

Refuge, restoration and renewal in urban Aotearoa

Whatungarongaro te tangata toitū te whenua

The people fade from view, but the land remains.

The wellbeing of people and place are deeply enmeshed. A sanctuary is a place of safety – for rest, recreation and renewal. To seek sanctuary is to escape.

Green spaces, urban national parks, restored waterways and rivers in urban landscapes have increasing importance as places of sanctuary. With [increasing urbanisation](#), and more recently our restrictions on travel, there is even greater need for such places to be accessible.

Recently, for almost 2 million people, the COVID19 lockdown meant that *local* green spaces and rivers were the *only* places [for recreation](#) and escape. Such places provide an opportunity for retreat, reflection, renewal of energy, and a chance to reconnect with the natural world in some form. They're a contrast to our built environments and streetscapes.

Spending my childhood immersed in nature has led me to have a deep appreciation of the whenua (land) and a strong belief in the reciprocity that exists between the wellbeing of the whenua and of people. Jasmine Slater, NZARE blog

Escape in the city

Parks as living rooms

For urban dwellers, both in [lockdown](#) or with limited access to transport, city parks and green spaces became [‘living rooms’](#) – a natural extension of the confined spaces people were spending most of their time. The pandemic has highlighted the [importance of green spaces and urban parks](#).



Figure 1 Wellington - Biophilic Cities – Waitangi Stream and Park

Separated from nature

We think of Aotearoa as rich with outdoor opportunities accessible to most people. But even in a city surrounded by sea, mountains and ample green space like Ōtautahi (Christchurch) *‘some of [the city’s] most [vulnerable young people](#) are growing up disconnected from nature, never having set foot in wild places’.*

[Nearly 14% of NZ children](#) live in poverty, and more than 65% of all New Zealanders live in [major or large urban areas](#). Creating natural refuges where wildlife can thrive in urban areas is paramount. Such places need to be accessible by walking, bus or biking, making them available to a greater range of people.

National Park cities

Nature is being squeezed out of urban areas, despite the mounting body of evidence that shows nature has a crucial role in tackling the decline of city-dwellers’ health and wellbeing [Salzburg Global Seminar](#)

In 2019 London became the world’s first [national park city](#) providing a range of benefits¹ To find out more, watch this short clip that was used as part of the London campaign [here](#).

[National Park cities](#) include working towards improved:

- wildlife and habitats
- relationships between people and nature
- clean air
- greenspace and places for recreation.
- healthy rivers and waterways.

Whatungarongaro te tangata toitū te whenua

This whakatauki speaks to the values of kaitiakitanga that Māori hold, it places Papatūanuku and our environment in higher priority than humans. It acknowledges the connections we hold to the whenua and whilst people come and go the land will remain.

Rewilding urban Aotearoa

Landscapes *within* urban or developed environments can suggest what came before [forest, wetlands] or create possibilities for children to experience uncultivated areas.

“Re-wilding describes a landscape design approach that re-establishes or restores an area of land to an uncultivated state... the establishment of a wild landscape, as close as the physical, urban and ecological parameters will allow”²

Promoted by [Rewild Aotearoa](#),³ [Te Mana o te Wai Reserves](#) are a network of publicly managed rivers, lakes and wetlands flowing from the mountains down to the sea.⁴ They are *‘nationally important as freshwater and native forest ecosystems, and as landscapes, visitor destinations.. recreation sites...and mahinga kai and cultural harvest’*

The [Queen's Chain](#) is an important component, providing marginal strips and esplanade reserves, that apply to about 60% of New Zealand's coast, lakefronts and significant rivers,⁵ including many in our urban environments.

Case Study 1

A new walkway along the [Makotuku River](#) in Raetihi is drawing residents to fish, swim and walk their dogs. Over two years, locals Donna Journeaux and Carina McNie (who grows the plants and plans the landscaping) teamed up to create a 4.1 km walkway, BMX track, restored picnic sites, and access to historic swimming holes. The Raetihi community are right behind it this restoration project, with school children and others turn up to help at working bees.



Figure 2 Image: NZ Geographic <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-greening-of-the-red-zone/>

Case Study 2

A new campaign to make Christchurch an [urban national park](#) is underway. Prior to European settlement, Christchurch was a mix of [wetlands](#), waterways and kahikatea forest used by Ngāi Tahu for food gathering. Only tiny parts of this wetland still exist.

Advocate, Hayley Guglietta, says ‘the city has had some major trauma... more and more people [are] looking for a way to bring peace and wellbeing into their lives’. The project represents a [focused community effort](#) to improve the city's liveability through better connections between people and nature. The Ōtākaro Avon River Corridor, *which is four times the size of Hagley Park, has presented us with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create spaces where people can enjoy the outdoors and connect with nature.*⁶ At the same time, [Red zoned land](#) soon to be under city council management provides a real chance to ‘revolutionise’ the space and do something different.

Principles In Action

Impact on climate change	Establish or restore areas of land to original species and habitats
Equity of opportunity	Create places everyone can get to easily
Wellbeing is paramount	Promote the benefits of being in nature and caring for nature
Community Connection	Involve community in restoring or creating urban green and blue spaces
Design	Matching solutions to need – ensure that we combine liveability and nature Biophilic cities create deep and powerful connections to nature

Further reading and references

- Landy, F (Ed) (2018) [From urban national parks to natured cities in the global south](#), Springer, eBook
[Biophilic Cities - Wellington](#)
 Sturgeon, A. The Guardian, [Rewilding out cities: beauty, diversity and the biophilic cities movement](#), 4 April 2021.
 1 Allot, A. Stuff. [Let's make the Garden City of Christchurch a National Park](#) 4 September 2021.
 2 Sloan, K. [Re Wilding: Cities by Nature](#)
 3 [RewildAotearoa](#)
 4 Ibid
 5 Walking Access Commission, ["Access along rivers, lakes and the coast."](#) and GibsonSheat, [What is the 'Queen's Chain'?](#)
 6 Dalziel, L. and Hughey, J., The Press, [Ōtautahi Christchurch is ideally placed to become a national park city](#). 4 September 2021.