

TAKE CARE OF OUR RIVERS

Dame Anne Salmond
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Around New Zealand, people are looking at the rivers in their districts and deciding to take care of them. In many places, creeks and rivers that used to run clear over rocky or shingle beds are full of sediment and pollutants. When it rains, they turn brown. And yet these waterways are vital to their communities, draining the land, providing water for stock and plants and places to fish and swim.

In Gisborne, the Waimata is a good example. Many people live on the banks of the river, which is enjoyed by rowers, waka ama paddlers and kayakers. Its winding valley provides access to inland forests and farms. Gisborne owes its existence to the harbour carved out by the Waimata and the Taraheru rivers that run through the heart of the town.

During the recent storms, the Waimata looked like liquid mud. In many places, its banks collapsed into the river and were swept out to sea. Up Riverside Road there were numerous drop-outs, including parts of Donner's Bush, the DOC Scenic Reserve. In the next storm, farms and houses in the upper valley could be cut off from town.

There is no need for this sort of thing to continue. In other districts, farmers' organisations, foresters, councils and community members are joining forces to prevent this kind of damage. Waterways are being protected, vulnerable riverside slopes left in bush and bush buffers planted or left to regenerate.

It would be great to see a concerted effort of this kind in Gisborne. It would also make good commercial sense for the district, and the town.

Recently, the Chairman of Beef and Lamb New Zealand urged his members to fence off the rivers that run through their properties. He warned, 'There is increasing scrutiny both here and offshore about the impact farming has on the environment and we ignore this at our peril'.

The same applies to forestry. Much of the timber exported from the East Coast is certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council, which requires its members to observe high environmental standards - including bush buffers around waterways. Foresters who breach these standards risk losing access to world markets.

The state of local rivers also matters for tourism, and the Navigation Project. Tourists are not much impressed by rivers full of sediment, or beaches covered with logs.

A project to take care of our rivers would be transformative. The Council would pay less for clearing debris from the beaches and repairing infrastructure such as riverside roads. There would be less good farmland washed out to sea. Habitats for endangered species would be created, and water quality in the harbour, recreational uses and fisheries all enhanced.

The sooner this happens, the better. It would be fitting, for instance, to launch a project to restore the Waimata River at the Transit of Venus celebrations in June, with the aim of protecting the river by 2019, the 250th anniversary of the arrival of the *Endeavour*.

The Waimata runs out to sea past Te Toka-a-Taiau, the rock where a local rangatira stood and greeted Captain James Cook with a hongi. How better to commemorate the promise of that moment than to restore life to the waters that flowed around their feet?

As for ways and means - the Waimata runs into the port, which would benefit from lower sedimentation levels and dredging bills. The Port might well fund a study of how the river can be protected. Insights and recommendations from this study could then be applied to other rivers in the district.

The Eastland Community Trust could establish a fund to support fencing and riparian restoration, providing community support to landowners for these costs. Forestry companies might provide free materials for fence posts and battens, and community members could assist with planting. Others will have other suggestions and ideas

Such a project would bring the community together, protect local industries and enhance the environment. As the old saying goes, 'Homai te wai ora ki ahau' – 'Bring me the water of life!'