



# The Aorere Catchment Project

A SMALL COMMUNITY RISING TO A BIG CHALLENGE!

Ensuring the Aorere remains a great place to live and work requires considered planning and careful management of the catchment's land and water. Meeting wider community, regulatory and industry requirements for environmental performance is a big challenge.

The Aorere Catchment Project is driven by the dairying community. Rising to the challenge, local farmers have joined forces acting to reduce local water quality issues. The key success of the project is its core value of 'farmers as leaders'. Utilising the deep family links and stewardship for the area along with the collective skills and knowledge of the local farmers is key.

The project runs from July 2006-June 2009 and is led by the Aorere Project Management Group (a group of local dairy farmers). Funding support is provided predominantly by the Ministry of Agriculture's Sustainable Farming Fund and the project is coordinated by the NZ Landcare Trust.

## The Project continued...

The Aorere Catchment differs from most others around New Zealand in that waterway nutrient concentrations are generally low. This is mostly due to the dilution effect of high volumes of water. However, the estuary and surrounding bay are particularly sensitive to faecal bacterial or bad bug runoff.

Each year, shellfish up to value of \$15M are harvested by the Aorere industry. When river volumes are high, E. coli levels are also high due to pasture run-off. Shellfish are not harvested during these times to avoid bad bug contamination and illness in human consumers. High E. coli have also been detected in lower flow conditions, and over time the ability to harvest shellfish was been restricted to windows as low as 30% of the year. The shellfish industry faced a real threat of closure if continued high results were found during low river flow conditions.

This dairy-farmer driven project develops effective solutions and provides one on one assistance in this high rainfall setting.

It's all about future-proofing farming and keeping the Aorere an awesome place to live and work forever!

## The Catchment

The Aorere is known for its magnificent beauty: forest clad hills, lush green flats and crystal clear waters. It is a place where the community's prosperity relies on its natural resources.

Most of the Aorere catchment is covered by native vegetation. It is home to the Kahurangi National Park and the Heaphy Track. The remaining landcover is made up of 16% agriculture, 3% scrub and 1% exotic forestry. Dairying is by far the most common farming type with approximately 11,000-13,500 cows within the catchment.

Aorere lifestyles are shaped not just by the physical cover of the surrounding land. Living in the Aorere means living with water. The Aorere River can be a gentle giant, its crystal-clear waters inspiring diverse recreational use. But a rainfall of between 3.5-4.5m per annum can quickly awaken the sleeping giant. Living with rapidly rising flood waters is a reality and dairy farming within these wet conditions is challenging.

At the mouth of the River lies the 1610ha Ruataniwha Estuary. The high ecological value of this estuary sees it listed as nationally significant. The estuary and nearby bay are also home to a strong aquaculture industry turning over up to \$15M in shellfish per year.

The Aorere River Mouth





Aorere Mussel Farming – mussel boat visible over shellfish beds



## Key milestones since project inception (2006):

- Formation of a dairy community-led project management team
- Intensive modelling of nutrient and pathogen impacts from landuse and on-farm management within the catchment and the surrounding bay
- Presentation of modelling results to the Tasman District Council and local marine farmers
- Identification of the key contaminant issue within the catchment and receiving environment (pathogens)
- Interviews with 31 of 33 dairy farms within the catchment to tailor project deliverables to farmers' needs
- Community problem solving field day hosted on local farms utilising farmers as experts and scientists on tap - not top leading to derivation of accepted best management practices for the catchment
- Tailored individual farm planning system to address specific water quality issues with practical voluntary 5 year plan and budget
- 14 voluntary individual farm plans completed this winter with \$1.4M in detailed best management practice improvements planned by local farmers
- November 2008 meeting for Aorere dairy farmers hosted by the Aquaculture Industry – water quality improvements mean harvesting up from 50% to 71% in the space of the project
- Autumn large scale catchment field day planned – celebration of on-farm improvements and the wonderful Aorere River and coast
- It's not over – hope to find ways of extending funding for individual farm plans and playing a leadership role wider than the Aorere.



## Outcomes

Arising from a history of blame and distrust the Aoreere Project aims to build relationships and positive environmental results through action. After several media articles and meetings depicting the Aoreere dairy community as high level polluters, tensions were running high between regulatory authorities, the shellfish industry and local dairy farmers. There was a common misconception that the Aoreere River was the most polluted waterway in NZ. The New Zealand Landcare Trust offered to help local farmers turn the situation around. Although we are only part way through the journey, we are proud of the community's willingness to get involved and make a difference.

Farmers talking at Aoreere project field day





## What is NZ Landcare Trust?

The NZ Landcare Trust (NZLCT) is a non-government organisation working primarily in the rural sector on sustainable land management projects. The NZLCT works in partnership with rural communities, local and regional government, iwi and rural industry to implement projects with a practical **action on the ground** focus. A small but dedicated team covers most regions in both the North and South islands. Our CEO is Dr. Nick Edgar, a Waikato born and bred freshwater scientist.



Contact details:

**Gretchen Robertson**

03 454 6464

021 267 5664

[gretchen.robertson@landcare.org.nz](mailto:gretchen.robertson@landcare.org.nz)