

Ep 21 - Bluff Hill Motupōhue Environment Trust (BHMET)

Sarah Thorne: [00:00:00] Catchment Convos with Thriving Southland, your link to Southland Catchment Groups and their impactful projects. Each episode, we'll dive into grassroot efforts by local farmers and communities that are driving change and sustainability in our region. Listen in for inspiring stories and insight. Real people, real change, the Southland way.

Welcome back to Catchment Convos, the podcast where we dive into the work of passionate people driving change in our catchments and communities. I'm your host, Sarah Thorne, one of the Thriving Southland Catchment coordinators, and joining me for today's episode is David Swannnnnn, trustee and project leader for the Bluff Hill Motupohue Environment Trust, also known as the BHMET.

Today, we'll explore the journey of the trust and its work to protect and enhance biodiversity in Bluff, and their recent expansion to include Ōmāui and some of the peninsula between Motupohue, the Hill, and Ōmāui. David will share how the trust was established, [00:01:00] the vision that continues to drive its work today, the innovative tools they use to tackle predator pests across the landscape, and how partnerships with neighboring landowners and community groups are strengthening outcomes.

So let's get into it.

Welcome to Catchment Convos, David. It's lovely to have you on our podcast today. It'd be wonderful if you could introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us about the trust and what its dream is.

David Swann: Cool. It's lovely to be here, Sarah, thanks for having me on. My name's David Swann. I'm the project leader for the Bluff Hill-Motupohue Environment Trust.

The trust's been going since 2008, and it's kind of an interesting story of a community saying, "That's it. We've gotta do something." We have Tītī colonies on Motupohue, and the forest had grown silent, but the last straw was when a member of the community found a Tītī dead on the Foveaux walkway, having been eaten by a feral cat, and that was it. And the community got together,

established the Bluff Hill-Motupohue Environment [00:02:00] Trust, and started a major predator control effort. So that was really the starting point.

Sarah Thorne: And how it's grown from there. 20 years on now, David. That's incredible.

David Swann: We're certainly heading towards the 20-year point and the forest has come back to life in big ways, and tiny ways.

I think that's one of the nice things about conservation is you see it when you actually get out into the environment and you see the things that are flourishing, that's pretty good. The tree fuchsia are just beginning to flower again, and if you have possums, you never see, tree fuchsia flowers because they are one of the ice cream plants for possums. And so you never see them on the trees, and the trees die as a result. But you certainly never see them on the ground, and we see the ground carpeted with fuchsia flowers. So that's one of those little tiny things that brings joy when we're working on the hill.

Sarah Thorne: I bet that does.

So what do you think's been key to making this happen, this [00:03:00] amazing project that you've got and are part of every day?

David Swann: So I was really fortunate. I joined the trust as a volunteer in 2019 when we moved to Bluff from Wellington, and started as a trap line volunteer. And immediately it was obvious that this magnificent team of volunteers had done everything right from day one. And there was a foundation of absolutely correct trap placement. But perhaps most important, the data was all there. They had collected data from day one. And when COVID arrived and then I wrote the application to the DOC's Jobs for Nature fund it was so easy because all the evidence was there and basically the proposal was to expand that work accelerated across the rest of the hill. I mean, the level of [00:04:00] effort when the trust started, it was just astonishing. And that was all from the little community of Bluff. So that's a really nice bit of the history of the success on the hill, the foundation built by those first volunteers.

They did citizen science. I mean, that's what they were doing. So one of the things that we decided when we were applying to the DOC Jobs for Nature Fund. Obviously, that was always going to be a temporary boost to conservation, and we recognized that if we just went out and bought loads and loads of cheap manual traps, it would leave us a problem when that funding

ended because we would never have enough volunteers to run manual traps across the whole hill, so we made the decision to invest in automatic traps.

Now, automatic traps are 10 times more expensive to buy than manual traps. [00:05:00] So you need a lot of evidence to persuade funders, to persuade stakeholders that making that capital investment is worthwhile. But because we knew exactly how our manual traps were performing, we knew exactly how much it cost to run our manual traps, actually developing the case was relatively easy. And then in collecting the data subsequently, the automatic traps are a complete game changer for community conservation.

Because once you've used automatic traps, I'm sorry, but there's no going back to manual traps. When you have manual traps, my observation is that all too often people go out and buy loads and loads of traps, and for the first year, great volunteer effort. The traps are [00:06:00] being serviced every two weeks religiously, and all is well. And the second year, pretty good, but we're seeing intervals out to maybe three weeks, and then predator numbers start falling, so servicing the traps doesn't get quite the same thrill going, so, you know, once a month or so.

And over time you just end up with essentially abandoned manual traps sitting out in the forest almost as a token in the desperate hope that predators will see the trap and give up and go home. And that's not how it works. Whereas automatic traps are sitting out as a sentinel in the forest continuously killing.

They kill to bring predator numbers rapidly down. And then any incursion is immediately dealt with because the trap is sitting out there and the first animal that comes in bang, it's gone. And it's interesting because if [00:07:00] you look at an area that's had very little predator control, and you look at the characteristics of the predators, there's like a bell curve.

The majority of predators are in the middle of that bell curve. They will go into a trap, you know, fine. One end of the bell curve, there are The explorers, the predators that just wanna go and explore things. And they'll go up into a trap, and they'll tell their mates and, you know, bang, bang, bang. But at the other end are the conservative ones.

And so when you clear an area of predators, you're left with these conservative predators that are neo-phobic. They don't want to experiment with stuff. They will not go into a trap, and they're your stubborn ones. But if you've cleared an area, you're always gonna get incursion. And guess what the predators that are [00:08:00] doing the incursion are?

They're the explorers. They're easy to kill. So they will wander into a new area, and they will just go into a trap and bang. So if you've got a situation where you've got a quick way of achieving a knockdown to the point where you've got a few predators left and they're the ones that are trap-phobic, but it's at a level below where they're having an impact on the environment.

Now, normally you'd worry in manual trapping that you're gonna get surges in population as food becomes more available. But that doesn't happen with automatic traps. You don't get those surges, because every time there's a little bit of a surge, bang, bang, bang. And so the incursion is dealt with before it becomes a problem.

So we refer to this as creating a state of persistent deep suppression- Mm-hmm ... where you've got the traps [00:09:00] out in the forest, and you never get the surges, which means that the ecosystem can thrive once again. We can have our taonga species thriving once again, breeding. And it means that as a community conservation group, we can have an ambition to expand our area of operations, which we could never do if we were reliant on manual traps, or we'd just be struggling to keep on top of predator numbers with volunteers.

Does that make sense?

Speaker 7: Yeah. . Thank you, David. I love the way, you made the point that how important it is to look after your volunteers. Because there's always another job to do, isn't there? I mean, you've got a native plant nursery. You've expanded your area.

David Swann: That's, that's one of the other strengths of- the BHMET was established with a habitat [00:10:00] restoration mission, not just a predator control mission.

Predator control is a pretty negative thing really, isn't it? You're just killing stuff. Um, why are you killing stuff? That's, I think, an essential part of the mission for any community conservation group is why are you doing what you're doing? And I think habitat restoration is a much more positive goal.

And as soon as that becomes your objective, there are a number of other things you need to do. You need to be taking care of weeds. So let's talk about that a bit because. So if you've got gorse, chances are you've got possums. Once you remove the possums, the natives overtop the gorse, the gorse dies when it can't see the sun, and so that's problem solved. So gorse, not a problem. Wilding

pine, massive problem. Huge problem. Even in the areas of relatively mature native bush on Motupohue.

So we gotta get rid of weeds, [00:11:00] and we then need to accelerate the process of native regrowth. So Estelle Pērā-Leask is the chair of the Bluff and Motupōhue Environment Trust. She's a magnificent woman who had the vision all along, and part of that vision was establishing a native plant nursery.

And, Te Korowai Whakahou is the name of the nursery. It's the restore the cloak. I ended up project managing the build of the nursery, which I did and I always thought, "God, how are we gonna keep this running and how are we gonna be able to afford to run a native plant nursery?" And little did I know that thanks to Trees That Count, that native plant nursery is now, uh, an essential source of funding for the trust because Trees That Count have been funding us for the last few years to put 25,000 trees a year on the hill.

So it's not how can we afford to run the [00:12:00] native plant nursery, it's how could we have survived without it? But then the other question is how on earth do we produce 25,000 trees a year from that nursery? And that's thanks to our nursery manager, Leah Smith, who just is a force of nature. She's churning out well over 25,000 plants a year. And actually, uh, catchment groups are buying quite a lot of them because they're sturdy little plants. These are plants that have been raised in Bluff and the farmers that have bought them tell us that they're the best plants they've ever had just because they thrive in any conditions, which is great.

Speaker 7: What an incredible team you have down there on the hill.

David Swann: They are a wonderful group of people, and I think it's part of what conservation should be, right? There is an essential role for volunteers in conservation, but at some point when you're running complex automatic trap networks, when you're running the complex business of a native plant nursery, [00:13:00] you need skills and experience, and you need to pay people what they need to live and thrive in their community. And that's always been very important to, me as project leader that we're giving people long-term employment.

Um, and look we're going through a tough time at the moment. We've lost three major funding rounds, so we're having to tighten our belts quite hard at the moment. So even as I step aside into a voluntary role away from my paid role, I think it's so important that we continue to support our people living in the community.

It's a difficult time to be in conservation at the moment, and there's gotta be money in the economy before, you can do conservation. You know, conservation costs money. But I think there's a danger in conservation itself in that obviously [00:14:00] it's really important that the conservation industry, in inverted commas, tackles the landscape-scale projects because they cannot be done either by volunteers, and nor can they be done by piecemeal efforts. They are massive undertakings and they're critically important. But as we think about what the journey to a predator-free, Aotearoa by 2050 is gonna look like, if we are to get rid of predators across New Zealand, then how do we move from these big landscape-scale projects to eventually encompass everything? Well, I'll tell you two things. You can't do it by ignoring communities. You can't do it by imposing on communities. Communities have to lead the join up.

You cannot not fund communities because we are protecting the little places. But- when you [00:15:00] protect lots of little places, you create the flyways that allow our forest birds to move between Fiordland, Catlins, Rakiura, and spread their genes so that we don't get little pockets of genetic sort of isolation. And those flyways will only ever be created by community groups. I mean, if you look at the big projects like Predator Free Wellington or Predator Free Dunedin, they came out of community efforts, and you cannot just come along to a community and impose on that community a landscape scale solution because you'll lose the community, and you'll lose the social license to operate. And if we don't have a social license to operate, we cannot succeed in community conservation.

Sarah Thorne: Yeah. Communities provide those linkages in so many different [00:16:00] ways, don't they?

David Swann: Right. And if you look at that habitat restoration mission, there are some things we have to do that stress that social license to operate. I regard a social license to operate a bit like a bank balance, right? If you do good things and you become trusted by the community, you build up a balance of think of it as goodwill.

And so when we drilled and filled the pines around the reservoirs, that definitely drew down on our social license. There were people who were pretty vehemently opposed, for very good reason, to that removal of those wilding pines. And I think that the reality is that you need that social license in order to be able to do some of the unpopular things.

Sarah Thorne: It's a balance, isn't it? David you have described so many challenges. [00:17:00] You've described so many achievements and the ways

that you and your team have thought about stuff and come up with solutions. What are you most proud of?

David Swann: It's always interesting to kind of do a retrospective and look back. In any job you have bad days, and think, "Oh, God, you know, this is going well, isn't it?"

Um, and so you do need a little pool of the good things. And so if I've had a bad day tackling the technology in the office or something, then, you know, go for a walk, stop in the forest and just listen and watch. And that calm of just being in the forest, then all of a sudden, all of those problems- ... all of those challenges, disappear into the background, and you can say, "That's why we do it. That's why we need to sometimes have a bad day, is because there is that joy in the difference that [00:18:00] the team has made to this place."

Speaker 7: That's a very beautiful thing, David.

So the whole reason this podcast really came to be was that our very new Awarua Catchment Group, that are five months old at the time of recording this had a visit to Bluff, to visit the hill and to meet you and your team.

How does it help the trust, having connection with groups like this? And what opportunities do you see in working together with this catchment group and other groups out there?

David Swann: So that's a, that's a great question. I was invited to join the Awarua Catchment Group and it just makes sense because we look after Motupōhue and Omaui, at opposite ends of the peninsula and we have to maintain relationships with landowners. So Department of Conservation own the scenic reserve on Motupōhue and Omaui there and Invercargill City Council has big landholdings.

But we also need to have strong relationships with [00:19:00] farmers. We're a pragmatic conservation group, and I think any community conservation group must be pragmatic.

And farmers are private landowners. They are essential to the economy of this country. And in my experience, if you approach a farmer with humility, they want the best from their land, and we want the best from their land. They don't want possums on their land. They don't want rats on their land. And if we go in with humility and say, "Do you mind if we put some traps on your land?"

Um, of course you can. Yeah. W- w- what's the catch? And no, no, look, we're trying to, you know, reduce possum numbers, to reduce the incursion back onto the hill. And so actually, there are great relationships that emerge from that, and then you begin to understand the very real [00:20:00] challenges that farmers face in today's very regulated world.

I like the idea of a strong relationship with our local catchment group because that can only ever lead to better outcomes for everyone, right?

Speaker 7: Yeah. I have never met, haven't met a farmer or a community member yet that doesn't love standing in their stream or looking at their bush, they're so proud of them.

David Swann: Absolutely, and I think one of the big things that we always want to reassure farmers about- Is we do record data from our traps.

But that data is for our use. It's not for the council's use, it's not for DOC's use, it's not for the government's use. And so we are quite careful in how we share trapping data. So if you [00:21:00] go to TrapNZ you can actually download data from all trapping projects. But the key is that it's an anonymized data set.

Sarah Thorne: Yeah. So you've been around now for 18 years, I think it is, heading towards the 20. What does success look like for the next five to 10 years?

David Swann: This is gonna sound a little strange, but there's a reason behind it. My most important consideration is that we must continue employing our people in this community. And that's because without the skills of our people Then no ambition is possible, right? We couldn't do it without our volunteers, but we couldn't do it without our employees. It's not one or the other. And one certainty [00:22:00] is that you cannot run a native plant nursery as a volunteer effort. You cannot run an extensive automatic trap network w-with all volunteers. It's not possible. And without that native plant nursery, without those automatic traps, then our ambitions to gradually join up Motupōhue in Omaui, so that we have predator control active across the whole peninsula, and then to extend an-our trap network around Bluff Harbor and into the Awarua Waituna wetland.

And those are important ambitions because, the Awarua Waituna wetland is an internationally significant wetland, and is almost entirely absent of any predator control.

Um, and we know that the Bittern that are still [00:23:00] present there are clinging on. And It's kind of how can I be here and see another extinction on my watch? It's not right. I'm not prepared to see that happen. So I'm pragmatic about how we go about our conservation mission, but I'm deeply passionate that we must not see another extinction on our watch.

And so, you know, how do I do that? I have to fundraise. And it's major fundraising. We have to get corporate entities engaged in seeing the philanthropic benefit of protecting such a crucial area of biodiversity and preventing further extinctions.

Speaker 7: So if any of our listeners have any brilliant ideas to help you and your community get some funding you'd be totally up for, hearing from them.

David Swann: David, [00:24:00] david@motupohue.nz, I'd love to hear from you.

Sarah Thorne: Fantastic. Well, before we wrap up, David, is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners on your work and the project and your hill?

David Swann: I suppose one of the things we didn't talk about is how we're using the latest technology to connect all of our traps to the office. So some of our more tech-savvy listeners may have heard of the Internet of Things. Well, we have the Internet of Traps, so we have a communications network that brings the internet down to the trap level so that we get real time feeds from about 120 of our traps.

So when an animal goes under a trap, takes a photo, we see it. And that means that we have a very precise understanding of what's going on in and around our traps, which mean that we know progress is being made. And it's very interesting. We monitor a bunch of traps over on Rakiura [00:25:00] and wow, what a different, setting.

We very rarely see rats in our traps now, and if we do, they're pretty tiny. The rats over there they're absolutely enormous and frequent. So it's very interesting. Keeps us, again, grounded in our reality, which is that we have a very low predator environment and that's a really, really nice thing.

So another example of technology being used to make sure that we're grounded in fact.

Sarah Thorne: Thank you, David. Thank you so much for joining me today. I mean, what a group of people, what a community, and what a project.

And that's a wrap for another episode of Catchment Convos, brought to you by Thriving Southland. A big thanks to our guests for being part of the conversation on today's episode, and to you guys for tuning in. We appreciate your support. Don't forget to like, subscribe, and follow us wherever you get your podcasts from so you can stay up to date with all the latest [00:26:00] episodes as they're released.

For more information on this episode, check out the show notes or head to the Thriving Southland website, where you can also learn more about the awesome work happening across the catchment groups here in Southland. And if you've got a project or an idea you want to share, don't be shy, reach out. So until next time, keep up the good work out there on the land, and as always, stay connected and keep driving those changes for a thriving Southland.