

Restoring Our Valued Environment

Four old friends, looking for a local travel adventure with a different slant - what better idea than to cycle tour the length of New Zealand, stopping to help at local volunteer-run conservation projects along the way? With only a minor amount of cycle touring experience in the group, we set out to ride from Southland to Northland by as many back roads, as much scenic route, and as much bikepack-able trail as possible. The mission: to learn, to help, to travel with a low footprint. The name: Restore Our Valued Earth; the ROVE project.

We set off from Bluff on ANZAC weekend and took six weeks to ride the South Island, in often glorious but generally quite mixed weather. By Queen's Birthday public holiday we had ferried across to Eastbourne, where we had lined up to volunteer at a joint public planting day through Mainland Island Restoration Operation, MIRO, and Greater Wellington. Through our journey so far we had spent volunteering days at planting sessions and weedings, cleared a trap line on the Paparoa Track, and hauled tracking tunnels and kororā nesting boxes around Kaipupu Sanctuary in a downpour. MIRO's objective was one of the biggest and grandest we had seen so far and we were delighted to be able to help the reforestation part of their project.

With an ambition to stay out of motorised transport unless absolutely necessary for the three months of our trip, we hopped onto our bikes on a beautiful sunny Queen's Birthday morning and rode south from Eastbourne. At Lake Kohangatera we met Jo, Greater Wellington's East Harbour Regional Park Ranger, with Brian, Terry, and Georgia, regular volunteers who hadn't headed away for the long weekend. Knowing the ROVE team were going to show up, Jo had brought a few dozen extra seedlings on top of her original planned quota. We assisted in planting these in deep, heavy, pleasingly dark soil in the ex-farmland between the two Parangarahu Lakes.

There was remarkable diversity among the half-dozen plantings we helped at over the course of our journey. From bouldery and clayish soils in Central Otago and Canterbury, through loose sand in the Māpua wetlands to the despicable jumbles of roots and rocks at Makara Peak, every planting site had its challenges and needed its own deliberate, ecologically-grounded approach. That includes careful choice of plants, and here, on an exposed south-facing ridgeline, we planted mānuka and kānuka, cabbage trees and toitoi, various comprosmas, pittisporums, ngaio, and kawakawa, among - indeed, sometimes practically inside - the gorse that will act as a nursery plant for the next few years.

A full reforestation strategy has objectives at all timescales, and so any planting will soon be attracting birds, and with them seeds from nearby forests. On this trip we weren't able to visit MIRO's other operational area: the Northern Forest, a huge area of established native bush and a local seed source representing the historic ecology of the area. Most of the projects we volunteered with were careful to eco-source their plants, but, with most land having been fully cleared of bush at some point, the opportunity to work with the true local plant varieties had been lost.

Planting 130 plants among the team was one thing, but there was a stretch goal for the day too. Two sheep, living wild in the fenced planting area, had to be encouraged out the gate and away from our freshly planted natives. It only took an hour with all eight of us involved,

and it really is remarkable how quickly a wary sheep can dash through impenetrable gorse. The sheep were so desperate to escape, one cleanly negotiated a cattlestop at speed and the other jumped into the river to swim around the end of the fence and downstream to the beach. They trotted off down the beach - so long, Shrek!

By mid afternoon, with the plants all in the ground and the sheep fully wrangled out of the planting zone, we jumped back onto our bikes and rode north again to Eastbourne where we paused to reload our stashed gear. Then onwards, to Seaview and up the Hutt River Trail to stay with relatives in Upper Hutt that night. Only 2000 km left to Cape Reinga.

Five weeks later, we finished our cycle trip with a resounding sense of gratitude - grateful that groups like Greater Wellington and MIRO were happy for a bunch of itinerant travellers to help in the small way that we could, and grateful for the wonderful experiences meeting and working alongside local volunteers. Grateful to have the opportunity to travel slowly and richly through our magnificent home country. But most of all, grateful that so many dedicated volunteers throughout New Zealand are trapping, weeding, planting, and working to protect our land.

The ROVE Team