

Whangamata Harbour Care Chairman's Report - 2021

A popular phrase in this day and age is 'keep calm and carry on'. It's got to be right up there in terms of what's ahead for WHC. We as a volunteer community group are now faced with the task of accepting defeat and putting it all in the 'too hard basket' - this is not the kiwi way. The rules of engagement have changed and we need to meet that change by keeping calm and carrying on. At the end of the day common sense may prevail. If not the structure of society that our forefathers (and mothers) envisaged will be lost to unsustainable regulatory arrogance.

Let's look at how things have changed. We now are forced to take on organisations that have unlimited resources both technically and financially – they have fixed agendas and in some cases no accountability. We as a volunteer organisation must now meet with all the criteria they demand in order to even begin discussion. The last year has been spent doing just that and therefore the spirit of determination remains within WHC.

We accept that certain things must be done, however this comes at a cost to a volunteer organization. Time, although limited in some cases, is a great asset. However financial resources are another matter. Our members have come from both professional and practical backgrounds. They have years of experience and a wealth of knowledge. What's happening now is that they are expected to face continual peer review by 'faceless' experts. A case in point: Our consent to continue with the removal of mangrove seedlings has expired. We were then directed to operate under a consent held by WRC. What's different is that the WRC consent was appealed by Forest and Bird, not the local members as they didn't even get consulted, but by the Forest and Bird's national body. The Environment Court ruled in favour of Forest and Bird. WRC then had to interpret the ruling with the assistance of their regulatory team. What transpired was a set of rules that had no regard what-so-ever in terms of practical methodology and application when forced upon our volunteer community group. WRC are now faced with explaining to the local community how they now intend to continue on with seedling removal. Their costs of course will be met by ratepayers. Their current budget has already been spent on preliminary removal using outside contractors within a very small area of regrowth (they had backed on WHC undertaking the work at the cost of a sausage sizzle). I can go on but the complexities of the issues would need all day to explain.

They did offer to pay half the cost of a new consent, but logic said that we would still only end up with the same unworkable methodology. The 'carry on' option for WHC is to continue with the submissions, petitions and legal options available to volunteer groups (although very limited). This is being supported by members determined to see justice done. What have we achieved to date in terms of mangrove management? A mountain of paperwork, reports and years of endless discussion. For that we stand as true testament to the will and perseverance of the community. What have the authorities and the system achieved? There is no one available for comment! The strangest thing is that other communities dealing with the same issues and in consultation with their authorities have achieved the agreed outcomes. WRC after spending hundreds of thousand dollars now see themselves as an authority on the invasion of mangroves, when a few meetings with other authorities could have saved those funds for countless other projects.

Our Pest Control Team have made significant progress especially in dealing with the complexities of approval by our local authority TCDC. With a genuine understanding by both parties, we have now met all the criteria required for approved operator status. Pest Control volunteers have really put in the 'hard yards' and are the unsung heroes, boldly braving the great outdoors to protect our native trees, birds; insects and lizards from possums, rats, stoats, weasels and hedgehogs. They also continue to do all the paperwork and monitoring in order to meet with reporting requirements under our agreements for compliance and funding.

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The support from sponsors with donations to acquire the latest in tracking and monitoring equipment is most appreciated. We need this type of technology to not only make life a little easier, but to protect our volunteers when out in the field. The development of our new computer system to include catch data is another tool that has earned us praise from other sources. We now have credibility and skills to undertake new projects that may in the future include DOC and Rayonier Matariki, thus the further protection of the northern side of the harbour including the DOC 'Area of Special Significance'. PLEASE STAND UP AND TAKE A BOW

The new structures within WHC have now been implemented, these include sub committees that are responsible for Mangrove Management, Pest Control, Membership and Conservation. Other shared responsibilities include New Projects and Education and Public Awareness. Overall operations including Financial and Secretarial Services are undertaken by the Management Team.

What is now planned is to encourage members to become involved within the sub committees, this will allow for a greater range of inputs and ideas in order to expand our operational ability. Tasked with this in mind our Membership Subcommittee has now completed a full verification of members. The results so far are encouraging as prospective new members are responding to both website and street day promotions. Whangamata is also attracting many new permanent residents. They have skills that are in high demand within our organization, and we are open to any assistance that they may offer with or without long-term commitment. Our Vision and Objectives Statement outlines the many activities that are proposed within our structure.

Sponsorship is another task undertaken within the Membership Sub Committee. This is a very important role as it's the lifeblood of voluntary organisations. At present we have no fees attached to our membership therefore we fully rely on grants and donations to support our operations. In today's financial environment we need to show full support for our sponsors so that the benefits are seen as being reciprocal. Planned events to encourage awareness within the community are proposals already being considered.

The Conservation subcommittee is currently completing a submission to the Coastal plan review. They are also undertaking preliminary investigations into initiatives that will support the seabird population now being endangered by lack of feeding, resting and roosting opportunities due to the invasion of mangroves and the expected rise in sea levels.

Restoration of an area on the northern side of the harbour entrance is also targeted for development as potential NZ dotterel breeding habitat. The area was once used by dotterel for breeding but has become overgrown with weeds (including blackberry and pampas) in recent years making it unsuitable for this purpose.

A Presentation entitled "Time to Review the Values and Threats Posed by the Mangrove Spread" is scheduled for later in this meeting.

In summary we (WHC) are going to 'keep calm and carry on'. The future although clouded at times deserves every effort made to improve our community spirit. What we see as being insurmountable can in fact be overcome, the tick or cross on a ballot paper will make the difference. Finally, many thanks to our committee. Your time and effort, your personal resources and the support of your families has made a difference to our harbour, its estuaries and environment.

Kerry Gibb, Chairman