

The Nursery On Our Doorstep

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Did you know that the estuary in Ōtautahi is a wetland of 'International Significance'? The Avon-Heathcote Estuary attracts on average 20,000 birds and during summer that number increases to an incredible 32,000. As kaitiaki of this environment, we have noticed large amounts of pollution. When we walk near the estuary, we see plastic (including microplastics), bottles, plastic bags, bottle caps, and even shoes. This is a distressing problem. With so many different species living in this area, it's vital for our community to look after the estuary.



Ihutai, the Avon-Heathcote Estuary, is one of the world's most important coastal wetlands and is the biggest semi-enclosed shallow estuary in Canterbury. It is over 450 years old and covers approximately 9km². The New Brighton Spit shelters Ihutai creating a safe environment for Godwit, Heron, Plover and other native and endangered birds. The Avon and

Heathcote rivers come together at the estuary and mix with the salt water from the ocean. This attracts hundreds of species, all of which contribute to the environment's biodiversity.

We spoke to some adult residents who grew up there and asked them some questions about pollution in the area. From their responses we discovered that in the past, there was more rubbish on the beach than the estuary. They saw mostly glass bottles, soft drink cans, and cigarette butts. During the 1970s, there wasn't much awareness about litter in the environment. Our teacher, Craig Patterson, who grew up there in the seventies, said that "Environmental issues weren't such a big thing when I was growing up". However, attitudes began to change in the eighties. South New Brighton resident, Anna King, said "I remember doing school clean up days. We also had a 'be a tidy kiwi' campaign" in the 1980s.

People enjoy walking on the beach and many of them collect litter, so now the tides have changed and the estuary actually has the worst problem. Coastal Ranger, Jason Roberts, told us that 381 bags of rubbish were collected in a year, the most common litter being bottle caps.

Astonishingly, 28 fish species and 114 different bird species have been identified in our estuary. Tanya Jenkins, of the Avon-Heathcote Estuary Ihutai Trust told us that “These birds were here well before the people arrived in NZ and need to be honoured (and) respected.”

“The estuary is a nursery for animals” says Coastal Ranger, Jason Roberts. This area caters for breeding, feeding and nesting for a variety of plants, insects, fish, crustacean and bird species. There is a shellfish bed and very old tuna channels. The estuary is also an essential passage to the rivers for whitebait and eels.

Most of the rubbish comes from stormwater draining into the Avon and Heathcote rivers; it's taken downstream, into the estuary. From there, it can be washed out to sea. Rubbish can also be picked up by the wind and blown into the rivers. Then, when it's high tide the rubbish gets washed up to the water's edge.



Over lockdown and due to isolation, people are going for walks more often in parks, reserves, the beach and along the estuary. This means that more rubbish is being dumped.

This is not only a problem in our estuary, but estuaries worldwide. The New York Times reported that manatees, pelicans and dolphins have been dying due to the poor health of estuaries in Florida and Reuters said that one third of U.S estuaries are in an unhealthy condition. BBC news says that the pollution in the Severn Estuary in Wales is a ‘crying shame’.

To help the pollution problem we took the initiative and arranged an estuary clean up with our classes. Earlier on we had applied for funding from our school's PTA to pay for gloves and rubbish bags that were necessary for the clean up. After lunch one day, we headed out of the school grounds with our class. There

weren't any boundaries for our clean up but we used most of the time on the water's edge. We spent around two hours picking up litter and filling six huge rubbish bags. Shockingly, there were large chunks of hard plastic, microplastics, newspapers, soft plastics, drink cans, bottle caps and other random items. There was so much plastic!



Tanya Jenkins told us that “All this plastic could end up in our estuary and oceans killing fish, birds, (and) dolphins.” This means that the litter in the estuary affects life on land and life below water (14 & 15 UN sustainability goals).

Our clean up was a success and we plan to hold many more. We are hoping to organise a clean up with

senior South New Brighton School students at the end of every term from now on to really make a difference in this ongoing problem. Over time, if we continue caring for our environment, the litter in the estuary will decrease. However, the problem will be unending until there is systemic change. For example, when we did our clean up we noticed there weren't many plastic bags because of the systemic change brought about by the ban.

Jason Roberts believes “More people care about the rubbish than don't care” and that the pollution level is “Better than it has been in 80 years”. The best thing we can do as a community is to make sure we are picking up every piece of litter we see, and trying not to drop litter in the first place. Everyone in Christchurch needs to be aware of the importance of our estuary, and to care for it for the future. Local resident, Rick Leftly, says “I think it's great South New Brighton School has clean up days so you all get to make a difference in this amazing community we call home”.

We feel positive that the more our community takes ownership of Ihutai, the more likely we are to sustain the status of International Significance.

He rā ki tua, better times are coming.

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 Items found on Clean Up

 Estuary Clean up Form

Thanks to:

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Tania Evamy, Anna King, Rick Lefty, Craig Patterson

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