

Native plants sure to thrive

Native plants will have an important role to play in the future and uncertain environment of the Canterbury Plains, writes IAN SPELLERBERG.

This is Conservation Week (September 13 to 20) and therefore a time to celebrate and experience New Zealand's native wildlife, natural areas and historic places.

It's also perhaps a good time to ask "what use is conservation?". The answer depends on what is meant by conservation. I suggest that in part it's about conserving what we have left of our natural heritage but also about restoring the historical losses.

But why bother? Some would argue that we should be content with what we have left. After all, New Zealand has 14 national parks amounting to about 30 per cent of the land area. That, together with all of the many other kinds of protected areas (terrestrial and aquatic), adds up to a lot in the name of conservation.

I believe that we have a moral responsibility to conserve our indigenous wildlife and natural area. There are, of course, many benefits both in a direct sense and indirectly. In addition and perhaps not well appreciated is that native plants can help to weave resilience into working lands.

The native plants and the native plant communities have all but gone from the Canterbury Plains. It was once a diverse area with many kinds of habitats with a rich and varied flora. A good description of what the area looked like is in a small book published by the Department of Conservation (*Native plant communities of the Canterbury Plains*). That's available from the Motukarara Conservation Nursery and Resource Centre.

Today, the plains look clean and green but there is not a native plant to be seen. Across those geometric patterns of the Canterbury landscape something has been stirring. It started as a few green dots and has been slowly spreading. At first you would not have noticed but now they are becoming more visible. It has the potential to bring huge economic benefits to these working lands. Those green dots are the first of the native

plantings and they are growing rapidly in number like emeralds in a monotonous landscape.

We are talking about a vast area and a huge project that will take decades to complete. Starting with just a few green dots, it seems inconceivable that it would be possible to link the few remaining remnants of native plant communities into some kind of ecological network.

Ecological networks provide a structure to hold key ecological areas, buffer zones and corridors together.

Greenways encompass both the land and the people so that nature is managed in a sustainable manner for future generations. The idea of a greenway fits well with natural, cultural and sustainable ethics. Thus the name Te Ara Kakariki Greenway Canterbury was born. The project was launched in 2006 at Peacock Springs with the gracious permission of Lady Isaac and the trust was formed in 2007.

The Greenway needed a visual identity with boundaries. The area chosen for Te Ara Kakariki Greenway Canterbury is that administered by Selwyn District Council. Selwyn District covers hundreds of thousands of hectares. The Te Ara Kakariki Greenway Canterbury is huge indeed in scale, and possibly the largest community-driven native-plant project fostering the use of native plants and native plant communities on private (and public) land in New Zealand.

That is what this project is all about. It's about fostering (for all reasons) the use of native plants and native plant communities.

The project builds on some existing, well-known conservation and restoration initiatives such as the Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust and Waihora Ellesmere Trust.

The project has huge implications for the restoration of the equally huge historic losses of our native flora. It also has significant benefits for native wildlife including our birds. In The Press (August 26th) there was an



Bright future: Orange-fronted parakeets or kakariki may not only survive, but also extend their range if habitats are restored.

article about the orange-fronted parakeets or kakariki. They are found only in three beech-clad Canterbury valleys and it is estimated there are but 200-400 left on the mainland. That article prompted several letters to the editor with questions about what else could be done.

Given appropriate control of predators and provision of food plants, it is possible that thousands of landowners could take part in Greenway Canterbury and help bring several native bird species back to the plains.

What else? The objectives of the trust include providing landowners with access to the resources that they may need, increasing the number of green dots, promoting the benefits of native flora and fauna and ecosystems, engaging with landowners, and reducing the barriers to the use of native plants. It is about using native plants and native plant communities for all kinds of reasons and at all kinds of scales, from small plantings

in local gardens to landscapes with native planting throughout the landscape. Potentially, this has huge economic implications that go hand in hand with the sustainable use of the Canterbury lowlands.

Where to from here? The trust is co-ordinating information about native planting on both public and private land. This will be free and widely available. The trust is also co-ordinating planting projects for public spaces to help with linkages to native plantings on private land. With the generous support of local Copthorne Hotels, native planting sessions have already taken place.

The Southern Woods Plant Nursery has provided resources for the Greenway Canterbury schools project. All schools in the region have been contacted and invited to take part in native plant projects and competitions.

Out there on the plains we could have a major native-plant education centre. Such a centre could include a

diverse range of educational programmes and activities aimed at all sectors of the community. This could be a major commercial venture and tourist attraction.

The Canterbury Plains are clean and green. A greenway from the mountains to the sea is a potential icon for Canterbury. I predict that in the not-too-distant future, this project will feature prominently in the tourist literature. It is not beyond imagination that tourists will come to New Zealand specifically to experience and celebrate native wildlife, natural areas and historic places (and kakariki) across the Canterbury Plains – and not just during Conservation Week.

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