

Mā tātou katoa e atawhai i te tāonga ao turoa - Everyone has a role to play in conservation - a whakatauki that took on new meaning when the Whanganui District Council Youth Committee, along with over 100 community members, took to the sand to help clean the shore of Castlecliff Beach. The purpose of the event was to improve the state of our local beach, creating a cleaner ecosystem for both life below water and on land, an aim inspired by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.



An eclectic range of items that included glass, household rubbish, and a car seat were hauled from the sand in an afternoon's hard but rewarding work. The Beach Clean Up itself was exceptionally well-received, earning a wave of positive feedback from the community. It helped to spark a discussion about what we, the people of Whanganui, can do to make our town a more environmentally friendly place in which to live.

Holding a beach clean up created an opportunity to generate greater awareness around the state of our beaches and accentuate the importance of keeping them clean. After getting our hands a little sandy, we walked away with the new found knowledge of how easy it is to contribute to a healthier environment and the sense of fulfilment that accompanies it.

The large turnout showed just how many people are keen to get involved with environmental projects and clean up our town. I found this truly inspiring. As a member of the Youth Committee, it helped me realise that we have the potential to create further opportunities that encourage people to get involved. By making environmental projects and initiatives more accessible, we both increase awareness around the ever-growing issue of sustainability, and also educate people on the part they play in keeping New Zealand, and our planet, beautiful.

The driving inspiration behind the Beach Clean Up came from our local issue with marine waste and the vast amount of plastics that are being dumped in our sand dunes. Earlier this year, someone drove onto Castlecliff beach with a whole trailer of household rubbish and old furniture. Except this time they didn't just dump it into the sand dunes, they dumped it directly into the ocean. It is habitual littering. Such disgusting actions continue to set us back and make the dire issue of marine waste worse.

However, this isn't just a local issue. It's a global one. According to an article written by Eric van Sebille, roughly 8 million metric tonnes of plastic are dumped into the ocean annually and of that, 236,000 tonnes are composed of microplastics. The impact of this issue is unimaginably large, causing significant health problems, not only in marine life, but in birds and land animals too. Their ecosystems are being littered with (micro) plastic, transforming them into dangerous, almost uninhabitable places.



The plastic problem in our oceans has already had a noticeably grave effect on wildlife. For example,

research presented to Parliament's Environment Committee shows that New Zealand's oceans pose the highest risk in the world for seabirds eating plastic rubbish. Many of these birds are already threatened and found only in our country, which should emphasise why we need to protect them and their environments in order to preserve biodiversity. However, the effect of rubbish in our coastal ecosystems is doing the complete opposite.

Being a coastal Region, our West Coast beaches are the understated treasures of Whanganui. Flowing from the pinnacles of the Tongariro National Park, winding through the Whanganui river and into our ocean, water links the mountains to the sea in its journey. But in this journey, the water picks up souvenirs along the way. Man-made souvenirs of bottles and packets and plastic bags, socks and string and even ski poles. These are just a few of the so-called souvenirs that I've seen lodged in mountain streams or washed up on our beach, contributing to the issue of water pollution.

We need to acknowledge that we are facing some very real challenges. Challenges in the form of plastic disposal, marine waste and preserving biodiversity. Challenges that affect us all. It has been encouraging to see progressive actions taking place in our region such as the 'no plastic bag' movement which will ultimately reduce the amount of plastic in our seas. The numerous forms of protest against Patea seabed mining have also been instrumental in working towards preserving the ecosystems of life below water and on land. It's so easy to feel overwhelmed by the issues our environment is facing but it's important not to lose sight of the fact that our combined efforts do make a difference. The Beach Clean Up, no plastic bag movement and protests against seabed mining are just some of the ways in which people have already come together in the community to take a stand for our oceans.

Our beaches, just like those of countless other towns, are irreplaceable in their importance to the community. We use them in many ways: to catch fresh dinner and gather washed up driftwood that will later keep us warm; we swim in the salty summer water to cool down; or in the winter, throw on a wetsuit and battle the cold to ride the occasional wave. We stroll along them, sometimes for exercise and sometimes to clear the mind, painting footprints in the sand as we go. Unlike many things, our beaches are free for everyone, providing opportunities at the small cost of promising to leave only those footprints behind. Our beaches continue to gift us all of these incredible experiences, so it's high time that we start giving back.



Surfing and fishing are just some of the many free opportunities that our beaches give us