



Above: Gorse has replaced forests on greywacke hills surrounding the capital. If protected from fire, it can provide a useful nursery for regenerating native shrublands and forest. Photo: Peter Goodwin

Right: Regenerating native forest on Johnsons Hill. Photo: Peter Goodwin



The face of conservation in the capital is changing as the branch channels this grassroots concern into positive action. Natural Wellington is the branch's plan to preserve and enhance the natural treasures of Wellington and to bring the native birds back to the city. It may not be possible to bring back the extensive stands of giant rata and rimu, the kokako or the saddleback, but it might be possible to lure back the bellbird, the whitehead and the robin and greatly increase the number of tui, morepork, fantails, and kereru.

Branch member, Jim Lynch, has prepared the vision on paper. With the help of Colin Ryder, local experts have been quizzed. Adding to the plan were botanists Maggy Wassilieff, Bill van Gorkom with his wealth of knowledge on local wildlife – a living treasure himself, and Tony Beauchamp with his original concepts such as bird corridors. Regeneration of New Zealand's natural ecosystems is a

slow process – it takes 100 years to grow a sizable rimu tree. So the plan looks far into the future and spans whole generations. It begins with a 50 year vision.

The way it could be

When Natural Wellington's mission is achieved, Wellington could be an exceptionally beautiful rainforest city. The hills clothed in tall native bush with birds singing and playing in the canopy once more. A place of true natural beauty for residents and visitors to enjoy. As Jim Lynch explains, "It will be a wonderful complement to the city's vibrant cultural, business and recreational life."

A more challenging task is to improve the birdlife in the forests, as native birdlife is declining across the nation as a whole. It can be done if the branch's vision is taken on board by the wider community to reverse the degradation of the capital's natural surrounds.

Natural Wellington aims to preserve existing permanent scrublands and pre-European forests – only very small isolated areas of native scrubland, grassland and herbfields remain out of the 570 hectares estimated to exist around 1800.

If regenerating forests are protected, they will inevitably grow through to maturity. At the turn of last century, there were 1750 hectares of coastal and lowland broadleaf forest, 10,000 hectares of podocarp/broadleaf forest and about 1000 hectares of swamp forest. In 1991, there is only 120 hectares of coastal and lowland broadleaf, 13 hectares of podocarp/broadleaf and no swamp forest at all. Natural Wellington aims to see over 100 hectares of the first category by 2040, nearly double the amount of podocarp/broadleaf and two hectares of partly restored swamp forest. Also, protection from fire will see the scrublands move through to regenerating forest and more unproductive, marginal land and gorse areas into the early scrubland stage.

The branch's aim is to restore at least one small area as an example of swamp forest and preserve the one area of coastal saltmarsh left at Makara, which is the last habitat for an endangered cotula, *Leptinella dioica* ssp. *monoica*. Only 10 hectares of saltmarsh and 10 hectares of swamp are left out of the 750 hectare and 500 hectare

areas which once existed.

Natural Wellington aims to add a little to the existing coastline ecosystems. Last century there were 85 kilometres of relatively natural coastline, but this has been reduced today to 50 kilometres. By 2040, the plan is for the restoration of a further 10 kilometres. Wellington's marine ecosystems have not been forgotten. The branch is currently preparing a public discussion document on proposals for a marine reserve along the rocky south coast.

A key part of the Natural Wellington ideal is to provide linked forest corridors through the suburbs. They will be revegetated and overplanted with bird food sources and predator control will be investigated. Bird numbers should increase substantially in variety and number in the forests. Some bird species may have to be reintroduced to the area to achieve this. One of the goals in Natural Wellington is for increased numbers of native birds and an increase in the number of species from eight to fifteen by 2040. Another goal is for all of the 36 significant ecological sites in Wellington to have full protection – only eight sites are protected now. The number will be added to as new sites are identified – perhaps there will be up to 50 by 2040.

The final aim is to change people's attitudes towards their natural world. Some citizens of Wellington place high value on their natural surrounds but such attitudes are not universal. Ignorance and apathy has prevailed for years leading to the awful abuses that have occurred to the capital's natural surroundings. Civic pride has expressed itself as town halls and traffic island flower beds while quarries, scrub fires and urban sprawl have destroyed much of Wellington's unique natural heritage.

Jim Lynch believes all the Natural Wellington aims are possible in time. "And perhaps our children and grandchildren will appreciate the foresight of this generation who acted positively to hand it on to

Centre right: The 'Natural Wellington' team (left to right) Chris Mathieson, Maggy Wassilieff, Fiona Wilson, Bill Van Gorkum, Jim Lynch, Eve Lynch, Jeff Sheerin. Photo: Peter Goodwin

Bottom right: Wellington South Coast – home to seals, sea birds, a number of rare coastal plants and the endangered speargrass weevil. Photo: Mark Bellingham

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