on private land for both South and North Marlborough in the 25-year period from July 2001 to June 2026. These do not include the additional wetland sites that have been identified through the 2010-13 Wetland survey (described below), unless they have had a full SNA assessment report completed and been assigned an SNA site number.

Table 1 and Table 2 show the total participation rates and overall results from 2001 to June 2026 in South and North Marlborough respectively. Using ecological district units, the tables show; the number of sites identified, the number of sites legally protected, the combined area and percentage of total land area of all the identified Significant Natural Area sites, and the percentage of Department of Conservation land in each Ecological District.

As of July 1, 2026, there has been a total of 974 sites (807 Significant Natural Areas and another 167 sites identified by DOC during the PNA or Tenure Review surveys of Wairau and Molesworth Ecological Regions). Together, they cover 140389Ha of land in the Marlborough Region. This is an increase of 1241.3ha of additional land that was added to the database of significant sites this financial year.

2.1.3. Westland Survey 2010 – 2013

From 2010 – 2013 Council carried out a further project to identify regionally significant wetlands in Marlborough. The project involved desktop identification followed by notification to all affected landowners and follow up field visits on request. These have been scheduled in the Planning Zone maps in the Marlborough Environment Plan. There was some overlap with wetland areas already identified through the earlier Significant Natural Area surveys.

Most wetlands were not visited or described in a survey as part of the identification process.

There were 1,300 wetlands identified in the desk-top exercise. The final number of identified wetlands is yet to be confirmed as this process is ongoing. They are all being treated as SNAs, which means they qualify for the same level of assistance through the Landowner Assistance Programme.

Additional wetlands identified opportunistically since then have been added to a separate database to be processed during the next plan change.

Table 1: South Marlborough Ecological Survey Participation and Results (July 01 – June 26).

Ecological Districts	No. of Sites	No. Sites Legally Protected	Combined Area (ha)	SNA sites as a % of Total Private Land Area in ED	SNA sites as a % of Total Land Area	% of ED in DoC land
Kekerengu	68	7	1,679	10.1%	5.4%	3.5%
Flaxbourne	83	10	2,332	7.9%	9.8%	0.2%
Grassmere	18	0	1,736	6.1%	9.4%	0.3%
Blenheim	22	13	3,084	2.4%	7.4%	6%
Medway	74	15	4,302	13.6%	13.4%	0.7%
Wither Hills	25	4	5,044	16.7%	16.6%	0%

Ecological Districts	No. of Sites	No. Sites Legally Protected	Combined Area (ha)	SNA sites as a % of Total Private Land Area in ED	SNA sites as a % of Total Land Area	% of ED in DoC land
Hilliersden	48	9	9,454	10.1%	18.4%	3.5%
Waihopai	80	29	18,104	21.5%	16.6%	24.2%
Tapuaenuku	22	2	4,733	12.6%	6.4%	39.6%
Dillon	55	30	34,057	38%	18.8%	69.3%
Balaclava	29	20	24,251	54.9%	19.8%	91.3%
Bounds	4	0	2,878	11.6%	3.0%	88.6%
Sedgemere	6	6	1,826	N/A	12.8%	100%
George	0	0	533	75.7%	1.7%	23.6%
Totals	534	145 (28%)	114013	Av=15.9%	Av=11.8%	Av=27.3%

Table 2: North Marlborough – Ecological Survey – Participation and Results (July 01 – June 26).

Ecological Districts	No. of Sites	No. sites legally protected	Combined Area (ha)	SNA sites as a % of Total Private Land Area in ED	SNA sites as a % of Total Land Area	% of ED in DoC Land
Rangitoto ki te Tonga/D'Urville	50	2	5183	32.8%	17.9%	31%
Cook Strait	8	2	533	13.9%	9.3%	32.1%
Sounds	238	37	12,649	18.1%	11%	41.4%
Te Hoiere/Pelorus	47	12	2,350	9.1%	2.3%	67.8%
Para	69	8	3,680	10.8%	7.7%	27.9%
Fishtail	28	4	1,088	7.8%	2.5%	67.8%
Totals	440	65 (15%)	25483	(Av=15.1%)	(Av=8.4%)	(Av=44%)

2.2. Discussion

Our field based ecological surveys have produced a lot of information about the distribution and type of native habitat remaining on private land in both South and North Marlborough. Despite a high level of buy-in from Marlborough landowners when the programme was initiated, there are still properties that have not been assessed for SNAs, however this is constantly changing as new landowners invite us onto their land. Sites are being added to the database on a regular basis and new relationships being formed with landowners all the time, usually leading to improvements being made to the biodiversity of many of the sites.

Monitoring these existing sites also gives us access to landowners who often ask why particular areas on their land were not assessed for the report. Often this results in other sites being added to the list.

Previously unreported threatened species are also often detected during monitoring sessions. They have either been missed in the past or have become more obvious when sites have improved due to pest control work.

2.3. South Marlborough

South of the Wairau River, this region is characterised by a long history of extensive native vegetation clearance since early Polynesian times and is consequently much depleted in ecological functioning in many respects. While there are still some extensive areas of beech forest, kānuka forest, shrublands and tussock grasslands, these, for the most part, all occur in the extensive areas of uplands and much of the low, productive country has been cleared for agriculture or development of some type. Podocarp forest, for instance, is very rare and is usually in high country areas naturally protected by terrain.

Of the fourteen Ecological Districts (EDs) that were surveyed in the South Marlborough area, there is very little Department of Conservation land in more than half of them. The percentage of total land area of significant natural sites is also very low for some of these - less than 10% in the four lowland coastal EDs (Blenheim, Flaxbourne, Grassmere and Kekerengu), less than 14% for Medway, and less than 17% for Wither Hills.

These six EDs are described as Priority One in the Statement of National Priorities for Protecting Rare and Threatened Biodiversity on Private Land, which identifies land environments that have less than 20% remaining in indigenous cover. Any district with less than 20% indigenous vegetation cover is recognised nationally as at high risk for high loss of indigenous biodiversity. They are therefore also Priority One for our SNA programme.

2.4. North Marlborough

The northern half of the region has a different climate and history of land clearance to South Marlborough and has considerably more Public Conservation Land (ranging from 28% to 68% in different Ecological Districts). The percentage of total land area of significant natural sites is generally higher than in South Marlborough, ranging from about 7% to 30% across the ecological districts.

While some ecosystem types are quite depleted, for instance lowland alluvial forest, swamp forests and kohekohe forest, a significant amount of native forest habitat remains on the hills – both beech and podocarp dominated. Additionally, large areas of regenerating forests consisting of kānuka, mānuka, tauhinu and broadleaved species are present where land has been left to regenerate following earlier clearance.

While fencing is important for some lowland sites within a pastoral farming landscape, feral animal pest control is the main challenge in North Marlborough, especially as there are still populations of a range of native fauna present (forest birds, bats, sea birds, weka, giant land snails, and native freshwater fish species).



Figure 3: Powelliphanta snail shell found during SNA survey, Rai Valley.

Part B: Site Improvement – Landowner Assistance Programme – Summary of Results 2024-2025

3. Landowner Assistance Programme – Background and Overview

The Landowner Assistance Programme has been operating since 2003 in conjunction with the field ecological survey work and has targeted assistance to high value sites with identified pressures and threats that can be practically managed. The main focus of the programme has been on management of threats within individual high value significant natural area sites (including a mix of fencing, weed and animal pest control and restoration planting work)

A concerted conservation effort on private land is needed if functioning ecosystems are to be maintained, especially in the lowland areas of South Marlborough which have been identified nationally as threatened environments with less than 20% of natural cover remaining. To be effective, this would need to include continued protection of the last remaining remnants as well as active restoration planting to create new habitats and increase the overall area in natural cover (which is currently less than 1% on the Wairau and Awatere Plain areas). So far about 20% of the 974 identified sites over the whole of Marlborough have received funding assistance for restoration or management (79 in North Marlborough and 116 in South Marlborough). While a number of sites are

likely to be deteriorating in condition over time due to a range of threats and pressures, it is pleasing to note that the condition of 37 of the 40 managed sites monitored in 2025/26 was Fair or better, and the trend in all but two were either Improving or Stable. Managed sites had much better statistics than unmanaged sites as you would expect. The Landowner Assistance Programme certainly improves the condition of sites.

Council expenditure to manage SNAs averaged about \$120K per annum from 2007 until 2012. Council has since increased its commitment and in 2025/2026, the SNA Landowner Assistance Fund distributed \$237,624 to landowners. A lot of restoration and good-will has also been achieved by the programme over time. There is also unrecorded landowner effort over and above this, where Council is not involved financially through the SNA programme.

3.1. SNA Habitat Improvement Projects 2025-2026

In the 12-month period from July 2025 to June 2026, the SNA project contributed to 29 projects in total. Ten of these were new projects, with a mix of weed control, pest control and planting. Nineteen of the projects are ongoing; mostly weed control but also including pest control and planting.

Highlights of the year in the Management Project include:

- Planting 3500 plants along the east coast between Mussel Point and Needles Point, in volunteer community and landowner planting days.
- Working with the East Coast Protection Group to control 1.5ha marram grass near Long Point.
- Seeing the success of the restoration of the East Coast after 5 years of planting and weed control.
- Releasing OMB sawfly biocontrol agents at three sites: Waima/Ure, Rarangi and Mahakipawa.
- Installing auto resetting possum traps in kohekohe remnants in the Outer Sounds and seeing the results.
- Weed control and tree planting in Para Swamp.
- Returning forest trees, including matai, totara and beech, to the landscape in South Marlborough.

Since 2003, 195 projects have received funding assistance from MDC. Council contributed \$237,624 this financial year which leveraged another \$280,157 from landowners and others. MDC has contributed \$1.6M towards SNA management over 22 years. With funding from landowners and other organisations, this has tripled to \$4.6M being spent improving the condition of Marlborough SNAs.

Recently, restoration of the East Coast between Marfells Beach and the Waima/Ure has been a focus. We have worked with the East Coast Protection Group to achieve contractor spraying of marram grass on the beach near Long Point and Cape Campbell, with funding from the Mahi mo te Taio Fund and planted 1500 pingao and 500 trees at Ward Beach. Pinoli staff planted 500 pingao at Booboo Stream and volunteers planted another 800 at the Needles.

In recent years 5.3km of coast has been planted with over 50000 plants funded mostly by the SNA project. The closing of the beach to vehicles over much of this coast, via Council's East Coast Beach Vehicle Bylaw, should help these plants to establish and for the ecology to recover. The reality is that the Bylaw has been of mixed success. It appears that drivers on the beach are not driving on planted areas and this has been helpful in allowing the plants to establish however vehicles are still going

onto closed beach areas that have nesting shore birds and threatened species. Banded dotterels have declined significantly over the three years they have been monitored.

Wetlands are a high priority nationally. Six were funded for assistance in 2025/26. Work continues in Para Swamp with willow control and tree planting. A multi-agency project with DOC, Ecan and Landcorp, to eradicate willows in the Acheron River in Molesworth, is ongoing over multiple SNAs. Six Significant Wetlands restoration projects covering 3750ha were funded, with Council contributing \$73,810.

A summary of all Significant Natural Area project expenditure is included in Appendix 1:.



Figure 4: Possum damage to kohekohe foliage.

3.2. Protection Projects Summary – July 2025 – June 2026

Table 3: Summary of new protection projects July 2025 – June 2026 (GST inclusive).

Ecosystem Type	Size (ha)	North/South Marlborough ED	Type of Work	Total Funding	SNA	Other	Landowner
Hill slope (Sch)	332	N Sounds	Pines	\$25,500	\$11,500	\$0	\$14,000
Riparian (Ker)	26	S Medway	OMB Bio	\$7,283	\$7,283	\$0	\$0

Ecosystem Type	Size (ha)	North/South Marlborough ED	Type of Work	Total Funding	SNA	Other	Landowner
Wetland (Lio)	277	S Blenheim	OMB Bio	\$7,283	\$7,283	\$0	\$0
Hillslope (Gan)	51	N Sounds	OMB Bio	\$7,283	\$7,283	\$0	\$0
Hillslopes (You)	6.8	N Sounds	Traps	\$7,360	\$3,680	\$0	\$3,680
Hillslopes (Ger)	617	N Sounds	Traps	\$1,820	\$1,047	\$0	\$910
Hillslopes (Hol)	1509	S Hillersden	Traps	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$0	\$5,000
Wetlands (Eca)	1569	S Dillon	Willows	\$15,450	\$5,150	\$10,300	\$0
Wetlands (Eca)	1758	S Sedgemere	Willows	\$42,100	\$12,100	\$20,000	\$10,000
Wetlands (Mid)	5.9	S Tapuae	Plants	\$350	\$350	\$2,000	\$0
Total	6152ha			\$124429	\$60676	\$32300	\$33590

Table 4: Summary of ongoing protection projects July 2025-June 2026 (GST inclusive).

Ecosystem Type	Size (ha)	North/South Marlborough ED	Type of Work	Total Funding	SNA	Other	Landowner
Forest (Her)	73	N Durville	Pines	\$39,499	\$2,875	\$33700	\$2,924
Hillslopes (Ger)	617	N Sounds	Traps	\$2,094	\$1,047	\$0	\$1,047
Hillslopes (Hol)	467	N Pelorus	Traps	\$18,538	\$9,269	\$0	\$9,269
Coastal (Har)	353	N Sounds	Toxin	\$2,094	\$1,047	\$0	\$1,047
Coastal (Mal)	7.3	N Durville	Traps	\$2,826	\$1,413	\$0	\$1,413
Hillslopes (Ste)	1011	S Waihopai	Weeds	\$11,508	\$5,704	\$0	\$5,704
Wetland (Hun)	1	S Blenheim	Planting	\$3,578	\$1,789	\$0	\$1,789
Wetland (Fis)	126	N Para	Weeds	\$21,700	\$5,850	\$10000	\$5,850
Hillslopes (Gri)	2538	S Wither Hills	Pines	\$18,400	\$9,200	\$0	\$9,200
Hillslopes (Cla)	193	N Sounds	Pests, plant	\$76,550	\$8,050	\$0	\$68,500
Hillslopes (StL)	6	N Para	Weeds	\$15,072	\$7,536	\$0	\$7,536
Hillslopes (Wes)	127	S Wither Hills	Pines	\$6,900	\$3,450	\$0	\$3,450
Hillslopes (Harv)	54	S Medway	OMB	\$3,428	\$1,714	\$0	\$1,714
Wetland (Cha)	19.7	N Para	Plants	\$48,760	\$48,760	\$0	\$0
Hillslopes (Bar)	26.5	S Flaxbourne	Plants	\$9,234	\$4,617	\$0	\$4,617
Dunes (Pin)	277	S Kekerengu	Plants	\$24,978	\$12,489	\$0	\$12,489

Ecosystem Type	Size (ha)	North/South Marlborough ED	Type of Work	Total Funding	SNA	Other	Landowner
Riparian (Gle)	304.6	S Waihopai	Weeds	\$11,354	\$5,677	\$0	\$5,677
Coastal (Bel)	16	N Sounds	Pests	\$8,948	\$4,474	\$0	\$4,474
Wetland (Don)	66	S Kekerengu	Plants	\$1,752	\$876	\$0	\$876
Total	6283.1			\$327213	\$135837	\$4370043700	\$147576

Table 5: Total Funding Contributions for Biodiversity Protection Projects on SNAs: 2025-2026

Marlborough District Council Funding	\$196,776
Central Government Funds	\$74,000
QEII National Trust	\$2,350
Landowners	\$181,166
Total	\$454292

Table 6: Summary of Total Funding Contributions for Biodiversity Protection Projects on Private Land 2003 – 2026

Marlborough District Council Funding	\$2,281,601
Central Government Funds	\$1,071,880
QEII National Trust	\$471,982
Landowners	\$2,363,311
Total	\$6188774

3.3. Relationships

Council promotes covenanting and maintains strong relationships with the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (QEII) and Department of Conservation (DOC), both of which provide a mechanism for landowners to independently protect areas on their properties.

A total of 67 (1/3) of the 195 projects protected through the programme so far have been on covenanted sites: 54 by The QEII Trust, ten by DOC and three as Permanent Forests. The QEII Trust monitors their covenanted sites, and we work together to manage issues on these sites. Permanent Forests are now registered in the Emissions Trading Scheme so are monitored for the carbon they sequester.

The boundaries of covenants and SNAs do not usually align, so the area is only where they overlap. The data comes from QEII and DOC and is only updated once the covenant has been formalised and then surveyed, which allows it to be mapped and added to the GIS layer. This creates a lag time from the time the agreement is signed to when it is mapped. Fifteen SNAs and two Significant Wetlands are protected by Conservation Covenants (PPL) through DOC. The remainder are protected by QEII Trust.

The table below shows the number of SNAs that are legally protected by the QEII Trust and DOC and how it changed over the current year. Due to funding constraints experienced by QEII Trust, no new covenants were created in Marlborough during this financial year.

Table 7: SNAs in Marlborough which have legal protection.

	No. of Sites
SNAs in Marlborough which had some legal protection at June 2026	213
SNAs in Marlborough which have some legal protection at July 2025	213

The SNA project also works collaboratively with the Marlborough Sounds Restoration Trust and South Marlborough Landscape Restoration Trust by contributing to several projects on private properties controlling wilding pines and ungulates. In 2025/2026, SNA project contributed \$12500 toward control of wilding pines near French Pass and on Durville Island and another \$10,000 towards wilding pine control in and around the Ned.

Community-based conservation groups currently operating in the Marlborough region include:

- Arapaoa Kiwi Trust.
- East Coast Protection Group.
- Endeavour Inlet Restoration Trust.
- Grovetown Lagoon Restoration Project.
- Para Swamp Restoration project (Fish and Game).
- Picton and Rarangi Dawn Chorus Groups.
- Te Hoiere/Pelorus Long-Tailed Bat Project (Forest and Bird).

All of these groups are independent of the Council and compete in a tight market for funding from a small number of other sources, such as Lotteries Commission, Canterbury Community Fund, the DOC Community Fund, Council and landowners. Council has worked with DOC to set up a Biodiversity Forum to provide a simple way of communicating with all the groups and enabling them to communicate with each other. These meetings have been well attended and have been seen as positive by the various community groups.



Figure 5: Possum trap in kohekohe forest which killed 30 possums and 42 rats in 4 months.

Part C: Monitoring Programme – Summary of Results

4. Background and Overview

Monitoring is an important part of measuring and tracking the outputs and outcomes of any project. There are three types of biodiversity monitoring that are relevant to the Significant Natural Areas project.

In relation to the Significant Natural Areas project, Council is undertaking a programme of ongoing monitoring of the state and condition of a selection of representative sites from the more than 958 SNAs identified. This type of monitoring was started in the 2014/15 in two ecological districts and repeated annually ever since across the entire district.

Assessment methodology is qualitative and simple and includes rapid ecological condition and trend assessments along with photo points. Reports prepared for each site visited and provided to the landowners include commentary, site maps and photographs established at defined photo points to provide a visual record of changes over time. Any emerging issues (for instance weed invasion) are discussed with the landowner and further management is often put in place to deal with these. The monitoring allows the Council to maintain links with landowners and assist them in relation to these sites. Frequently, small infestations of invasive weeds are able to be tackled during the monitor.

Systematic monitoring was established to assess the condition of the 195 sites that have been actively managed through the Landowner Assistance Programme since 2006 (about 13% of all sites identified since 2001). In 2025/26, 41 un-managed sites and 40 managed sites were monitored. It is no surprise that managed sites are in better condition than unmanaged sites.



Figure 6: Monitoring records huge recovery of kohekohe after removal of possums.

4.1. 2025 - 2026 Monitoring of Un-Managed SNA Sites

Monitoring to assess the state and condition of a selection of representative sites that have not had any specific conservation management applied, was carried out in 2025/2026.

They were in the Kekerengu, Flaxbourne, Medway, Tapuaenuku, Waihopai, Sounds, Pelorus, Para and Durville Ecological Districts (EDs).

4.2. Unmanaged Site Monitoring Results

- A total of 41 unmanaged sites were monitored on 19 properties.
- Overall results show that about 60% of unmanaged sites visited were generally in reasonable condition (23/41 were in good or good-fair condition) and 28/41 had a trend of stable or improving. This partly reflects the inherent resilience of many sites, which have persisted within a productive landscape over many decades prior to the SNA programme identifying them. In many cases it also reflects the commitment of landowners to manage their land in a manner sympathetic with the natural environment, with many undertaking property wide pest control, for instance.
- The flip side is that about 40% of unmanaged sites are either in poor condition and/or are deteriorating. Sometimes it is about good sites deteriorating because of recent possum damage or old mans beard taking over; other times its more long-term deterioration but in any respect, the sites still exist and possibly because of our visit they may now enter into a recovery phase.
- The Emissions Trading Scheme is incentivising landowners to allow their marginal land to revert to indigenous forest for growing carbon. We are actively assisting landowners to connect with experts able to assist in this field. Properties which have no “managed sites” are doing it themselves when they have engaged in growing native trees for the ETS. This means that significant sites will no longer be actively grazed and will often have a buffer of indigenous vegetation around them and in many cases more active pest control.
- While a relatively low percentage of sites are legally protected and therefore rely on the benevolence of the owners, the Marlborough Environment Plan (MEP) includes indigenous vegetation clearance rules which help to ensure they will persist in the landscape.
- Many SNA monitoring reports recommend that owners contact the QEII Trust to discuss legal protection of sites and many are now covenanted. The Trust monitors their sites on a biennial basis. Another four covenants are Significant Wetlands. Many of these sites are fenced as a result of the covenant placed over them.

Table 8: Summary of Monitoring results of SNA Un-managed sites 2025/2026.

<u>Site Condition</u>	Good	Good/Fair	Fair	Fair/Poor	Poor
	9	8	14	7	3
<u>Site Trend</u>	Improving	Improving/Stable	Stable	Stable/ Deteriorating	Deteriorating
	2	3	26	6	4

East Coast beaches along the Limestone Coast.

Damage caused by vehicles has been reported in the dunes, beaches and coastal biodiversity within and beside the SNAs along the East Coast, post the Kaikōura Earthquake of 2016. The damage to these vulnerable natural ecosystems has continued despite the enactment of the East Coast Beach Vehicle Bylaw in 2023.

An effort has been made to understand the biodiversity of these ecosystems better. New populations of threatened species, such as katipo spider and the mat daisy jumper moths, have been found. This beach ecosystem is also home to endemic shorebirds, geckos, invertebrates, plants and marine mammals, including the largest katipo spider population in the country. The SNA programme is leading a successful planting and weed control programme along the coast to restore indigenous biodiversity to the area. Results are pleasing with good survival of coastal broadleaf forest and dune grasses where they have been planted. Monitoring of birdlife has, however, shown that banded dotterels are declining sharply due to predators and vehicles.



Figure 7: Needles volunteer planting party.

4.3. 2025 - 2026 Monitoring of Managed SNA Sites

In the 2025/2026 monitoring round, a total of 40 Managed sites were visited on 24 properties. They were in Flaxbourne, Kekerengu, Medway, Tapueanuku, Waihopai, Sounds, Durville, Pelorus, and Para Ecological Districts.

Virtually all managed sites were found to be in fair or good condition and with a trend of improving or stable (only two of the 40 sites were stable/deteriorating). The condition and trend of managed sites is better than unmanaged sites, as you would expect, however many of these sites are not under

current management but are benefiting from previous efforts in fencing and weed control. This is a good outcome.

The table below provides a summary of the condition and trend of the sites monitored.

Table 9: Summary of Monitoring results of SNA Managed sites 2025/2026

Site Condition	Good	Good/Fair	Fair	Fair/Poor	Poor
	15	6	16	3	
Site Trend	Improving	Improving/Stable	Stable	Stable/ Deteriorating	Deteriorating
	22	5	11	1	1

4.4. Summary and Discussion

Some observations from the 2025/2026 monitoring round:

- Landowners continue to be co-operative and allow access for monitoring purposes, and all landowners were very interested in their sites and tracking their progress over time.
- More landowners are increasingly becoming aware of the benefits of setting aside marginal land from their operations and allowing it to restore itself, often just to reduce their operating costs but also to be good custodians of the land or to generate an income by sequestering carbon. While not ecologically significant, this adds indigenous biodiversity into the landscape
- Most SNA sites visited are improving in condition generally due to management interventions, or, in some cases, natural resilience and re-generation processes.
- Threats are most often either feral ungulates (mostly goats and deer), possums or weeds (especially old man's beard and wilding pines). These are old issues that seem to have regained traction in recent years.
- Post the 2016 earthquake, natural regeneration on the coast south of the Marfells Beach has largely been hindered by the impacts of much higher use of the coast by people driving vehicles. Indigenous dune ecosystems and species are being damaged by vehicle traffic. Implementation of the East Coast Vehicle Bylaw should be resulting in an improvement for shorebird nesting, but this is not showing up in the data collected. The dotterel population is in fact declining.

Part D: Associated Projects

5. Publicity and Information

5.1. Background

Publicity and promotion have been integral to the Significant Natural Areas Project because it relies heavily on voluntary participation and proactive protection activity from landowners. Initially the emphasis was on increasing awareness about the unique and diverse biodiversity of the region and the opportunity for landowners to participate in collecting information and looking at options for protection where necessary. This occurred through personal contact, individual property reports, annual newsletters and newspaper articles.

More recently publicity about the SNA project is integrated into other media releases and publicity, for instance links with entrants in the Marlborough Environment Awards, farming articles and so on.

5.2. The 2025-2026 Year

During 2025/2026, the Biodiversity Co-ordinator spoke at a SNA Landowner Forum Field Day at Bannockburn in the Awatere Valley, and gave a guided biodiversity walk on two properties. Presentations were given to an Untouched World Young Environmental Leaders gathering and a Victoria University Biodiversity Summer School. Regular reports are given to the East Coast Protection Group and the Ruakanakana/Lake Elterwater Restoration Group.

Three community planting days were held on the East Coast south of Marfells Beach in association with SNAs. The seedlings were paid for by the SNA project. 3000 indigenous seedlings were planted including mostly pingao sand sedges.

A newsletter was published and sent out to the 396 landowners who are in the SNA programme.

Mish Clark and Nigel Muir won the Environment Award for Landscape and Habitat Enhancement with their Wild Waikawa SNA project in the Marlborough Sounds. Mish is very active in her desire to connect with other landowners who have SNAs on their land. She has established a fledgling Landowners Forum group which meets about six times per year, both on the ground at properties and electronically through Zoom meetings. The SNA Coordinator attends and helps lead these events.

Wild Waikawa also hosted this years Untouched World Emergent Leaders for Change Programme, along with Waikawa Marae. It is aimed at aspiring young leaders in the biodiversity space. The SNA Coordinator was invited to attend to give perspectives on biodiversity and what opportunities there are to make a difference.

There is an ongoing programme of updating any SNA public information.



Figure 8: The SNA Landowner Forum lends a hand to control old mans beard in flowering kowhai trees in an Awatere SNA.

6. Seed Collection Project

6.1. Background

Through the Significant Natural Areas project, it became apparent that boosting the supply of suitable locally sourced native plants would be necessary if there was to be an adequate volume of appropriate plants available for restoration projects in Marlborough. Seed has been collected by MDC since 2006 and is now used for a number of Council projects which promote tree planting: the SNA project, Working for Nature Environmental Grants Scheme, Erosion Prone Land project and Catchment Care programmes. The seed goes to commercial nurseries that supply plants to Marlborough for general sale, so any restoration project that is buying plants from these nurseries can benefit from a supply of trees grown from locally collected seed. We focus on collecting the native conifers kahikatea, totara and matai as they are the real drivers of the lowland forest ecosystem and they have been reduced locally to near extinction by 600+ years of human habitation and development of the Wairau, Awatere and Flaxbourne valleys.

The Significant Natural Areas project identified remaining pockets of indigenous forest on private land that provide valuable seed sources that can generate future material for restoration planting. Landowners have allowed us back to collect seed from their trees ever since and we have made good use of that opportunity.

6.2. The 2025-2026 Seed Collection Season

In the 2025/2026 seed collection season, seed was collected from the usual sites in both North and South Marlborough. The cost of this was \$7,155 incl GST. This is a reduction from last year and reflects the larger amount of seed collected last year.

Good quantities of kahikatea and tōtara seed, along with some matai, were collected from the Wairau River and its tributaries. This seed was distributed to local nurseries: Selmes, Morgans Road, Ngati Kuia and Titoki Nursery at Waimea. Pingao and spinifex seed was collected and sent to Selmes and Riverside Nurseries to be propagated for our coastal restoration project on the east coast.



Figure 9: Trees establishing along on the back dunes at Mussel Point.

7. General Discussions and Conclusions

The Significant Natural Areas programme has been run by the Marlborough District Council since 2001. It is the main mechanism used to identify and promote protection of terrestrial indigenous biodiversity on private land. While it is entirely voluntary for landowners to participate, it sits alongside some MEP rules preventing certain types and scale of indigenous vegetation clearance and wetland drainage. The sites are not scheduled in resource management plans, apart from wetland sites identified in the 2010-13 surveys which are scheduled in the MEP.

The SNA project is heavily focussed on identifying and protecting habitat areas on private land as a mechanism to protect larger suites of indigenous biodiversity (plants, insects, reptiles and birds). Ecological assessments are relatively broad scale, relying on experienced ecologists and rapid qualitative methods. While it is a voluntary programme, the data collected through the significant natural areas ecological surveys are used internally by the Council when assessing the effects of resource consents.

Of the 974 sites identified through the surveys, about 195 have been managed in some way to enhance biodiversity. A third of these sites have covenants which provide permanent legal protection (primarily through the QEII Trust but also the Conservation Act).

Monitoring to track the condition of a random selection of these managed sites is undertaken annually. Of the 81 sites monitored this season, 41 are not being managed while the remaining 40 are being managed to improve their condition. In 2025/26, managed sites were in better condition than unmanaged sites and more were generally trending in a better direction.

Most were in Fair condition with a trend of Stable apart from two which were deteriorating to some extent. However, 3 were in poor or fair to poor condition, mostly due to old mans beard or possums. While this is a good outcome, the impacts of weeds, especially wilding pines and old man's beard, in addition to feral ungulates and possums, were important issues in 2025/2026. There are still, however, over 600 Significant Natural Areas which have not received any assistance from Council to proactively manage the ecological values and ensure they are sustained in the long term. Every year we engage with landowners to try and improve this situation.

The East Coast is a vital 50km long corridor/flyway for migratory and resident breeding shore birds, with Cape Campbell being an important roosting area for shore birds, haulout for NZ fur seals and rookery for elephant seals. As already reported, a considerable effort is being invested into these coastal SNAs towards restoring the vegetation sequences on the connected dunes and foreshore that have been damaged by a long history of fires, agriculture, pest/weed invasion and, more recently, vehicle use.

Included in this corridor is also a series of wetlands: the Waima/Ure lagoon, Lake Elterwater, Lake Grassmere/Kapara Te Hau, Wairau Lagoons and Para Swamp, which form an important flyway for waterfowl, especially in this otherwise dry landscape. The SNA programme assisted with tree planting and weed control in the Waima/Ure River, Lake Elterwater and Para Swamp.

Building and maintaining goodwill and awareness amongst landowners is at the heart of the SNA programme, and the work carried out in relation to the site re-visits goes a long way towards keeping in contact with them.

New technologies (for instance improved aerial photography and LiDAR for large parts of Marlborough) and tools (such as development of a new tablet-based field collection tool) are improving accuracy and efficiency in how we collect and store data.

The Significant Natural Areas programme is an important element of indigenous biodiversity management and protection in Marlborough, with a particular focus on privately owned land. It is complemented by the work of the QEII National Trust which works independently with private landowners to covenant and protect areas. Council's relationship with QEII is close and productive and we help each other to engage with new clients on a regular basis. We also pool our funds to make projects more affordable for all parties, although QEII has current funding issues which reduce its ability to react to opportunities.

The "Kotahitanga mo te Taiao" alliance continues to develop, with Te Tau Ihu Iwi, DOC and the Top of the South Councils working closely to develop a strategy for improving indigenous biodiversity in Te Taihū.

There has also been an increase in the number of larger scale community conservation and restoration projects in Marlborough in recent years and the Significant Natural Area programme continues to work closely with some of these, particularly where private land is involved.

In summary, the Significant Natural Areas Project continues to be the main avenue for Council to protect indigenous biodiversity on private land in the Marlborough region. Marlborough has less than 5% of its rarer ecosystem types remaining on the plains, which is not enough to sustain biodiversity over time. With Primary Industry being such an important part of the Marlborough economy, Council has a critical role in working with the community to help ensure that the natural environment is not degrading, rather it is improving.



Figure 10: Helping with Untouched World Environmental Leadership team at Wild Waikawa.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Total Budget for Main Aspects of Significant Natural Areas Project – Marlborough District Council Expenditure and Revenue – July 2025 – June 2026 (GST inclusive)

Table 10 :Significant Natural Areas Project – Total budget July 2025 to June 2026.

Project Name	Projected Budget	Actual Expenditure
SNA survey and monitoring	\$73,888	\$80,678
SNA protection projects	\$218,500	\$196,776
Seed collection	\$5,750	\$7,166
Total	\$298138	\$284620