

Environment & Planning Committee Meeting

22 August 2024

This Report relates to Item 10 in the Agenda

**“Significant Natural Areas Programme Annual
Report 2023/24”**



MARLBOROUGH
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Summary Report on the Results of the Significant Natural Areas Project 2023 - 2024





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Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

Through the Resource Management Act 1991 and provisions in the Marlborough Environment Plan (MEP), the Marlborough District Council has a role in maintaining and protecting indigenous biodiversity and significant natural areas in the Marlborough region. Since 2001 the Council has implemented the “Significant Natural Areas” (SNA) project, which has involved extensive field based ecological survey work and a subsequent protection and monitoring programme.

This report provides a summary of results of the Significant Natural Areas project (SNA) over the one-year period from July 2023 to June 2024. It summarises the results of:

- Ecological survey.
- Environmental protection work carried out through the SNA Landowner Assistance Programme.
- Significant Natural Area monitoring programmes.
- Community outreach; and
- The East Coast Vehicle Bylaw.

Strategic Direction

Central government has released the Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy (ANZBS) and National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity (NPSIB) which were developed through a process being led nationally by MfE and DOC with major input from Local Government. These documents are still being assessed by Council. They, along with the likes of the Kotahitanga mō te Taiao Alliance Strategy, will guide the Marlborough Biodiversity Strategy, another project that needs to be completed within the next 10 years.

Ecological Survey Work

Since 2001, extensive field based ecological surveys have been carried out on private land through large parts of the Marlborough region. Much of the work was carried out from 2001 to 2009 and since that time properties have been visited opportunistically by invitation.

There are a total of 782 Significant Natural Areas and 166 Recommended Areas for Protection currently mapped and identified in our database, an increase of 13 sites in 2023/24.

Managed Site Protection Programme

Established in 2003, the landowner assistance has contributed funding and expertise to protect and improve biodiversity in 168 SNAs.

There were 32 projects funded in the 2023/2024 financial year. Of these, 13 new projects were initiated during the year.

This programme to assist landowners to improve the condition of their SNAs resulted in the investment of \$541,384 into indigenous biodiversity on private land in 2023/24, of which Council paid about 40%. Around 50% of this went into weed control and the remainder was spent on planting (25%), fencing stock out of sites (15%) and undertaking animal pest control (10%). All of the planting budget went to our priority habitats, wetlands and dunelands.

Table 1: Total Funding Contributions for Biodiversity Protection Projects on Private Land 2023 – 2024 (GST Inclusive)

	2023/24	2022/23
Marlborough District Council Funding	\$232,550	\$200,072
Central Government	\$5,750	\$90,602
QEI National Trust	\$155,365	\$14,896
Landowners	\$147,719	\$226,628
Total	\$541,384.00	\$532198

Monitoring

Monitoring of sites tells us if we are achieving gains and gives direction to the Protection Programme. Monitoring in 2023/24 resulted in visits to 25 Managed sites and 13 Unmanaged sites. This made for a total of 38 sites monitored on 19 properties over nine Ecological Districts.

Results from this monitoring were encouraging as all Managed sites bar one were in Good or Fair condition with a trend over time of Stable or Improving. One that was declining was a coastal cliff being undermined by Cook Strait storm surges. The Unmanaged site results were more concerning. While over half were in Fair or Good condition, 50% were declining for a variety of reasons, including browse by possums and stock.

Discussion and Conclusions

There has been a continued increased involvement with landowners on the east coast, south of Lake Grassmere/Kapara Te Hau. A high percentage of this coast is Significant Natural Area, Outstanding Natural Landscape, Nationally Important Wildlife Corridor and habitat for Threatened and Highly Mobile species. Work began in earnest after the November 2016 Kaikōura earthquake as the SNAs that were likely to have been affected were assessed for damage. Many of the sites are coastal dune areas that have been uplifted during the quake. While they had not been hugely damaged by the quake, there was considerable evidence of damage caused by vehicles being able to access the area in a way they had not been able to previously.

The Council implemented the East Coast Vehicle Bylaw in July 2023 after an extended period of consultation with iwi and the community. This has seen the coastal strip from the Awatere River mouth to the Waima/Ure River designated vehicle free. A nine-kilometre section, between Marfell's Beach and the private airstrip south of Cape Campbell, is still open to ATVs and UTVs, provided a number of conditions are met. Biodiversity section of Council has been implementing the bylaw and monitoring the effects of it on coastal biodiversity. A 200-metre-long post and rope fence has been constructed at the southern boundary because vehicles continued to travel illegally along the beach south of the Cape Campbell Airstrip despite the new rules and signage.

An unexpected benefit of the earthquake uplift has been the creation of new beach and dunes. We are taking the opportunity to restore natural dune ecosystems on new sand before it is overwhelmed by exotic weeds such as marram grass and wilding pines, and much has been done to help achieve this. Increased focus on the coastal dunes has resulted in an improved knowledge of what is found there, including nationally important populations of endemic animals, such as Marlborough spotted skink, katipo spider and kiwaia, the mat daisy jumper moth, which is a critically endangered flightless moth unique to this coast. Planting pockets of native sand binding plants, to introduce valuable seed sources into the Significant Natural Areas on the coast and gradually reducing the weed load in those same areas, will increase the resilience of the area and is enhancing populations of indigenous biodiversity.

Restoration of large wetland ecosystems at Para Swamp and Lake Elterwater continues. Both sites are the focus of planting native species and controlling willows.

Landowners are also showing their commitment to their SNAs by covenanting through the QEII Trust and Department of Conservation, with 5 new covenants on SNAs in 2023/24.



Figure 1: Ecologist Geoff Walls looking for rare plants on limestone in South Marlborough.

Geoff, who was a key member of the team for over 20 years, surveyed and described most of the SNAs of Marlborough and went on to undertake the majority of the monitoring of their condition until 2020, passed away after a period of illness on January 5, 2024. Geoff's commitment to the programme and his engaging style of communication went a long way to ensuring that the programme was so successful in Marlborough. He is fondly remembered by the team and by many of our SNA landowners.

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1. Introduction

The Significant Natural Area project was established in 2001 to enable the Marlborough District Council to meet its obligations under section 6(c) of the Resource Management Act which requires that, in relation to managing the use, development and protection of natural and physical resources, the protection of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna, shall be recognised and provided for as a matter of national importance.

The Council of the time decided to meet these obligations through a proactive but non-regulatory programme to identify significant natural areas and offer landowners support to protect and enhance these areas. Integral to this approach was a commitment to hold the property specific information confidentially rather than scheduling it for regulatory purposes.

A working group was established to assist the Council to manage the programme. The group included Councillors and staff, Department of Conservation staff, landowner representatives and the local QEII representative. The working group has played an important role in guiding the direction of the project over the years.

Methods under the Marlborough Environment Plan require the identification of Significant Natural Areas based on set criteria that must be met in order for a site to be considered Significant.

Information collected through the significant natural areas surveys is held in a database and is only reported publicly in a general sense. The two main ways the information is used are, firstly, to provide a regional overview of significant natural areas and biodiversity on private land in the Marlborough region, and secondly, to provide a basis for developing protection programmes with landowners interested in proactively managing and protecting these areas.

Central Government released a National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity on 7 July 2023. It came into effect on 4 August 2023. Amongst many other things it provides direction to councils on how to identify significant natural areas and manage the adverse effects of new activities on them. While Marlborough District has had an SNA programme since 2001, the NPSIB required that this programme be modified in some ways.

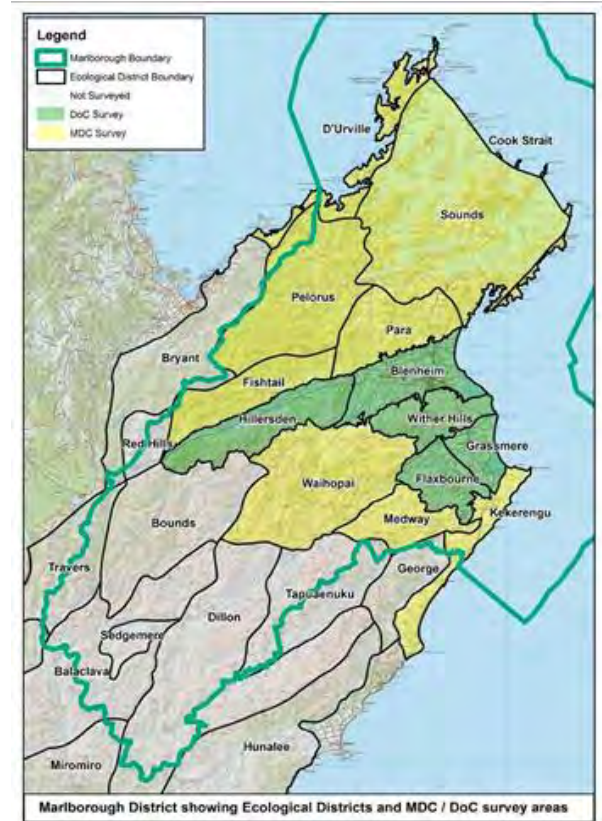
Government has recently introduced a new bill to, amongst other matters, extend the date by which local authorities have to identify and include new significant natural areas (SNAs) in district plans by a further three years, (i.e., from 31 December 2027 to 31 December 2030). The Bill has had its first reading in Parliament. All other local authority obligations under the NPSIB are unchanged.

Part A: Ecological Survey Work

2. Field Based Ecological Surveys – Background and Overview

Between 2001 and 2009, extensive field based ecological surveys were carried out on private land throughout large parts of Marlborough District. This work has been approached as a partnership with landowners, who have participated voluntarily. Through the results of the ecological survey work, it has been possible to analyse the extent and type of ecosystems remaining and the severity and types of pressures these remaining areas are subject to.

Ecological districts have been used as the survey units. The Marlborough District Council carried out the majority of the survey work overall (Kekerengu, Medway, and Waihopai ecological districts in South Marlborough and Para, Fishtail, Te Hoiere/Pelorus, Rangitoto ki te Tonga/D’Urville, Sounds and Cook Strait ecological districts in North Marlborough – (see yellow shaded areas on map). However, the Department of Conservation also carried out a substantial part of the survey work between the years 2002 – 2004, as part of the Protected Natural Areas (PNA) survey of the Wairau ecological region, which included five ecological districts in South Marlborough - Grassmere, Flaxbourne, Wither Hills, Blenheim and Hillersden (see green shaded areas on map).



Some ecological districts at the south of the region (Tapuaenuku, Bounds, Dillon, Sedgemere, Balacclava, Travers and Red Hills), were not surveyed in the 2000’s being mostly Public Conservation Land or pastoral leasehold land. In 2018, surveys of pastoral lease properties in the Upper Awatere Valley were initiated to fill gaps in coverage in Tapuaenuku, Dillon and Waihopai ecological districts. Other data from other sources is added as it becomes available.

There are still some gaps in coverage in parts of Marlborough previously surveyed, especially in the Te Hoiere/Pelorus, Waihopai, and Flaxbourne, which are being addressed as opportunity allows.

As each SNA is visited for monitoring, the opportunity is taken to reassess the boundary to ensure it still reflects the extent of significant habitat. The inaccuracies mainly stem from the quality of mapping that was available during the early 2000’s compared to what is used today, however they also show where changes in land use have allowed some sites to expand.

This ecological survey work has resulted in a large amount of information being collected. It provides both a regional scale overview of the extent and state of biodiversity resources on private land, and a more detailed property scale assessment which is useful for implementing practical protection measures such as fencing and pest control. While the emphasis has been on terrestrial vegetation and habitat values, wetlands and some waterways have also been assessed.

The new direction given by the National Policy Statement of Indigenous Biodiversity has been put on hold for three years to give as Central Government takes the opportunity to review it and the Resource Management Act.

2.1. Summary of Results – July 2023 to June 2024

2.1.1 Property Surveys

Thirteen new sites measuring a total of 694ha were added to the database this year. They were on 12 properties in Waihopai (5), Flaxbourne, Kekerengu, Para (3), Pelorus (2) and Sounds Ecological Districts. They range from beech and podocarp forest to coastal broadleaf and wetlands.



Figure 2: Covenanted SNA surveyed in the Tummil.

The Omaka Valley sites were remarkable for the size of the matai trees as well as their overall species diversity. A new population of 50 pink brooms was also found unexpectedly along with a variety of other bluff species.

Sites in Para ED include old titoki forest rare to the district which is being overwhelmed by old man's beard and is now being restored, and a large area of wetland adjacent to Para Swamp, our most significant lowland wetland.

The cost to Council of these surveys and reports was \$11,787.

2.1.2 Wetland Survey 2010 – 2013

From 2010 – 2013 Council carried out a further project to identify regionally significant wetlands in Marlborough. These have been scheduled in the proposed Marlborough Environment Plan which is currently notified, and submissions are being analysed. Wetlands are identified on the Planning Zone maps and landowners will then have another opportunity to consider them. This project involved desktop identification followed by notification to all affected landowners and follow up field visits on request. There was some overlap with wetland areas already identified through the earlier Significant Natural Area surveys.

Most wetlands were not visited or described in a survey as part of the identification process. This is an information gap which will need to be filled as opportunity allows with some ecological assessments.

There were 1,300 wetlands identified in the desk-top exercise. While the final number of identified wetlands is yet to be confirmed, the vast majority are likely to be scheduled in the Marlborough Environment Plan once it is ratified. Until then they are all being treated as SNAs, which means they qualify for the same level of assistance through the Landowner Assistance Programme.

Additional wetlands identified opportunistically since then have been added to a separate database to be processed during the next plan change.

2.1.3 Results

The tables below show the summary of ecological results from the Significant Natural Area surveys on private land for both South and North Marlborough in the 23-year period from July 2001 to June 2024. These do not include the additional wetland sites that have been identified more recently through the 2010-13 survey described above, unless they have had a full SNA assessment report completed and been assigned a number.

Error! Reference source not found. Table 2 and Table 3 show the total participation rates and overall results from 2001 to June 2024 in South and North Marlborough respectively. Using ecological district units, the tables show; the number of sites identified, the number of sites legally protected, the combined area and percentage of total land area of all of the identified Significant Natural Area sites, and the percentage of Department of Conservation land in each Ecological District.

As of June 2024, there has been a total of 782 Significant Natural Areas identified. In addition to this, there are another 166 sites identified by DOC during the PNA surveys of Wairau and Molesworth Ecological Regions, and 1,307 Significant Wetlands identified by Council and listed in the MEP. Together they cover 146,643 Ha of land in the Marlborough Region. Therefore, 9,188ha of additional land was added to the database of significant sites this financial year.

Table 2: South Marlborough Ecological Survey Participation and Results (July 01 – June 23)

Ecological Districts	No. of Sites	No. Sites Legally Protected	Combined Area (ha)	SNA sites as a % of Total Private Land Area in ED	SNA sites as a % of Total Land Area	% of ED in DoC land
Kekerengu	65	6	1,647	9.9%	5.4%	3.8%
Flaxbourne	75	8	2,369	6.5%	8.3%	0.3%
Grassmere	18	0	1,738	6.2%	9.4%	0.4%
Blenheim	22	12	3,085	2.4%	7.4%	3.4%
Medway	69	13	3,833	12.1%	11.9%	1.1%
Hillersden	48	9	9,463	10.1%	18.4%	3.6%

Wither Hills	25	3	5,039	16.6%	16.6%	0%
Waihopai	80	20	17,890	21.3%	15.8%	24.7%
Tapuaenuku	21	2	3,775	9.3%	5.1%	40.4%
Dillon	55	0	34,057	38%	18.8%	69.8%
Balacava	29	0	24,250	54.9%	19.8%	91.4%
Bounds	4	0	2,884	11.6%	3.0%	89%
Sedgemere	6	0	1,826	N/A	12.8%	100%
Totals	517	73 (14%)	111,858 ha	Av=15.3%	Av=11.8%	Av=32.9%

Table 3: North Marlborough – Ecological Survey – Participation and Results (July 01 – June 23)

Ecological Districts	No. of Sites	No. sites legally protected	Combined Area (ha)	SNA sites as a % of Total Private Land Area in ED	SNA sites as a % of Total Land Area	% of ED in DoC Land
Rangitoto ki te Tonga/D'Urville	50	2	5,180	32.8%	17.9%	30.9%
Cook Strait	8	1	478	12.9%	9.3%	28.4%
Sounds	231	31	12,659	18.2%	11%	41.2%
Te Hoiere/ Pelorus	45	11	2,143	8.3%	2.1%	67.9%
Para	67	9	3,667	10.7%	7.7%	27.9%
Fishtail	28	4	1,093	7.9%	2.5%	67.9%
Totals	429	58 (13.5%)	25220	(Av=15.1%)	(Av=8.4%)	(Av=44%)

2.2. Discussion

Our field based ecological surveys have produced a lot of information about the distribution and type of native habitat remaining on private land in both South and North Marlborough. Reports about each site or property belong to the landowner and are often the catalyst for landowners engaging in these special places on their land. Despite a 75% buy-in from Marlborough landowners when the programme was initiated, there are still gaps that have not been assessed for SNAs, however this is constantly changing as new landowners invite MDC onto their land. Sites are being added to the database on a regular basis with new relationships being developed with landowners all the time, usually leading to improvements being made to many of the sites.

New rules in the NPSIB would have resulted in a new era for Marlborough of mapping all sites compulsorily and on all land tenures, with many more sites mapped than previously. This work has been put on hold by central government to allow a review of the NPSIB along with the RMA. Our work continues and is unaffected by these political movements as we continue to meet the demand from landowners.

2.3. South Marlborough

This part of the region is characterised by a long history of extensive native vegetation clearance and is consequently much more depleted in ecological functioning than North Marlborough. While there are some extensive areas of beech forest, kānuka forest, shrublands and tussock grasslands, these almost all occur in the extensive areas of hill country, leaving the lowlands highly modified.

Of the thirteen ecological districts that were surveyed in the South Marlborough area there is very little Department of Conservation land in seven of them. The percentage of total land area of significant natural sites is also very low for some of these - less than 10% in the three lowland coastal ecological districts (Flaxbourne, Grassmere and Kekerengu) and less than 12% for two others (Blenheim and Medway), and less than 17% for Wither Hills. Any district with less than 20% indigenous vegetation cover is at elevated risk for high loss of indigenous biodiversity.

These six Districts are therefore Priority One in the Statement of National Priorities for Protecting Rare and Threatened Biodiversity on Private Land, which identifies land environments that have less than 20% remaining in indigenous cover. They are therefore also Priority One for our SNA programme. Grassmere

and Kekerengu are where the east coast dunes and beaches are found, so they fall into the two most depauperate districts.

Old mans beard is a growing issue in South Marlborough along with animal pests, especially possums, goats and deer. Wilding conifers are also a huge threat to ecosystems.

2.4. North Marlborough

The North Marlborough part of the region has a different climate and history of land clearance to South Marlborough and also has a considerable amount of Public Conservation Land (ranging from 24% to 68% in different ecological districts). The percentage of total land area of significant natural sites is generally higher than in South Marlborough, ranging from about 7% to 30% across the ecological districts.

While some ecosystem types are quite depleted, for instance lowland alluvial, swamp forests and kohekohe forest, a significant amount of native forest habitat remains – both beech and podocarp dominated. Additionally, large areas of regenerating forests consisting of kānuka, mānuka, tauhinu and broadleaved species are present where land has been left to regenerate following earlier clearance.

While fencing is important for some lowland sites within a pastoral farming landscape, feral animal pest control is the main challenge in North Marlborough, especially as there are still populations of a range of native fauna present (forest birds, sea birds, weka, giant land snails, and native freshwater fish species).



Figure 3: Tall matai tree in the Omaka Valley.

Part B: Site Improvement – Landowner Assistance Programme – Summary of Results 2022-2023

3. Landowner Assistance Programme – Background and Overview

The Landowner Assistance Programme has been operating since 2003 in conjunction with the field ecological survey work and has targeted assistance to high value sites with identified pressures and threats that can be practically managed. The main focus of the programme has been on management of threats within individual high value significant natural area sites (including a mix of fencing, weed and animal pest control and restoration planting work)

A concerted conservation effort on private land is needed if functioning ecosystems are to be maintained, especially in the lowland areas of South Marlborough which have been identified nationally as threatened environments with less than 20% of natural cover remaining. To be effective, this would need to include continued protection of the last remaining remnants as well as active restoration planting to create new habitats and increase the overall area in natural cover (which is currently less than 1% on the Wairau and Awatere Plain areas). So far about 20% of the 894 identified sites over the whole of Marlborough have received funding assistance for restoration or management (51 in North Marlborough and 105 in South Marlborough). While a number of sites are likely to be deteriorating in condition over time due to a range of threats and pressures, it is pleasing to note that the condition of seven of the 13 unmanaged sites monitored in 2023/24 was Fair, and the trend in eight of the ten was either Improving or Stable.

Expenditure to manage SNAs averaged about \$120K per annum from 2007 until 2012. Council has since increased its commitment and in 2023/2024 the SNA Landowner Assistance Fund distributed \$232,550 to landowners. A lot of restoration and good-will has also been achieved by the programme over time. There is also unrecorded effort over and above this where Council is not involved financially through the SNA programme.

3.1. SNA Habitat Improvement Projects 2023-2024

In the 12-month period from July 2023 to June 2024, the Council contributed to 32 projects in total. Eleven of these were new projects, with a mix of weed control, pest control, fencing, planting, planning and threatened species management. Eighteen of the projects are ongoing; mostly weed control but also including a fencing project and threatened native broom management.

Highlights of the year in the Management Projects include:

- Planting 10000+ trees and dune plants along the east coast between Mussel Point and Needles Point, in community and landowner planting days.
- OMB control to protect coastal titoki forest near Rarangi.
- Fencing stock out of the Hog Swamp and the hillslopes above at Blind River.
- Fencing ungulates out of 70ha of pink broom habitat and control of animals inside that fence.
- Ongoing planting and willow control at Para Swamp.
- Wilding pine and OMB control at Mirza Downs in collaboration with QEII.
- Predator and marram control along the coastal strip south of Cape Campbell to the Ure River

Since 2003, 167 separate sites have received funding assistance from MDC. Council contributed \$232,550 this financial year which leveraged another \$308,834 from landowners and others. MDC has contributed close to \$1.9M towards SNA management over 20 years, which has resulted in over \$5.1M being spent in that time improving the condition of these sites.

Recently, restoration of the East Coast south of Lake Grassmere/Kapara Te Hau has been a focus. Over 30000 plants have been planted in the last three years and the survival has been very high. Pupils from Marlborough Boys College and Seddon School have helped other locals to plant them. This was funded by Council through the SNA programme and Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) through their one billion Trees Matariki Tu Rakau community planting programme. The closing of the beach to vehicles over much of this coast, via Council's East Coast Beach Vehicle Bylaw, will help these plants to establish and for the ecology to recover. Barriers have been erected to direct vehicles away from planted areas to keep vehicles off around the Cape Campbell beech areas which are open to some vehicles and this has helped to protect planted areas. The planting programme is ongoing.

Wetland restoration is incredibly important. Eight Significant Wetland restoration projects were funded, with Council contributing \$107,168. All but one are in South Marlborough. The most significant of these this year is a 19.7ha property connected to Para Swamp which is currently dominated by crack willow. Over the next few years it will be restored to an outstanding lowland podocarp forest.

Following harvesting of pines in the Pukaka Valley, Marlborough Regional Forestry has taken the opportunity to reassess their forestry there and have retired sections of the flood plain and where there are scattered old podocarp trees remaining, mostly totara. These areas will be allowed to restore themselves to native forest while MRF will control weeds such as willows and old mans beard.

A summary of all Significant Natural Area project expenditure is included in Appendix 1.



Figure 4: Revegetation project on steep coastal faces at Waitui Farm. Before.



Figure 5: Revegetation project on steep coastal faces at Waitui Farm. Afterwards.

3.2. Protection Projects Summary – July 2023 – June 2024

Table 4: Summary of new protection projects July 2023 – June 2024 (GST inclusive)

Ecosystem Type	Size (ha)	North/South Marlborough ED	Type of Work	Total Funding	Council	Other	Landowner
Wetland/hill slope (Yea)	37	S Grassmere	Fence	\$34500	\$17250	\$0	\$17250
Wetland (Phi)	1	N Wither Hills	Fence/Plant	\$11684	\$5842	\$0	\$5842
Wetland (Cham)	19.7	N Para	Weeds/plant	\$57724	\$57724	\$0	\$0
Riparian (Pamu)	618	S Dillon	Weeds	\$13000	\$5750	\$5750	\$3450
Hillslopes (McL)	642	N Sounds	Pests	\$8050	\$4025	\$0	\$4025
Hillslopes (Sto)	0.7	N Para	Weeds	\$6274	\$3137	\$0	\$3137
Hillslopes (Tho)	6.7	N Para	Weeds	\$14793	\$9739	\$0	\$5000
Riparian (Daw)	19.6	S Waihopai	Weeds	\$11256	\$5628	\$0	\$5628
Hillslopes (Web)	121	S Kekerengu	Pines	\$9147	\$9147	\$0	\$0
Hillslope (Dow)	20	S Kekerengu	OMB	\$4365	\$4365	\$0	\$0
Riparian (OBr)	14	N Sounds	Pines	\$16560	\$8280	\$0	\$8280
Riparian (Kai)	16.4	S Flaxbourne	Survey	\$2565	\$0	\$2565	\$0
Hillslopes (Ble)	247.4	S Waihopai	Survey	\$4945	\$0	\$4945	\$0
Total	1763.5			\$194863	\$130887	\$13260	\$52612

Table 5: Summary of ongoing protection projects July 2023-June 2024 (GST inclusive)

Ecosystem Type	Size (ha)	North/South Marlborough ED	Type of Work	Total Funding	Council	Other	Landowner
Hillslopes (Mal)	4	N Sounds	Fence	\$2034	\$1017	\$0	\$1017
Hillslopes (Dil)	28	S Waihopai	Fence	\$1531	\$1531	\$0	\$0
Wetland (Whi)	1	S Flaxbourne	Planting	\$6764	\$3382	\$0	\$3382
Wetland (Hun)	1	S Blenheim	Planting	\$17236	\$8618	\$0	\$8618
Hillslopes (Harv)	344	N Sounds	pests	\$2600	\$800	\$0	\$1800
Hillslopes (Ste)	1011	S Waihopai	weeds	\$11558	\$5779	\$0	\$5779
Wetland (Elt)	66	S Kekerengu	Plants	\$3726	\$1242	\$0	\$2484
Forest (Bala)	73	S Waihopai	Pests, Fence	\$8586	\$8586	\$0	0
Wetland (Row)	28	S Blenheim	Weed	\$8580	\$4290	\$0	\$4290
Coastal (Pete)	12	S Kekerengu	Marram, plant	\$38127	\$5520	\$36049	\$0
Coastal (Wilt)	3.0	S Kekerengu	Planting	\$51412	\$12570	\$13842	\$25000
Hillslopes (Hol)	468	N Pelorus	pests	\$11500	\$5750	\$0	\$5750
Hillslopes (Sti)	149	S Flaxbourne	Weeds	\$7600	\$3800	\$4692	\$3800
Hillslopes (Harv)	54	S Medway	OMB	\$2588	\$1294	\$0	\$1294
Wetland (Patr)	5	S Hillersden	Weeds, plants	\$11700	\$5850	\$0	\$5850
Hillslopes (Wit)	281	N Para	Pines	\$9680	\$4840	\$0	\$4840
Hillslopes (Ham)	305	S Waihopai	Weeds	\$13868	\$6934	\$0	\$6934
Coastal (Sto)	92	S Kekerengu	Plants, weeds	\$62240	\$19860	\$88872	\$14269
Hillslopes (Peg)	185.8	Medway	Survey	\$4400	\$0	\$4400	\$0
Total	3111			\$275730	\$101663	\$147855	\$95107

Table 6: Total Funding Contributions for Biodiversity Protection Projects on Private Land 2023-2024

Marlborough District Council Funding	\$232,550
Central Government Funds	\$5,750
QEII National Trust	\$155,365
Landowners	\$147,719
Total	\$541384

Table 7: Summary of Total Funding Contributions for Biodiversity Protection Projects on Private Land 2003 – 2024

Marlborough District Council Funding	\$1,854,488
Central Government Funds	\$965,930
QEII National Trust	\$435,481
Landowners	\$1,912,231
Total	\$5168130

3.3. Relationships

Council promotes covenanting and maintains strong relationships with the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (QEII) and Department of Conservation, both of which provide a mechanism for landowners to independently protect areas on their properties.

A total of 62 of the 167 projects protected through the programme so far have been on covenanted sites. Five of these are Protected Private Land (PPL) covenants administered by the Department of Conservation and the other 56 are QEII covenants. The QEII takes responsibility for on-going monitoring of their covenanted sites, reducing the monitoring required to be carried out by Council.

The table below shows the number of SNAs that have been protected by either the QEII Trust or DOC. The boundaries of both do not often align, so the area is only where they overlap. The data comes from QEII and DOC and is only updated once the covenant has been formalised, fenced and then surveyed, which allows it to be mapped and added to the GIS layer. This creates a lag time from the time the agreement is signed to when it is mapped.

SNA monitoring reports recommend that owners contact the QEII Trust to discuss legal protection of sites. This has been successful in prompting SNA sites to be processed for covenanting by the QEII Trust. The Trust monitors their sites on a biennial basis. During the year, they visited 23 SNAs that they protect. Another four QEII covenants are Significant Wetlands. A further fifteen SNAs and two Significant Wetlands are protected by Conservation Covenants (PPL) through DOC.

We also work closely with the Landcare Trust to the benefit of habitats of mutual interest.

Table 8: SNAs in Marlborough which have legal protection

	Sites
SNAs in Marlborough which have some legal protection at July 2023	155
SNAs in Marlborough which have some legal protection at July 2024 ¹	131

Council has also been working collaboratively with the Marlborough Sounds Restoration Trust and the South Marlborough Landscape Restoration Trust in recent years and has contributed to several projects on private properties led by these Trusts. Council is currently collaborating with MSRT toward control of ungulates in SNAs in Waterfall Bay in Inner Queen Charlotte Sound and SMLRT toward control of wilding pine trees in the Taylor and Omaka catchments.

Community-based conservation groups currently operating in the Marlborough region include:

- Endeavour Inlet Restoration Trust.
- Grovetown Lagoon Restoration Project.
- Kaipupu Mainland Island Sanctuary.
- Para Swamp Restoration project (Fish and Game and The Gamebird Habitat Trust).
- Picton and Rarangi Dawn Chorus Groups.
- Te Hoiere/Pelorus Long-Tailed Bat Project (Forest and Bird).
- Arapaoa Kiwi Trust.
- East Coast Protection Group.

All of these groups are independent of the Council and compete in a tight market for funding from a small number of other sources, such as Lotteries Commission, Rata Foundation, Canterbury Community Fund, the DOC Community Fund, Council and landowners. Council has worked with DOC to set up a Biodiversity Forum to provide a simple way of communicating with all the groups and enabling them to communicate with each other. These meetings have been well attended and have been seen as positive by the various community groups.

¹ The table above of SNAs in Marlborough which have legal protection indicates a reduction however this is linked to a change of methodology used when calculating these values to counter inconsistencies found in legacy mapping. This reduction is not due to a reduced area of land being legally protected. There was an increase of 6 sites covenanted by QEII alone.

Part C: Monitoring Programme – Summary of Results

4. Background and Overview

Monitoring is an important part of measuring and tracking the outputs and outcomes of any project. There are three types of biodiversity monitoring that are relevant to the Significant Natural Areas project.

In relation to the Significant Natural Areas project, Council is undertaking a programme of ongoing monitoring of the state and condition of a selection of representative sites from the more than 867 Unmanaged SNAs identified. This type of monitoring was started in the 2014/15 in two ecological districts and repeated annually ever since.

Systematic monitoring was established to assess the condition of the 167 sites that have been actively managed through the Landowner Assistance Programme since 2006 (about 13% of all sites identified). In 2024, 25 managed sites were monitored and found to be in fair or good condition with an ongoing trend of stable or improving. Not unsurprisingly, managed sites are in better condition than unmanaged sites.



Figure 6: Possum browse on kohekohe leaves.

The QEII National Trust monitors the sites that it has covenanted (currently 95 sites in Marlborough, 89 of which overlap with SNAs), so Council does not generally monitor the SNAs that QEII monitors, even though Council contributes to funding management at some of them.

4.1 2023 - 2024 Monitoring of Unmanaged SNA Sites

Monitoring to assess the state and condition of a selection of representative sites that have not had any specific conservation management applied, was carried out in 2023/2024.

They were located in the Kekerengu, Flaxbourne, Hillersden and Sounds Ecological Districts (EDs).

4.2 Site Monitoring Results

A total of 14 unmanaged sites were monitored on eight properties. The results are mixed.

Overall results show that about half the unmanaged sites visited were in poor condition (six were in fair condition and six were poor) and seven were deteriorating. While disappointing, this largely reflects the impact of possums which are building numbers in the Marlborough Sounds. In many cases however, the remainder at Fair or better and Stable or better reflects the commitment of landowners to manage their land in a manner sympathetic with the natural environment. Even the deteriorating sites were on properties of caring landowners but in out of the way places and not often visited.

Table 9: Summary of condition results of SNA Un-managed site revisits to Kekerengu, Hillersden, and Flaxbourne ecological districts

<u>Site Condition</u>	Good	Good/Fair	Fair	Fair/Poor	Poor
	1	1	6		6
<u>Site Trend</u>	Improving	Improving/Stable	Stable	Stable/ Deteriorating	Deteriorating
		2	5		7

Damage is occurring to dunes, beaches and coastal biodiversity within and beside the SNAs along the East Coast. Council initiated a Vehicle Bylaw however damage to these vulnerable natural ecosystems has continued in the absence of any enforcement of the bylaw, as for the most part behaviour has not changed to the degree sufficient for recovery in areas that are not being actively managed.



Figure 7: Multiple vehicle tracks at the racetrack turnaround point at Needles Point.

4.3 2023 – 2024 Monitoring of Managed SNA Sites

In the 2023/2024 monitoring round, a total of 24 Managed sites were visited on 15 properties. This is a moderate increase after a number of disrupted years.

Assessment methodology is qualitative and simple and includes rapid ecological condition and trend assessments along with photo points. Reports prepared for each site visited and provided to the landowners include commentary site maps and photographs established at defined photo points to provide a visual record of changes over time. Any emerging issues (for instance weed invasion) are discussed with the landowner and further management is often put in place to deal with these. The monitoring allows the Council to maintain links with landowners and assist them in relation to these sites. Further quantitative monitoring could be added in time to allow a more rigorous analysis of change in site condition over time or to target particular points of interest within sites.

All managed sites were found to be in fair or good condition and with a trend of improving or stable (only one of the 16 sites was deteriorating, due to storm damage). The condition and trend of managed sites is better than unmanaged sites, as you would expect, however many of these sites are not under current management but are benefiting from previous efforts in fencing and weed control. This is a good outcome.

The table below provides a summary of the condition and trend of the sites monitored.

Table 10: Summary of Monitoring results for SNA Managed sites 2023/2024

Site Condition	Good	Good/Fair	Fair	Fair/Poor	Poor
	8	8	8		
Site Trend	Improving	Improving/Stable	Stable	Stable/Deteriorating	Deteriorating
	13	4	6		1

4.4 Summary and Discussion

Some observations from the 2023/2024 monitoring round:

- Landowners continue to be co-operative and allow access for monitoring purposes and all landowners were very interested in their sites and tracking their progress over time.
- Most managed SNA sites visited are improving in condition generally due to management interventions, or, in some cases, natural resilience and re-generation processes.
- Threats are most often either feral ungulates (mostly goats and deer), possums or weeds (especially old man’s beard and wilding pines). These are old issues that seem to have gained traction in recent years. Possum numbers are building in the Sounds.
- Post the 2016 earthquake, natural regeneration on the coast south of Marfells Beach has largely been hindered by the impacts of much higher use of the coast by people using vehicles. Rare indigenous dune species and ecosystems have been damaged by vehicle traffic. Implementation of the East Coast Vehicle Bylaw has had limited success in changing this.
- The condition of the coast and the effectiveness of the bylaw is being measured with regular monitoring using cameras and aerial drone photography.

Part D: Associated Projects

5.0 Publicity and Information

5.1 Background

Publicity and promotion have been integral to the Significant Natural Areas Project because it relies heavily on voluntary participation and proactive protection activity from landowners. Initially the emphasis was on increasing awareness about the unique and diverse biodiversity of the region and the opportunity for landowners to participate in collecting information and looking at options for protection where necessary. This occurred through personal contact, individual property reports, annual newsletters and newspaper articles.

More recently publicity about the SNA project is integrated into other media releases and publicity, for instance links with entrants in the Marlborough Environment Awards, farming articles and so on.

5.2 The 2023-2024 Year

During 2023/2024, the Biodiversity Co-ordinator spoke at the Merino NZ Biodiversity Field Day at Glen Orkney Station. He also attended the Avon Catchment Care Group field day. Regular reports are given to East Coast Protection Group and Ruakanakana/Lake Elterwater Restoration Group. Articles were placed in local papers about SNAs and tree planting opportunities.

We have supported a community initiative set up by SNA landowners, Mish Clark and Nigel Muir, expressly for other SNA landowners. They have had two field days on their Sounds property which 13 landowners attended with another five expressions of interest. They have scheduled two more field days on other Marlborough properties in the Sounds and Wairau Valley, along with a number of on-line sessions for people who are unable to attend. We have attended the field days and will continue to, along with providing financial support for the facilitation of these sessions.

Three community planting days were held on the East Coast south of Marfells Beach in association with SNAs. They were well attended by Marlborough residents, landowners and business houses. 5500 indigenous seedlings were planted including a mixture of coastal forest trees, shrubs and sand grasses.

All Waikawa Bay School pupils were shown how to identify native plants and given instruction about all their uses during a day of education outside the classroom at Victoria Domain. The Victoria University Masters in Conservation field class was met at Grovetown Lagoon and given an insight into the work of Councils' Biodiversity Team.

All existing information brochures and website versions were updated, including information for the public as to where to collect indigenous plant seed from in Marlborough.



Figure 8: Waikawa Bay students eager to learn, EOTC.

5.3 Background

Through the Significant Natural Areas project, it became apparent that boosting the supply of suitable locally sourced native plants would be necessary if there was to be an adequate volume of appropriate plants available for restoration projects in Marlborough. Seed has been collected by MDC since 2006 and is now also used for the myriad of Council projects which promote tree planting: The Working for Nature Environmental Grants Scheme, Erosion Prone Land project, Catchment Care programmes as well as the SNA programme.

The Significant Natural Areas project provided an opportunity to identify remaining pockets of indigenous plants on private land that provide valuable seed sources to generate future material for restoration planting.

Information on the website about where to collect seed from has been updated and refined.

5.4 The 2023-2024 Seed Collection Season

In the 2023/2024 seed collection season, seed was collected from a number of sites in both North and South Marlborough incidentally during other biodiversity work. This included spinifex and pingao seed for beach restoration and for restoring threatened plants such as the Marlborough brooms. Seed was sent to Riverside Horticulture and Selmes Road Nurseries for propagation for restoration projects.



Figure 9: Dune building processes at Cape Campbell started by planting spinifex.



Figure 10: Ngaio trees emerging through the marram grass.

6.0 General Discussion and Conclusions

The Significant Natural Areas programme has been run by the Marlborough District Council since 2001. It is the main mechanism used to identify and promote protection of terrestrial indigenous biodiversity on private land. While it is entirely voluntary for landowners to participate, it sits alongside some MEP rules which prevent certain types and scale of indigenous vegetation clearance and wetland drainage. The sites are not scheduled in resource management plans (apart from wetland sites identified in the 2010-13 surveys which are intended to be scheduled in the MEP).

The project is heavily focussed on identifying and protecting habitat areas on private land as a mechanism to protect larger suites of indigenous biodiversity (plants, insects, reptiles and birds). Ecological assessments are relatively broad scale, relying on experienced ecologists and rapid qualitative methods. While it is a voluntary programme, the information collected through the significant natural areas ecological surveys is used internally by the Council when assessing the effects of resource consents.

A working group continues to assist the Council to manage the Marlborough SNA project. This group remains integral to the management and direction of the SNA project.

Of the 948 sites identified through the SNA and RAP surveys, about 164 have been managed in some way to enhance biodiversity and a number (131) of these sites are also covenanted to provide permanent legal protection (primarily through the QEII Trust but also Conservation Covenants).

Monitoring to track the condition of a random selection of these managed sites is undertaken annually. In 2023/24, managed sites were in Good condition. In terms of the trend in condition, all but one were Stable or Improving. This is a great result.

There are, however, still over 750 Significant Natural Areas which have not received any financial assistance from Council to proactively manage the ecological values and ensure they are sustained in the long term. Of the 14 unmanaged sites monitored this season, half were in Poor condition with a trend of Deteriorating. The other half were Fair or better and Stable or better. This result was largely influenced by long delayed visits to the outer Sounds where possum numbers are building, and they are impacting the small, isolated pockets of coastal broadleaf forest.

The East Coast is a vital 50-kilometre-long corridor/flyway for migratory and resident breeding shore birds and marine mammals, with Cape Campbell being an important roosting area for shore birds, haul out for New Zealand fur seals and rookery for elephant seals. As already reported, a considerable effort is being invested into these coastal SNAs towards restoring the vegetation sequences on the connected dunes and foreshore that have been damaged by a history of fires, agriculture, weed invasion and, more recently, vehicle use.

Included in this corridor is a series of wetlands: the Waima/Ure lagoon, Lake Elterwater and Lake Grassmere/Kapara Te Hau, which are an important sequence of habitats for waterfowl, especially in this otherwise dry landscape. They also link with Wairau Lagoons and Para Swamp. Tree planting with SNA assistance has occurred at Waima River Mouth, Lake Elterwater and Para Swamp.

Building and maintaining goodwill and awareness amongst landowners is at the heart of the SNA programme, and the work carried out in relation to the site re-visits goes a long way to keeping contact with many landowners in the ecological districts involved.

An external review of the SNA programme has helped to set the future direction and priorities. Also, the current review of the resource management framework in Marlborough through the proposed Marlborough Environment Plan provides some further direction. The submission process will also result in a final confirmation of wetland sites, which are already eligible for financial and technical assistance through the SNA Landowner Assistance Programme.

Central Government released a National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity in July 2023. The process was consultative and also led to the Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy, which gives Council direction for a Marlborough Biodiversity Strategy. Government has recently introduced a bill to, amongst other matters, extend the date by which local authorities have to identify and include new significant natural areas (SNAs) in district plans by a further three years. (i.e., from 31 December 2027 to 31 December 2030). The Bill has had its first reading in Parliament. All other local authority obligations under the NPSIB are unchanged.

Information management in relation to the SNA programme is undergoing some changes. Improvements to the Council's internal information storage systems are being implemented, now allowing more information to be collected, stored and retrieved in a more streamlined manner. We are now able to access information about the sites while in the field and to take photo-points which are geolocated, using an iPad.

The Significant Natural Areas programme is an important element of indigenous biodiversity management and protection in Marlborough, with a particular focus on privately owned land. It is complemented by the work of the QEII National Trust which works independently with private landowners to covenant and protect areas. Council's relationship with QEII is close and productive and we help each other to engage with new clients on a regular basis. We also pool our funds to make projects more affordable for all parties.

The "Kotahitanga mo te Taiao" alliance continues to develop, with Te Tau Ihu Iwi, DOC and the Top of the South Councils working closely to develop a strategy for improving indigenous biodiversity in Te Taihū.

There has also been an increase in the number of larger scale community conservation and restoration projects in Marlborough in recent years and the Significant Natural Area programme continues to work closely with some of these, particularly where private land is involved.

In summary, the Significant Natural Areas Project continues to be the main avenue for Council to protect land based indigenous biodiversity in the Marlborough region. Marlborough has less than 5% of its rarer ecosystem types remaining on the plains, which is not enough to sustain biodiversity on the plains over time. With Primary Industry being such an important part of the Marlborough economy, Council has a critical role in working with the community to help ensure that the natural environment is not degraded, and hopefully is improved.



Figure 11: Marlborough Green Gecko

7.0 Appendices

Appendix 1: Total Budget for Main Aspects of Significant Natural Areas Project – Marlborough District Council Expenditure and Revenue – July 2023 – June 2024 (GST inclusive).

Table 11: Significant Natural Areas Project – Total budget July 2023 to June 2024

Project Name	Projected Budget	Actual Expenditure
SNA survey and general	\$28,750	\$11,788
SNA protection projects	\$207,000	\$244,785
Seed collection	\$5,750	\$159
SNA monitoring – Managed sites	\$34,500	\$20,096
SNA monitoring – Unmanaged sites	\$34,500	\$12,000
Total	\$311,363	\$288828