



Report **03.593**
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Committee **Environment**
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Marine biodiversity programme – future direction

1. Purpose

To inform the Committee about the proposed future direction of the marine biodiversity programme.

2. Background

This year is the third and final year of our three-year marine biodiversity project, 'Our Harbour – Our Strait'. It is a collaborative project with the Ministry for the Environment, and was built around three main themes: community participation; information management; and integrated management, focussing on Wellington Harbour and the south coast.

The main areas of work that have been completed as part of the project are as follows:

Community participation (Greater Wellington): A number of community focus group meetings were held, involving people from different part of the Region. The purpose of the focus groups was to look at the community's perceptions of the marine environment, and find out what people wanted agencies to do to look after it. Two evening lectures on the local marine environment have been held at Te Papa, with 150-200 people attending each time. The final lecture is planned for 20 November 2003.

Information management (Greater Wellington): Following a series of focus group meetings and an information gathering exercise, a database has been developed and the information entered (over 700 entries to date). The information will be made available on the Greater Wellington website in the coming months, and we are working to make the information available spatially through our GIS (geographic information system).

Information management (Ministry for the Environment): The Ministry engaged a consultant to complete an investigation into decision-making processes and legislation for key management agencies in the marine environment, followed by a report assessing management techniques for coastal resource management.

A contract was also let to scope the availability, suitability and accessibility of datasets for a marine environment classification.

3. **A changed programme for the next three years**

At the end of last financial year, the Ministry for the Environment informed us that this project was no longer one of its priorities, and that its involvement would not continue into this financial year. This decision followed a re-prioritisation exercise within the Ministry and discussions about which central government agency is best placed to deliver on marine biodiversity outcomes. The Ministry of Fisheries manage fisheries and have a marine biosecurity function, and the Department of Conservation is the provider of biodiversity outcomes for marine ecosystems.

As the actions prescribed in the project plan for the marine biodiversity project are nearing completion, and the Ministry for the Environment is withdrawing from the project, staff believe that it is timely to reassess the direction of Council's marine biodiversity work. The main concern that staff have about the current project is that most of the work has been theoretical - developing the database, organising lectures and producing reports. While this work is useful, and raises community awareness of the marine environment, it is not directly improving the health of marine ecosystems.

3.1 **What is being proposed?**

Staff have been looking at the following options for marine biodiversity work:

1. **Investigations into the ecology and recreational value of river and stream estuaries:** Greater Wellington has little current information about river and stream estuaries in the Region, with the exception of Pauatahanui Inlet. Estuaries are an important part of the marine environment, both biologically and recreationally, and are under increasing pressure. The Wairarapa coast has a high number of small river estuaries that contain coastal wetland sequences which we know very little about. The Kapiti and Wellington coasts have larger and slightly better-researched river estuaries. This work would complement the work currently being done in Pauatahanui Inlet.
2. **Investigation of the ecology of sandy beaches:** Greater Wellington has little information on the state of our sandy beaches. They (should) contain a variety of marine shell life, but anecdotal evidence suggests that biodiversity is reducing as a result of increasing pressure from activities and pollution.
3. **Harbour biosecurity:** Methods in the Regional Coastal Plan require us to assess exotic and introduced plants in the coastal marine area. NIWA is working under a national contract with the Ministry for Fisheries on harbour biosecurity. Wellington Harbour is part of this study, and the study could be extended to our other harbour – Porirua, which has not been assessed for exotic plants and organisms.

4. **Marine biodiversity classification:** NIWA have been working on this concept at a national scale under contract from MfE. This work is important and is similar to classifications systems developed for terrestrial biodiversity. Regional level information could eventually be used as the basis of our coastal planning.
5. **Wellington Harbour freshwater springs:** The harbour freshwater springs are known to discharge in the area around Seaview wharf and Matiu Somes Island. The springs have been a topic of discussion for some time now and may be worthy of further investigation. The spring ‘impoundment’s’ were recently studied as part of a Victoria University hydrology research thesis, but the work did not extend into the spring ecology and relationships to the wider harbour environment.

We are proposing to develop a Marine Biodiversity Action Plan, using the above thoughts as a starting point. This approach is consistent with other action plans being developed as part of Greater Wellington’s biodiversity programme. The Action Plan will develop the options and detail the work to be carried out, budgets and timeframes. It will be developed with the following criteria in mind:

- The work is linked to improving our ecological understanding of marine biodiversity;
- Communities may become involved in marine biodiversity work;
- The work can progress within the allocated budget;
- The work will assist with our information requirements for state of the environment reporting and coastal plan review; and
- If possible, work will be linked to other biodiversity programmes.

4. Strategic context

The marine biodiversity programme is specified in the Council’s Take 10 element – Biodiversity.

5. Communication

Greater Wellington has contacted societies, interest groups, local iwi, government agencies and other associations as part of the marine biodiversity project. Groups have been contacted for different parts of the project and levels of engagement, and we have developed a database of contacts from the Te Papa lecture series. These contacts are important for any future biodiversity work as we would like to keep people informed and involved where possible.

Iwi, the Department of Conservation, the Ministry of Fisheries, interested groups and the community will be consulted during the development of the plan.

6. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee

- 1. receive the report;*
- 2. note the contents; and*
- 3. endorse the future direction of the marine biodiversity programme.*

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