

Jobs for Nature supercharges river restoration

Content provided by the Department of Conservation

It's more than four years since the \$1.2-billion Jobs for Nature program was set up as part of the COVID-19 recovery package. The Department of Conservation has managed about 40 per cent of the funding, allocated to 225 projects, many of which had a focus on enhancing the biodiversity of freshwater habitats and ecosystems.

Kaitiaki and taura of Waikanae Jobs for Nature at the closing celebration, December 2024, Otaraua Park, Waikanae. Image courtesy of Sarah Wilcox



The Department of Conservation (DOC) established the Ngā Awa river restoration program works in Treaty partnership in 12 river catchments across the country, taking a mountains-to-sea approach. The rivers are diverse – ranging from Waipoua in Northland, to Taiari (Taieri) in Otago – and reflect the variations of climate, soil type, vegetation and land uses in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The existing partnerships enabled DOC to support mana whenua (people with authority over the land) and local groups to apply for Jobs for Nature grants, with a focus on river restoration in their catchments. A total of \$42,918,000 went to freshwater restoration projects in Ngā Awa rivers. This significant investment has supported ‘boots on the ground’ work known to improve the biodiversity of waterways.



As many of the projects are now wrapping up, it's a good opportunity to celebrate the successes, and reflect on what's been achieved for freshwater and the local river communities. This article focuses on work to date in three Ngā Awa rivers, with selected data used to illustrate progress. All figures were current in January 2025.

WHANGANUI RIVER, CENTRAL NORTH ISLAND

In the Whanganui River project, the team's impact includes the following:

- › Number of plants added to riparian or wetland areas: 373,958
- › Number of plants added to other areas: 56,530
- › New fencing: 129,513 metres
- › Fencing maintained: 10,218 metres
- › Area treated for weeds: 159.01 hectares
- › Area treated for pests: 512 hectares
- › Total employment starts: 158
- › Expected project completion date: September 2025.

The Mouri Tūroa project, valued at \$7.86 million, is a partnership between DOC and Ngā Tāngata Tiaki o Whanganui with the goal of improving the health and wellbeing of Te Awa Tupua.

Gordon Cribb (Whanganui iwi), Mouri Tūroa Project Manager, says the project is based on a relationship with the Whanganui River and guided by Tupua te Kawa, the value system recognising the interdependence of the land and river.

‘We’ve kept the project team small to efficiently bring together local suppliers and businesses with landowners to get the work done – 68 contractors and five nurseries have been connected to a wide range of landowners via 136 expressions of interest.’

Fencing stock out of wetlands and tributaries was a priority. ‘It mitigates pollution by reducing the amount of sediment going into waterways, as well as supporting landowners to comply with the stock exclusion regulations. Many of the fenced areas have been planted with natives, with pest control in place to keep the survival rate high.

‘The only way we’re going to see an improvement in water quality, biodiversity and ecosystem health is through collective efforts across all landowner types. It’s encouraging to see farmers, hapū, marae and community groups taking ownership of the restoration work.’

KO WAIKANA E TE AWA, KĀPITI COAST

In the Ko Waikane Te Awa project, the team's impact includes the following:

- › Number of plants added to riparian, lake or wetland areas: 22,300
- › Number of plants added to and other areas: 114,300
- › New fencing: 6700 metres
- › Area treated for possums or goats: 2578 hectares
- › Total employment starts: 94
- › People who completed formal training: 67
- › Project completion date: December 2024.

Groundtruth Limited received the \$8.5-million Mahi mō te Taiao – Waikanae Jobs for Nature contract, partnering with Te Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai. Kristie Parata, of Te Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai, was the iwi (tribal) Coordinator.

‘The model here was to run a practical three-month conservation and land management training program with

groups of six to eight tauira (students). Tauira then moved into teams working as kaitiaki (carers) and kaimahi (trainees) on their awa and whenua, caring for the environment. Ten groups were trained,' says Cribb.

'Our kaimahi learned a wide range of skills, including plant propagation, environmental monitoring, fencing, track cutting and pest control. Many reconnected with their past and heritage, and discovered new life paths and future goals. One said, "I thought I was here to save the taiao (nature), but found the taiao was saving me."

Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai is currently looking to transition this project, including the new plant nursery, into an iwi-led environmental business to continue the restoration work.

RAKITATA (RANGITATA) RIVER, CANTERBURY

Three Jobs for Nature projects have supported restoration work in this river. Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua received \$2.75 million for the Arowhenua Native Nursery and \$8.7 million for restoration work in the lower river. The Upper Rangitata Gorge Landcare Group was awarded \$7.3 million to lead restoration work in the upper river.

Funding for the nursery ended in December 2024 and the business is now transitioning to a commercial wholesale model. Funding for the restoration projects ends in March 2026.

Totals across the projects are as follows:

- › Number of plants produced: 616,236
- › Number of plants added to riparian, lake or wetland areas: 257,869
- › New fencing: 124,631 metres
- › Area treated for weeds 81,250 hectares
- › Area treated for rats, mustelids and other animal pests: 122,364 hectares
- › Area treated for wallabies 107,935 hectares.

Brad Edwards, DOC's Ngā Awa River Ranger for the Rakitata River, is proud of how work across the different

projects has come together. 'Every project is important, from seed collection and propagation at the nursery, to the crews out preparing the ground and planting, maintenance work while the plants get going, extensive fencing to keep stock out of the riverbed and the landscape-scale pest control,' says Edwards.

As well as trapping sediment and nutrients, the planting is creating a native corridor along the whole river. Established trees will be seed sources for birds to spread into new areas.

A predator control network of more than 3500 traps has been set up and maintained to protect the threatened birds that nest on the riverbed, including wrybill/ngutu pare, and black-fronted tern/tarapirohe. Predator catches for 2024 totalled 2828 hedgehogs, 368 feral cats and 479 stoats.

'The variety and scale of what's been achieved through Jobs for Nature is absolutely staggering.'

MEASURING CHANGES AND BENEFITS

Anyone who works in freshwater knows that making change is a long-term game. It can take years for positive changes, like more fish, improved water quality or a reduction in sediment, to show up. Monitoring has therefore been part of these projects, so future changes can be tracked.

An October 2024 impact report by MartinJenkins¹ estimated that the DOC-managed Jobs for Nature projects will deliver a return of \$4 for every \$1 spent. This figure is based on economic, environmental and wellbeing benefits, such as avoided irrigation loss, improved farm productivity, and reduced youth unemployment, water treatment costs, and human health risks.

In its approach to Jobs for Nature, DOC chose to put people first and trust the work would follow. The benefits for people, however, are also significant for freshwater. Many people employed said they had formed a much deeper relationship with the place and the river, which could bring further lasting benefits for nature in the long term. 💧

Jobs for Nature team planting beside Deep Stream, a spring-fed tributary of the Rakitata River, in October 2024. Image courtesy of Greg Wilkinson

