

A white-faced heron is captured in mid-flight against a clear blue sky. The bird's wings are spread wide, showing the intricate patterns of its feathers. Its long, yellow legs are trailing behind, and its sharp beak is pointed forward. The bird's head is white with a dark stripe through its eye.

The white-faced heron arrived in New Zealand in 1947 and has thrived in our wetland areas

Ahuriri Estuary

nature in the heart of the city

WORDS Nina Mercer on behalf of
DOC (Department of Conservation)

Fancy a wander through nature but don't want to travel too far? Right on the edge of Napier is the Ahuriri Estuary/Te Whanganui-a-Orotū. Recognised for its ecological and cultural values, the estuary is a wildlife refuge as well as a great place for a stroll.

Winding its way inland from Westshore, the Ahuriri Estuary was once a large lagoon. Around 1200 hectares of seabed was uplifted in the 1931 earthquake. That, and the subsequent reclamation of almost 2000 hectares through drainage and diversion, has created the wetland geography that exists today. A well-maintained Department of Conservation (DOC) walkway takes in a 3km loop around the estuary, interpretation panels along the way giving an insight into the area.

Important Habitat

Ahuriri Estuary contributes to a chain of coastal wetlands of national importance. Supporting more than 70 species of birds, along with numerous fish, invertebrates and plant varieties, the estuary is a vitally important habitat for both endangered and common native flora and fauna.

The critically endangered Australasian bittern includes the estuary in its home range, and migratory birds such as the kuaka (bar-tailed godwit), wrybill, white-fronted tern and royal spoonbill spend time in this lush habitat.

Nationally critical, the karoro (black-billed gull) is the most threatened gull in the world, and also makes the estuary its home.

But it's not just birds that make the estuary special – the lower estuary is a known yellowbelly flounder nursery and cockle species are present, although regular stormwater discharge prevents harvesting.

A Long History

The area has long been a place of settlement for Māori. Mana Ahuriri, a group of neighbouring hapū with strong family ties (whakapapa), hold rangatiratanga over the area. The people of Ahuriri descend from the great explorer Mahutapoanui, believed to be the beginning of their people.

A mostly freshwater lagoon of nearly 4000 hectares covered the area prior to the 1931 earthquake and this was an extremely important food and resource gathering area.

Both iwi and European settlers valued the area for the sheltered harbour and food. After the uplift created by the earthquake, and reclamation of the area, less than 500 hectares remain today.

The Ahuriri Hapū Deed of Settlement was signed in November 2016, giving the Ahuriri Hapū a key role in the statutory management of the area. Te Komiti Muriwai o Te Whanga, the collaborative statutory board led by Mana Ahuriri, was created to provide strategic management advice for the estuary.

Working Together

Management of the estuary currently falls under several different central and local government agencies: DOC, the Napier City Council and the Hawke's Bay Regional Council. The establishment of the Mana Ahuriri Statutory Board, Te Komiti Muriwai o Te Whanga, will pull these agencies together and is a huge step forward in managing the area with iwi input and oversight.

Finding a Balance

Both the Hawke's Bay Airport and Pāmu Farms border the estuary. Combine this with sitting on the edge of the city's industrial area and it's not easy to keep a natural

Urban nature, creating walkways that protect and restore the environment



The Ahuriri Estuary supports more than 70 species of birds, along with numerous fish, invertebrates and plant varieties.



A wide boardwalk allows safe passage over the mudflats



The Minister of Conservation, Eugenie Sage meets with Manu Ahuriri representatives Piri Prentice and Joinella Maihi-Carroll



The significance of the estuary is celebrated in sculpture

area pristine. It's a fine balance to protect this jewel while keeping up with the needs of a growing city.

For many years stormwater drains have run off into the estuary from the city, the airport and the farm. The need to make change to protect the area has been clearly recognised, and local councils and commercial businesses are working hard to improve the state of the wetland.

The recent upgrade to Watchman Road, Meeanee Quay/Westshore and the expressway – providing a safer entrance to Hawke's Bay Airport – together with the terminal upgrade to support visitor growth, show consideration for the environment and support a strong sense of place and connection to iwi. The terminal has been designed in the shape of a kuaka in flight, by local architects Designgroup PMA, and Mana Ahuriri representative along with artist Jacob Scott.

The Masterplan

Holding responsibility for the bulk of the land and activities around the Ahuriri Estuary, the Napier City Council has recognised the need to have a 'whole estuary' focus to manage the area. With the water quality currently ranked as extremely poor, action is needed to reduce the pollution entering the wetland, particularly through the stormwater systems.

In August 2018, the Napier City Council finalised a 'Masterplan' for the Ahuriri Estuary and Coastal Edge in partnership with the Regional Council, Mana Ahuriri and DOC. The vision is 'promoting

connectivity between people and place; delivering quality social, cultural and economic outcomes; and celebrating with authenticity the unique estuary and coastal edge environment.' As part of this, a long-term project aiming to improve water quality before it enters the estuary will focus on the treatment, at, site of water entering the stormwater system.

Over \$19 million has been set aside to deliver twelve masterplan projects over the next ten years.

The twelve projects will meet multiple objectives beyond improving stormwater quality. The Council will stage the delivery of the various projects, engaging with key stakeholders and the wider community throughout.

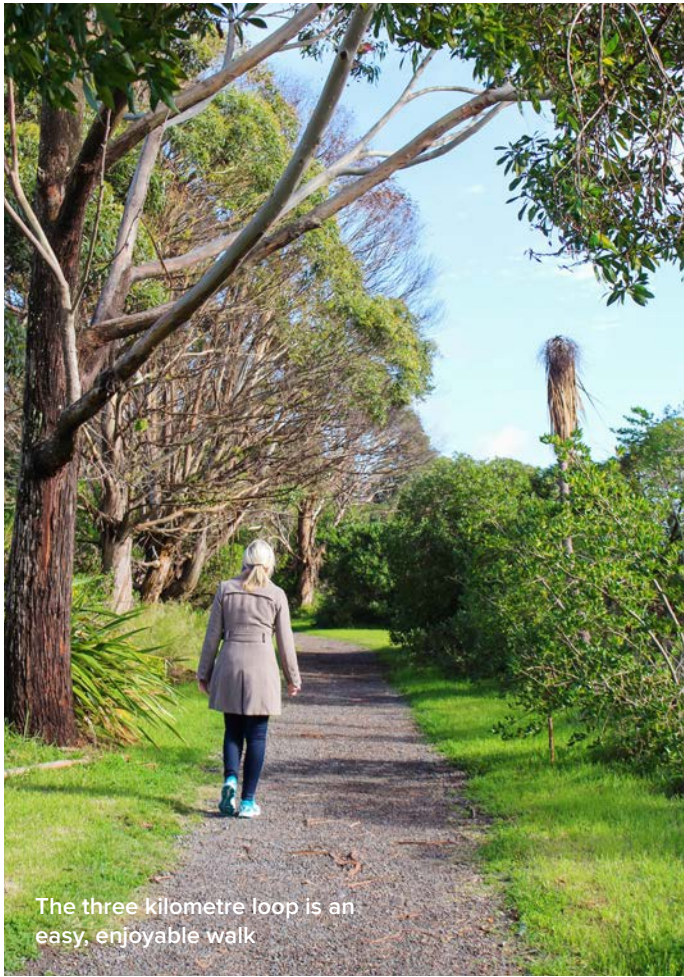
Hot Spot for Action

The Hawke's Bay Regional Council identified the estuary as one of the 'environmental hotspots' in its annual plan, striving for a healthier estuary for fish, birds and people.

Key actions for improving estuarine health have been to reduce sediment and nutrient loads to the estuary through soil erosion planting and riparian planting.

Building an understanding of the role of freshwater inputs for the estuary is also a focus. Additionally, a significant impact on the estuary has been the rapid expansion of the invasive tubeworm *Ficopomatus enigmaticus*, which forms reef-like structures impeding

PHOTO: Nina Mercer



The three kilometre loop is an easy, enjoyable walk

PHOTO: Nina Mercer



PHOTO: Nina Mercer



Royal spoonbills spend time at Ahuriri Estuary

PHOTO: Rod Hay



The kuaka, bar-tailed godwit

PHOTO: DOC



A well-deserved break for keen volunteers

PHOTO: Nina Mercer



The estuary is an area of strong cultural importance

water flow. Working with DOC and the Ahuriri Trust, over 250 tonnes of the invasive marine tubeworm has been removed to date. “We have seen a benefit to water flow in areas where the tubeworm has been removed,” says Regional Council Scientist Anna Madarasz-Smith. “But the growth is extensive and we need to continually work on both removing it and also reducing nutrients coming into the estuary, which may be fuelling its ongoing expansion.”

So far, the hotspot programme has seen more than 10,000 plants planted, and over 10km of waterways have been fenced in the catchment.

Community Passion

And, of course, there is the passion from the community. Conservation and the environment is everybody’s responsibility, and when community groups get active they can achieve huge results.

In Napier, locals have taken part in responsibility for the estuary from as far back as 1981, when the Ahuriri Protection Society was formed. A key achievement of this group has been to help others realise the importance of swamp and wetland habitats.

DOC volunteers meet with the Ahuriri Estuary Restoration Group monthly, to plant, weed and occasionally do walkway maintenance. These keen volunteers work mainly in the lower estuary area, but sometimes venture further up.

When You Visit

So how can you help? Enjoy your visit to the Ahuriri Estuary by making the most of the area, while keeping the native animals safe. Please don’t light fires, keep your dog on a leash, stay off the mudflats, give the birds peace and quiet and remember to take your rubbish away with you. This will mean an enjoyable, stress-free experience for you, the birds and future visitors.



Above: Interpretation panels tell the story of the estuary
Below: The variable oystercatcher can be seen at the estuary and is common on nearby beaches



PHOTOS: Nina Mercer

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