

## WHAT GROWS WHERE YOU LIVE (#WGWYL)

Ruth Evans



Figure 1. Harakeke, Poroporo, Raupō.

What Grows Where You Live (#WGWYL) was an environmental art project led by Ruth Evans and Log. The project was selected as one of two “Environment Envoy” commissions as part of Dunedin City Council’s Te Ao Tūroa – Dunedin’s Environment Strategy, and delivered through Dunedin’s Urban Dream Brokerage service. According to Environment Envoy broker Katrina Thomson:

Artists have a vital role in making new connections and enabling people to see their world in completely new ways. Our programme uses and creates strong partnerships between different sectors to encourage Dunedin’s community to see their local environment from new perspectives. We are working with Urban Dream Brokerage as a model for innovative and participatory use of vacant space – indoor as well as outdoor. We are all working together to achieve the goals of Te Ao Tūroa, Dunedin’s Environment Strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The #WGWYL project embraced the biodiversity of Ōtepoti/Dunedin, focusing on the plant species raupō (*Typha orientalis*), harakeke (*Phormium tenax*), kōwhai (*Sophora microphylla*) and poroporo (*Solanum laciniatum*). #WGWYL was manifested through native plant revegetation initiatives, artwork creation and community outreach. The project began by working with private and public landowners to reintroduce native flora across the greater Dunedin region through planting initiatives. This part of the project was documented and compiled within the pages of an art zine, the #WGWYL zine, which provided an understanding of where these plants grow, how to source them, and their traditional applications in Māori society.<sup>2</sup>

Ruth Evans also created sculptural representations of the focus species in three-dimensional needlework pieces. These educational artworks were displayed in an exhibition space in the central city between 27 April and 19 May, at 23 Princes Street. Open six days a week, on Saturdays the space became a community hub for knowledge- and skill-sharing workshops led by practitioners in biodiversity and the native flora and fauna of Dunedin, with the artworks as a continuous focal point for connection and reflection. This multi-disciplinary work brought people together in active and new ways to explore the environment and also the impacts that the environment has on us.

## ENVIRONMENT ENVOY

In August 2017, Urban Dream Brokerage and Dunedin City Council announced the launch of Environment Envoy, a pilot program which aimed to support projects that related to Te Ao Tūroa – Dunedin's Environment Strategy. Two commissions of \$6,500 were available for projects with a "strong public impact."<sup>3</sup> The judging panel were looking for proposals which "encourage the community to think about the environment and productive landscapes in different ways; strengthen collaboration between artists and the public, iwi, scientists, councils, business and community groups; engage the community to contribute to creative projects that provide educational opportunities for communities and support enhancing our environment."<sup>4</sup> Applicants were asked to address the way in which their project responded to at least one of the following goals of Te Ao Tūroa – Dunedin's Environment Strategy: "working with landowners to integrate biodiversity into productive environments (farming and agricultural lands); boosting backyard biodiversity and urban biodiversity; increasing food resilience; enhancing urban ecosystem functions (e.g. storm water runoff regulation, providing food for pollinators); ensuring Dunedinites are able to enjoy, connect to and celebrate the natural world."<sup>5</sup> #WGWYL responded to not just one of these goals, but to all of them.

## REVEGETATION INITIATIVE

The major goal of the #WGWYL project is to honour the native flora and fauna of Ōtepoti, raising their numbers through revegetation initiatives. The decision to plant out raupū, harakeke and kōwhai was made during the proposal phase of the project, once we knew what sort of ecosystems we would be revegetating. There is no need for humans to plant out poroporo in the region, as this plant spreads readily by itself. Because of this, poroporo has gained a reputation as an invasive weed, rather than being acknowledged for the beautiful native that it is. By honouring this plant alongside recognised native species – such as kōwhai for example, which has been labelled New Zealand's unofficial native flower – it is our intention to challenge the common perception of poroporo.

From the beginning, it was decided that the revegetation initiatives would take place on private land. We reached out to a number of property owners who we felt would be interested in participating in the project. From these inquiries, we were introduced to a number of other people who wished to participate, and received plants to plant out on their own properties. The majority of the plants purchased for the project were distributed in the Waitati area, while other recipients were based in Port Chalmers, North East Valley and Karitane. Three of these properties were larger blocks of land, over 2 acres, while the rest could be described as 'backyards.' One participant took our plants to Quarantine Island in Otago Harbour with the Otago Girls' High School Enviroschool group.

A total of 130 plants were purchased from Dunedin's Ribbonwood Nurseries, and another 40 harakeke were raised for the project by Dylan King. King also donated a number of other native plants, including makomako (*Aristotelia serrata*), akeake (*Dodonea viscosa purpurea*), mountain akeake (*Olearia traversiorum*), kōhūhū (*Pittosporum tenuifolium*) and kōtukutuku (*Fuchsia extorticata*).



Figure 2. #WGWYL planting event in Waitati

The summer of 2017-18 was the hottest on record. According to Niwa's National Climate Centre, Dunedin received 618 hours of sunlight between December 2017 and February 2018,<sup>6</sup> with the mean air temperature in the city 3°C higher than the historical average.<sup>7</sup> Under these conditions, we were concerned that the heat would negatively impact the plants if they were to be put in the ground during the summer months. We decided to wait a few weeks after collecting the plants, knowing that as March arrived, the days would shorten and the heat subside.

On 3 March, a small group gathered at a property in Waitati for the #WGWYL Planting Event. Landowner Mark Spencer took the group on a walk through the property, and a discussion was held on his long-term plans for native revegetation. We asked Mark where he would like us to work, pointing out the areas which were ideal for our plants. Mark stated that he had no preference for the location, and encouraged us to use our judgement. We headed to a site near the house: a paddock with a sloping bank running down into a freshwater swamp containing a number of native grasses and rushes growing among introduced grass species. With its sloping bank and waterlogged terrain, the site was perfect for our day of planting.

After a quick coffee, the group set to work. While I photo-documented the process, Dylan, Log, Sam and Orlagh planted out 100 natives. The day was hot and as the crew got stuck into their task, low cloud came up from the bay, bringing with it a slight drop in temperature and, later that evening, a drizzling of rain.

Having completed our activities on Mark's property, we divided up the plants requested by the other #WGWYL recipients. These individuals had volunteered to revegetate their own sites, providing us with documentation of the process. The plants, the "#WGWYL cross-stitch swab" and a letter providing more information on the project and their role within it were delivered to these locations. In the weeks following, these participants each engaged with the project in their own way, sharing their experiences with us, and the broader public, through photographs which have been archived in the #WGWYL zine.



Between November 2017 and April 2018 four #WGWYL sculptures – *Poroporo*, *Raupū*, *Harakeke* and *Kōwhai* – were constructed. The original intention was to create work from materials found at the revegetated sites. However, due to record summer temperatures, the decision was made to begin working on the sculptures before the opportunity to host the #WGWYL Planting Event arose. Just weeks after being informed by Urban Dream Brokerage and Dunedin City Council that #WGWYL had been selected as an Environment Envoy commission, materials were donated for constructing these sculptural works. Following a process of experimentation, three-dimensional textile sculptures were chosen. Where possible, these sculptures were based on actual plant specimens. The only time when it was necessary to work from photographs and botanical illustrations was during the making of the flowers for the *Kōwhai* piece. While the sculptures are not intended to be botanically correct, we sought to create representational forms of the plants on which they were based.

Steel wire of various gauges was used in all the pieces, acting as a skeletal framework for the works. In addition to the use of wire, *Raupū* was formed around a steel rod; the sculpture was then set in a concrete base, which was hidden with a layer of sand and polymer resin, a material which mimics water. The wire allowed the sculptures to be reshaped by visitors. In the case of *Poroporo*, the skeletal wire framework constructed for the textile forms allows the piece to change shape in a realistic manner, at the whim of those handling it.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

During the course of the commission, Ruth and Log met with a number of individuals, groups and organisations, seeking out information on the chosen plants and their various applications. We met with members of hapū botanists, scientists, raranga (flax weaving) practitioners, horticulturalists, and others. Through these networking activities, Log and Ruth were able to gather a wide variety of information relating to the project which was used in the construction of the #WGWYL zine.



Figure 3. "Plant a Native" workshop with Dylan King

## WORKSHOP EVENTS

During the exhibition, which ran from 27 April to 18 May, a number of workshops were hosted in the Princes Street gallery space which expanded on the concepts behind the project. On the morning of 28 April, a small group of artists and makers gathered at an 'artist discussion' event, where Ruth Evans answered questions from the public about the project and her future intentions.

That afternoon, Tahu Mackenzie, the education officer at Orokonui Ecosanctuary, hosted a workshop, "Learn to Plant Trees like Birds do!" Using nutrient-rich clay and eco-sourced native seeds, the public were invited to participate in the creation of 'magic poo bombs' (also known as 'seed bombs'), which they took away to plant in a suitable location of their choice. After a brief introduction and a beautiful waiata, Mackenzie explained how this approach to propagation mimics the way that birds, such as the kererū, spread seed far and wide. Working spaces were established within the gallery, with tables hosting native plants, their seeds, some clay and potting-mix soil.

While a number of seeds were pre-harvested for the activity, Mackenzie also provided some seed-laden plant cuttings, allowing participants to mimic the gathering of seed directly from the source. A small ball of clay was rolled in the palms of our hands and a 'well' was pressed into its centre. Seeds were then added and the ball was rolled again. Once we had combined the seed with the clay, the balls were coated in the potting mix and were ready to be thrown. Mackenzie encouraged us to produce 'magic poo bombs' which contained a variety of seed, rather than a mono-crop, and discussed the importance of diversity for revegetation. Koromiko (*Hebe parviflora*), tauhinu (*Ozothamnus leptophyllus*), kōhūhū (*Pittosporum tenuifolium*), and kānuka (*Kunzea ericoides*) seeds were used for the workshop, as they do not require passing through the digestive tract of an animal in order to propagate.

On 5 May, the #WGWYL HQ hosted two further workshops. In the morning, between 10am and 12.30pm, the gallery became a zine-making working space, with members of the public joining Ruth and Log to create zines of their own. Ruth demonstrated how to turn a sheet of A4 paper into a small zine and, using the resources provided, participants began making zines of their own.



Figure 4. #WGWYL Envoy space. View from Princess st.



Figure 5. Workshop participants with Tahu McKenzie

That afternoon Lucy Smith hosted a workshop titled "Introduction to the Art of Raranga." During the workshop, the gallery was closed in order to allow participants to engage with the material without interruption. Lucy has been teaching raranga in Dunedin for a number of years, having been taught by her whanau elders from an early age. Lucy began the workshop with a karakia before demonstrating how to harvest harakeke following the correct tikanga. Lucy would usually avoid hosting workshops in such a setting, as she prefers to work from the plant itself, so we felt very honoured that she was willing to step outside of her comfort zone and commit her time to the project. Because there are no harakeke plants within walking distance of the gallery, Lucy used a juvenile harakeke plant for the harvesting demonstration, and brought in leaves which she had harvested before the workshop. Participants

were taught how to weave harakeke flowers, and after the event Lucy offered to host future workshops at a site where harakeke was available, so that more time could be spent expanding the group's skills.

On 12 May 2018, the #WGWYL gallery was home to another workshop, "Plant a Native, with Dylan King." King is an experienced arborist, landscaper and gardener who specialises in the native plants of Aotearoa. From the proposal stage right through to the conclusion of the project, King was thoroughly involved in the #WGWYL project, sharing his skills and knowledge through interviews and revegetation events. For his workshop, King educated participants about various propagation techniques including how to correctly sow kōwhai seeds; transplanting of seedlings; and how to take divisions of harakeke to ensure reliable transplanting of cultivars. Twenty people attended this workshop, and all participants walked away with native plants for their own properties, whether as seeds sown, transplanted seedlings or juvenile trees.

The final workshop for this round of #WGWYL, "Habitat Restoration and Guided Hikoi," took place on 19 May. Hosted at Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau/ Sinclair Wetlands and facilitated by the wetland's coordinator, Glen Riley, this hikoi and planting event took place the day after the exhibition had closed, providing the public with one more opportunity to engage with the project through habitat restoration initiatives. Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau is a 315ha wetland on the Taieri Plains, owned by Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu and managed by Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau/Sinclair Wetlands Trust. The site is valued as a wāhi taonga (culturally significant site), and also for the purposes of mahinga kai (traditional food and resources), conservation, recreation and education.

Sixteen participants arrived at the site on a cold but sunny Saturday morning. After a brief introduction in the education center, Glen took the group on a guided hikoi through the wetlands. Armed with photographs taken over the years, Glen discussed the changes that have occurred through the process of wetlands restoration, explaining the history of the site and future ambitions. Along the way, we stopped at various locations where native plants were waiting for us. Glen demonstrated how to transplant these juvenile specimens and how to protect them from introduced weed species while the natives establish their roots and slowly reclaim the land. We felt extremely honoured to work with Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau.

This final event captured everything that #WGWYL is all about – community engagement, skill sharing, native habitat appreciation and restoration – bringing the project full circle. In the wise words of wetlands founder Horrie Sinclair, "Without habitat we have nothing."<sup>18</sup>

## OUTCOMES AND PROSPECTS

#WGWYL achieved a number of goals in the time that it was made available to the people of Ōtepoti. Through community participation in the project's revegetation initiatives, native flora has been reintroduced to a number of locations across the region. One hundred plants were put in the ground at Mark Spencer's farm in Waitati, creating an onsite nursery for future propagation of raupū and harakeke on other sites, taken from divisions. The sculpted forms of raupū, harakeke, kōwhai and poroporo captured the interest of visitors, sparking conversations about the importance of these plant species and their social, cultural and environmental significance.

Through the information compiled in the attractively produced zine, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical layers informing the project. The workshops and other events provided opportunities for experts from a number of areas to share their knowledge with the public. Skills were shared and plants were distributed in the form of seeds, seedlings, divisions and juvenile trees, to be planted out through community participation, further advancing the main objective of the project: to increase the biomass of native flora across Ōtepoti.

With this first round of #WGWYL now behind us, the groundwork for future iterations of the project is already being laid. The second phase of #WGWYL will focus on concerns over the spread of myrtle rust (*Uredo rangellii*), a fungal disease which seriously damages plants of the *Myrtaceae* family, such as pāhutukawa, mānuka, rātā and ramarama, among many others. This project will raise awareness of myrtle rust, examining how it spreads, the damage it can cause, and the measures being taken to reduce its impact on the environment.

**Ruth Evans** believes that art has the capacity to act as a tool of resistance. Evans explores this approach within her multi-disciplinary practice, through the creation of contemporary jewellery, sculptural works and art-based games. Evans completed the Master of Fine Arts programme at the Dunedin School of Art.

- 1 "Art Makes Environmental Connection", *Ara Toi Ōtepoti*, 4 May 2018, <https://hail.to/toi-oho/publication/87YlulO/article/7JlS8F8> (accessed 8 August 2018).
- 2 "What Grows Where You Live", *Urban Dream Brokerage*, <http://urbandreambrokerage.org.nz/what-grows-where-you-live> (accessed 8 August 2018).
- 3 From the Environment Envoy project criteria brief, <http://urbandreambrokerage.org.nz/environment-envoy>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/dunedin-sweltered-hottest-summer-record>.
- 7 See <https://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/the-press/20180203/281517931564149>.
- 8 Horrie Sinclair began creating what was to become Sinclair Wetlands in 1960 when he purchased the land, ceased farming and began blocking drainage channels.