



## Judges' Report

### CATEGORY:

## Landscape and Habitat

## Wild Waikawa

### INTERVIEWED

Michelle (Mish) Clark and Nigel Muir. Presentations also provided by community members.

- Kristie PakiPaki - Pou Taiao/Environmental Manager at Te Ātiawa o te Waka-a-Māui
- Allanah Burgess - Kaiwhakahaere/General Manager at Waikawa Marae and MDC Maori Ward Councillor
- Mike Aviss - Biodiversity Co-ordinator, Marlborough District Council
- Siobain Finlow-Bates - Friend and Wild Waikawa Volunteer
- Rob MacLean - Friend and Wild Waikawa trapline Volunteer
- Sophie Whittall - Ecology and Marine Science Graduate and Wild Waikawa Volunteer
- Rob and Michelle Neal - Neighbour and Wild Waikawa Volunteer
- Dawn Muir - Sister and Wild Waikawa Volunteer
- Joanna Huntley - Head Teacher, Waitohi Kindergarten

### DATE

30 November 2024

### JUDGES

Roy Grose, Helen Ballinger and Wendy Sullivan

## INTRODUCTION

Wild Waikawa is a restoration project encompassing approximately 200 hectares of private land located at the head of Boons Valley, Picton. The property ranges in elevation from 100 to 1,000 metres above sea level.

The forest ecosystem has been severely degraded by mammalian predators, ungulates, wasps, and weeds. Restoration efforts focus on activities such as wilding pine removal, wasp control, predator trapping, and the propagation and planting of native trees.

A significant emphasis is placed on community involvement, particularly local mana whenua Te Ātiawa, through volunteering and educational opportunities. On the day of the Judges Visit, Mish and Nige invited local community members to share their perspectives on the project. This passion and engagement from community members have been evident in their emotional and enthusiastic contributions to the project.

In addition to restoration work, there is a growing focus on ecotourism, eco-volunteering, and forest therapy programs to enhance visitors' connection to nature.



## GENERAL INFORMATION

Landowners Michelle Clark (Mish) and Nigel Muir (Nige) are leading the restoration of their property with support from the community, the Department of Conservation (DOC), and the Marlborough District Council (MDC). Their restoration efforts have been ongoing for four years.

The property is designated as a Significant Natural Area (SNA) and adjoins public conservation land. It hosts several ecologically significant and rare species, including the short-jaw kōkopu, black beetle (*Megadromus speciosus*), Marlborough Sounds gecko, and native snails (*Powelliphanta hochstetteri bicolour* and *Wainuia nasuta*). Avian species such as the falcon/kārearea and rifleman/titipounamu are also present. The upper reaches of the property feature old-growth podocarp and beech forest.

Mish and Nige focus their restoration efforts on six key areas: wilding pine control, wasp control, predator control, weed management, planting, and community involvement.

The property previously contained five derelict and overgrown tunnel houses, which they have restored and now use as a native plant nursery. These facilities support propagation for on-site restoration and plant sales to fund further work.

Monitoring efforts include acoustic bird recording, and the couple collaborates with experts to identify and survey rare species such as fish, lizards, snails, and black beetles.

A distinguishing feature of Wild Waikawa is its emphasis on fostering a deeper connection between individuals and nature. Mish, a trained ecotherapist and forest therapy guide, integrates this ethos into the project.

Te Ātiawa, who hold a profound spiritual connection to Te Maunga Piripiri, have historically found the area inaccessible. Mish and Nige have developed a strong relationship with Te Ātiawa, enabling whānau to reconnect with Te Maunga Piripiri (Mt Piripri) and Te Awa Waikawa (Waikawa Stream). Their commitment to kaitiakitanga has earned the respect and appreciation of the iwi.

The project also engages with local schools and kindergartens, providing a platform for environmental education. This includes a kindergarten-led trap line and using Wild Waikawa as a hands-on field classroom. A stand-out comment from Waitohi Kindergarten was that Wild Waikawa not only provides an opportunity to learn kaitiakitanga, but installs leadership, and confidence and encourages the tamariki to slow down and observe which enables calmness beyond their visit.

Community involvement remains central to the project, with volunteers contributing to trapping, weed control, planting, and propagation efforts. Mish and Nige's deep passion and commitment to kaitiakitanga have inspired many to join and support their mission.



The property is off-grid, relying on a Pelton wheel for electricity. Sustainability is a guiding principle, with careful consideration given to waste reduction and recycling.

## **THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY**

- The deep connection between the community and the project.
- Strong engagement and collaboration with Te Ātiawa Iwi and Waikawa Marae, fostering reconnection with ancestral lands.
- Promoting natural and spiritual connections through volunteerism, mental health initiatives, and educational opportunities.
- A willingness to embrace new ideas, seek technical expertise, and collaborate with community groups and students.
- Innovative approaches to funding restoration work, including forest bathing tours for cruise ship passengers and leveraging Significant Natural Area (SNA) funding for volunteer support.
- Significant ecological progress, including extensive pest and weed removal.
- Building relationships with other SNA landowners to share knowledge and experiences.
- Rationalisation of assets, such as repairing and utilising the tunnel houses, and repurposing materials for trap boxes and tracks, and restoring a shed for accommodation.

## **PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED**

- The property's size, rugged terrain, and steep topography make it time-consuming to maintain trap lines and conduct effective weed and pest control. Motivation is drawn from visible progress, such as the regeneration of native tree species, and the inspiration shared with others who assist with their efforts.
- Constraints on resources and time necessitate careful management of activities. Mish and Nige focus efforts on key objectives, including predator control, and propagating and planting canopy trees. Accommodating short-term international volunteers fast-tracks work and long-term volunteers can work independently.
- Managing work, personal life, and energy levels can be overwhelming. Mish and Nige implement strategies to manage time effectively and reduce the scale of activities when needed to maintain balance.
- Securing adequate funding to sustain restoration work is a constant hurdle. The couple are constantly looking for innovative income streams such as offering guided cruise ship tours and upscaling nursery production to on-sell surplus plants.



## SUMMARY

Wild Waikawa focuses on reversing ecological degradation caused by predators, invasive weeds, and pests.

The standout feature of this project was not just extensive community involvement but community commitment and advocacy for its ongoing success. Volunteers actively participate in trapping, planting, and environmental education, while partnerships with Te Ātiawa Iwi and Waikawa Marae foster cultural reconnection. Mindfulness programs and forest therapy further enhance the project's impact by encouraging a deeper connection with nature.

Wild Waikawa showcases what can be achieved through collaboration, dedication, and innovative problem-solving, setting an example for ecological restoration and community-driven action.



## SUGGESTIONS

- Engage a trusted local volunteer to act as a volunteer coordinator. This role will help manage volunteer contributions, reducing your personal workload and supporting your well-being, which is essential to the project's success.
- Develop a [funding strategy](#) to clearly define your goals, financial needs, and identify funding sources that align with your objectives.
- Continue to maximise the property's assets for income generation. For instance, like the nursery generates income, consider using the volunteer accommodation as an Airbnb when not in use for volunteers.
- Recording pest numbers only indicates what has been captured and does not provide insight into the remaining pest population. Understanding this data enables adaptive management and measures success. Seek external advice and reconsider your decision to exclude tools such as tracking tunnels and wax-tags.
- Prioritise funding for AT220 traps or similar models to ease the workload of regularly checking traps.
- Install vegetation monitoring to measure regeneration, using either permanent [photo points](#) or [vegetation plots](#)/enclosures.