

World class fish & wildlife habitat

Southland Trust celebrates 21st birthday of wetland restoration in the Waiau region.

By Cam McCulloch

Of all milestone birthdays, 21sts are widely considered the most important. They're an opportunity to raise a glass, celebrate past achievements and look to the future with optimism.

For the Waiau Fisheries and Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Trust, the impact we've had over that time is remarkable. In 21 years we've transformed farmland into thriving, ecologically sustainable wetlands. We've created rearing habitats for our precious whitebait and longfin eel populations. We've boosted public access to tens of kilometres of waterways.

None of this would have been conceivable back in 1997 when land on the lower Waiau River was predominantly bare. Our people power and resources back then were limited but our vision was big – to transform land purchased from a \$5 million mitigation fund associated with the Manapouri Power Scheme into a world class habitat for fish and wildlife that all Kiwis could enjoy.

Our most established project, Rakatu Wetlands, is a living example of an ecosystem restored through hard work, perseverance and a classic 'give it a go' mentality.

Today, visitors can experience wetlands teeming with diverse wildlife and framed by the breath-taking Fiordland National Park. With more than 65 hectares of wetland protected and 50ha of new open water habitat created, Rakatu is our flagship project and a true icon of biodiversity restoration for Southland.

Further downstream at the mouth of the Waiau, the trust has worked to counter the effects of reduced coastal rearing habitats for whitebait, eels and other wildlife, as part of the mitigation associated with reduced flows in the Lower Waiau River for electricity production.

All up, we've created more than 90 interconnected wetland habitats, built new open water wetlands and conducted careful monitoring of wildlife using the new habitats.



Rakatu Wetlands Restoration Project today (top) and as farmland (bottom) before work commenced in 2003.

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Beyond these and other key restoration projects, the trust has signed 197 Habitat Enhancement Partnership Agreements with landowners by financially contributing to the construction of 118km of fences to restore and protect 384ha of important riparian strips around waterways. Riparian fencing supports

wetland health, reduces erosion, recharges groundwater and acts as transport corridors for fish and wildlife.

Alongside our restoration and access projects, we're also hugely proud of how we've carried out our work. Necessarily a 'lean and mean' model from day one, trustees hired two contractors who

simply rolled their sleeves up and got on with the job.

We've also carefully invested our initial funding to ensure the work we do is self-funded and will be sustainable well into the future.

Partnerships have been a hallmark of our success. The active and enthusiastic cooperation of local landowners

has been pivotal to the transformation we've seen in Waiau. This speaks to the pride farmers have as stewards of their land and commitment to preserving it for future generations. Along the way, we've enjoyed the support of the QEII Trust, Landcorp and Meridian Energy – all strong partners who share our vision and believe in the work we've done.

Perhaps the most exciting part of our work is to imagine what can be achieved in the next 21 years. If a small but determined group of New Zealanders was able to bring thriving wetlands back to Southland in just 21 years, with growing support and involvement from the public we will be able not only to continue transforming the Waiau – but to inspire care and restoration of these critical habitats all over the country.

Cam McCulloch is Chair of the Waiau Habitat Enhancement Trust
<http://waiautrust.org.nz>