

## Rangitata Awa Reflections

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I valued the walk around with Brad the other day, every day adds value to the story and journey that is unfolding, and that we are on as a wider group of inclusive of all the stakeholders. We have a rare opportunity to create and recreate pockets and corridors of outstanding ecological and environmental value on the Rangitata river. Currently we are in this hinterland between commerce and conservation. Currently conservation is taking a back seat, as stakeholders grapple with the big picture, much of what is unfolding is in the overwhelm basket. We are all reading the same book, some folks are on different chapters, very few are on the same page. As a group that shares the conservation space it's a matter of creating the opportunities for folks to catch up and share in that page. Sometimes the best way forward is to reflect back and observe.

In that reflection there are stories that need to be told. Having lived on the awa for some time you get to learn its moods and intrinsic values, it is a living and dynamic thing. Before corporate arrived and decided to turn the Canterbury plains into a green desert, there were so many populations of real conservation gold that were destroyed with that transition. Reflecting we used to collect seed from the area, and some the plants were over 100 years old, (botanist's descriptions and local knowledge). Every loss creates its unique challenges, none more so than the coprosma species. Having male and female plants, they hybridise very readily so it presents issues finding specimens true to form. So, when they are indiscriminately culled the loss is immeasurable.

The phone rang and there was a developer on the other end in a flap, as we know Ti kouka and pivots are not compatible friends. They had been cutting the Ti kouka down, got pinged so then proceeded to dig them up with a twenty-ton digger and transplant them mid-summer into a shingle pit. The inquiry they were all dying what to do, yet still patting themselves on the back for being conservation minded. The crowd was screaming, the specimens were unique, and the loss went straight over the heads of the developers.

These behaviours have been occurring for a couple of decades, the biggest loser is the environment. Previous generations planted shelter on the plains for good reason. When we first landed on Rangitata Island it blew nor west every day for about 6 weeks, I have seen lush pastures burnt tinder dry by mid-afternoon. This speaks of the environment; we can be fooled by the current lush green artificial landscape that we currently observe. It is a harsh environment and one that needs to be understood and respected in order to thrive and survive.

On the top side of the river, it can be still as, you go down that cutting onto the first bridge, and you hit a category 5 hurricane blowing down the awa. One day we were planting above Ealing springs, you could see the dust blowing in billows down the river; yet we were watching from the terrace in stillness. You can be lulled into a false sense of security, in the back of my mind is the old saying, "your only one nor wester away from a drought in Canterbury."

Observation can be the key to creating positive outcomes. Speaking to this we are training our seed collection team to observe, the environment, they are operating in. We are looking for old and unique specimens, we are sitting listening to the bird song, observing where they are flying to, what trees and shrubs are they visiting. Observing the greater Rangitata, from Arundel up to the Saddle it's this lush growing environment, hit White Rock station and the environment changes to that harsh dryland scene. The introduction of pivots on Messi have introduced a new dynamic into the

environment. If we look at the lower Rangitata, without irrigation much of the land would revert to its savanna grassland ecosystem, some sheep to the acre, and subsistence struggle street farming, where even the rabbits had to take a cut lunch.

When thinking of restoration, we need to reflect on what was and what still is in the river ecosystem. That can be the driver of what we seek to plant within the associated restoration areas.

One of the gigs I am running within the program is “the need for seed,” every Monday staff are turning up with their treasure finds; “keep an eye out for natives with seeds on in your travels.” It is quite infectious and lead to some robust conversations. Some of the restoration crew have been asking about the volunteers on the river.

There’s a story behind that.

Back in the day the Millichamp’s operated a nursery in Tinwald Ashburton. They were attending a wedding in Hororata; mid-winter in a memorial hall, on the wall were branches of Kowhai in flower used as decorations. Nursery man gold, consequently, they propagated the trees for their early flowering. The story goes on, Mr Millichamp of the day was a keen fisher, so every time he went fishing, he would take trees and shrub seedlings with him which he would plant on the Rangitata. Many of them are still there today, some are still generationally spreading down the awa. There were Kowhai growing beside State highway one; these were removed when the passing lanes went in, they are now lost. They came from a nursery in Tinwald that has fallen to subdivision creep. Planted by a conservationist relating to his environment. Looking with today’s lenses should they be there or should they not? You can still see expression of his work along the river system.

True story or not, I was inspired so over the years I have adopted his approach, mindful of the environment that plants are going into you tend to be selective; the cool thing is that besides the tree you are the only person that knows what’s going on.

Reflecting on the restoration we have the same opportunity to re-establish what could or would have been, enhancing the river ecosystems. By observing what is actually in the system already we have a road map that can be enhanced on. Further to this we have the opportunity to reintroduce, declining rare, and endangered species in the restoration areas. This was brought home to me when collecting seed at the Wakaniu beach reserve, as a group they are dedicated to enhancing that coastal environment, proliferating some of the rare specimens that are occurring naturally.

We have the same opportunity; I was challenged with the realisation that with some of these specimens there are minimal populations present in Canterbury at large. Speaking to that I am pretty sure I observed a specimen of *Mulenbergia ephedroides* growing in the hapua, when I made it back the river had craved the whole bank out in a fresh. The restoration is going to be that ebb and flow, meticulous planning, plant delivery and site maintenance and measuring performance will greatly enhance the ability to create successful outcomes.

The more that I think about the restoration project, it is bigger than its moving parts. There is a need to develop a working overview that speaks to the goals and aspirations of the project at large. We could loose over a million plants from the coast to the gorge and only then would we be scratching the surface. It’s one thing creating the vision, it’s a totally different thing selling the vision and creating buy in and delivery. Within in the environs we have some strong personalities, who can create those flash points, which bring unnecessary pressures to the project.

In any project there will be points that are challenging, and with this project I see risk adversity starting to express itself, in the preservation of self-interest. We need to keep the aspiration flowing. At every point it is the awa, the awa, the awa, that needs to take centre stage and all the people and stakeholders need to become stadium players and work together as a team.

If we can establish a solid foundation, we can continue to build beyond the funding cycle. The nursery at Arowhenua will play a critical roll in this journey. That work will fall to the Rangatahi that are becoming involved in this project. With the right inputs and mentoring they will become tomorrow's leaders. The restoration program for the Rangitata is aspirational and if we continue to be strategic in our approach over the lifetime of the current program, we will see some extraordinary results. It will be interesting to see the results at year two, three and four, the results will be spectacular and hopefully create a model of best practice for river restoration and enhancement.