



Take me to the RIVER

TrustPower has finally been given the go-ahead to build a hydroelectric scheme on the Wairau. There's been a lot of legal argument and scientific evidence along the way, but what about the stories of those who love and use the river?

By Bev Doole. Photography by Peter Burge

The braided rivers of the east coast of the South Island are special – there aren't many other places in the world with a similar system – and the Wairau in Marlborough is a classic example. It rises in the Spenser Mountains in the Main Divide, courses down the steep-sided Rainbow Valley and then meanders over its wide floodplain past Blenheim and on to the sea.

From the air, the braids look like silver ribbons running to the coast. But for TrustPower, a company looking to produce more electricity, they are streams of gold. Late last year, the Environment Court, in a finely-balanced decision, cleared the way for

TrustPower to go ahead and divert part of the Wairau for a hydroelectric scheme.

The court's decision was the final step after five years of applications, submissions, legal argument and scientific evidence. It has been the largest and most controversial resource consent handled by the Marlborough District Council. TrustPower plans to channel water from the braided section of the river into a long canal, through six power stations and back into the river 48km downstream.

Those opposing the scheme include farmers who face having the canal and earthworks cross their land, residents who fear what would happen in a large earthquake (the canal crosses the Wairau

fault line 10 times) and anglers who face low river levels and the loss of fish habitats.

Saint Arnaud trout fisherman and guide Nick King says his international clients come to New Zealand to fish wild native rivers like the Wairau and its tributaries because they don't have any like them left at home.

"They can't believe the clarity of the water and the size of the fish, and they also can't believe we're going to interfere with the Wairau for hydro power. Rivers are not a renewable resource. Once we lose a native river to a concrete channel, it's never coming back. Never."

"I believe New Zealand rivers have paid their dues for our electricity needs. We have



Left: Stick with it: Trev Jane and Geoff Hughes are walking all the waterways of Marlborough. Their favourite stretch is along the Wairau

to look at alternative options and use less power. We're killing pristine wilderness so we can use 50-inch televisions and four-slice toasters."

"John Key wants development. He wants us to catch up with Australia. But what he doesn't see is that our 'gold mines' don't look like gold mines. They look like rivers with clean water and big fish, and there aren't many left."

Nick's concerns are echoed by other locals who are drawn to the Wairau for many reasons. Here are their stories.

The Walkers:

TREV JANE AND GEOFF HUGHES

In 2005, at about the time TrustPower applied for resource consents to build

the power scheme, two science teachers at Marlborough Boys' College decided to skip Friday night drinks at the bar and go walking instead.

Trev Jane and Geoff Hughes started on the Wither Hills Walkway but after a few months got bored with it. "We were looking out to the coast and decided to do that next," says Trev. "We walked from Whites Bay to Cape Campbell," chips in Geoff. "It made a nice change, especially in summer because it wasn't as hot as the Wither Hills."

And then they came up with the idea of walking all the waterways of Marlborough. "We try to stick to the river bed because it doesn't irritate people. When we get to farms or vineyards, we first check with the owners. They're fine once they've met us. We've only

been refused access once – up the top end of Hawkesbury," says Trev.

"Most people are interested. They ask: 'What are you doing that for?' And we say, 'We're seeing Marlborough – all of its little corners'. Walking the rivers gives you a very different perspective," says Geoff.

Trev and Geoff chat like two old buddies, finishing off each other's sentences:

Geoff: We discovered the rivers were lovely and cool with a breeze coming down. It's good to walk through the clean water – refreshing, like being by a waterfall.

Trev: I think it's the negative ions, isn't it?

Geoff: Yeah, negative ions.

Trev: Hot, dry nor'westers have positive ions – that's why you get so tired.

Geoff: Yeah, that's right.

They still think like science teachers, even though they've both now left Marlborough Boys' College. They found their walks were a good way to unwind after a week in the classroom.

T: You felt stuffed after school; tight in the chest. But after half an hour of walking up the Wairau, you felt like you were winding down and relaxing.

G: It's like dropping a heavy load of clothes off as you walk along. You lighten up; cheer up as you're looking towards the hills.

T: Water has a very soothing effect.

You just focus on what's there; you're not distracted. It's a form of meditation in a way – you change your pace when you're out there walking on the riverbed.

G: Yeah, that's right.

T: And we stop all the time too. Pick up a rock to have a look at it. Skim some stones, watch some terns and seagulls – it's a very absorbing place.

Their favourite stretch of river is the Wairau between the Waihopai and the Renwick Bridge. They've walked up it and tubed back down.

"Tubing down the river is magic. We each have a tractor tyre, which is like being in an armchair. There are still a few braids in that section where we have to get out and carry



Left: Bird artist Nicolas Dillon, with his children Sophia and Archie, wants the river left untouched for future generations

Right: The braids of the Wairau are streams of gold for TrustPower. PHOTO: NICK KING

the tubes before pushing off and heading on our way again.”

Their next stage down the Wairau will include the 48km section affected by the TrustPower decision. They’re concerned about the impact if the power scheme goes ahead.

T: I don’t know what’s going to happen in the summer with its low flow. They have a minimum flow when they stop taking water out [for the scheme] but that’s when the cockies need irrigation water too. What happens up there affects down here. You can talk about minimum flow levels, but they’ve already got silting-up problems towards the mouth because of reduced flow.

G: And it’ll threaten the wildlife too.

T: It’ll be one of those things: once it’s built, it’s too late.

G: We’ve had this conversation, haven’t we? Why spend money on a power scheme when you’ve already got renewable energy available – just give everyone a free loan to get solar power. Germany does it – houses generate solar power during the day and sell it back to the grid. Beats digging more coal out of the ground or building another power station.

No doubt there will be more rambling walks and conversations. Although no longer teaching, Trev and Geoff still meet up on Friday afternoons and head for the river.

“Walks are the best form of relaxation,” says Geoff. “It was a nice discovery really: that you didn’t need a drink to relax. Just get out amongst it. I don’t want to be selfish or anything, but we shouldn’t tell too many people about the river.”

The Artist:

NICOLAS DILLON

Nicolas Dillon doesn’t have far to go to work. He walks out of his farmhouse in Rapaura, ducks under the washing line and heads into his studio – a converted orchard sales shed at the end of the garden. His other place of work is about 1.5km away on the Wairau River.

Nicolas is an acclaimed bird painter. He has exhibited his oils and watercolours around the world, including at the prestigious Birds in Art exhibition in Wisconsin and with the Society of Wildlife Artists in London.

“I grew up on a high-country farm up the Waihopai Valley and all the connections to the Marlborough landscape are important to me. My early work was very much focused on the bird and its plumage, whereas now it’s more about the bird and the environment and light that surrounds it.”

The Wairau riverbed is an outstanding bird habitat that supports endangered species such as the black-fronted tern, the

black-billed gull and the banded dotterel, which could be further threatened if the power scheme goes ahead.

“I paint the black-fronted terns; they’re a bird I love watching. They have such visual beauty and grace in flight. For me, they are a key feature of the river, flying low over the water. It lifts my spirits when I see them.”

Nicolas prefers to work in the field rather than paint from photos.

“I work with a high-powered telescope that allows me to get close to the birds without disturbing them. I have a backpack full of painting equipment, pencils and watercolours, and sit for hours observing them. That way I take in more of nature, its goings-on, the light and the atmosphere. It’s all very well looking down the barrel of a camera lens, but if you’re drawing and evaluating line and shape and tone and light, all your senses are fully engaged. You absorb a lot.”

“When I’m back in the studio, I’ve got the drawings and watercolours to refer back to, but internally there’s a lot more stored in my head that adds to the painting. It’s not just about painting a bird; it becomes about my relationship to nature and my emotional connection with that.”

“I feel very strongly that man shouldn’t be meddling with the river any more than we already have. It’s such a fragile, finely-



Above: Bill Woollcombe, who has fished the Wairau for 25 years, says TrustPower is grabbing a public resource for private profit

Below: Banded dotterel, watercolour by Nicolas Dillon

balanced environment. When you remove water and put it back, you're doing things that aren't natural and we don't know how it will affect the river and the wildlife it supports."

Nicolas donated one of his paintings to a fundraising auction for the Save the Wairau campaign. "It was a watercolour study of a banded dotterel that I made on the spot, looking through my telescope. There was a breeding pair and the male was standing and resting on one leg on top of a river stone. That was him, keeping a watch out."

Rather like those who have been keeping a wary eye on TrustPower.

"I'd like my children to be able to continue to enjoy the Wairau River and the landscape of Marlborough as I do. Having picnics and swimming in the river is the thing we most enjoy doing as a family."

"As a child, the river is just there and you use it. It's not till you get older that you realise how unique it is and how lucky you are to have it on your doorstep."

The Fisherman:

BILL WOOLLCOMBE

An hour or two in the company of Bill Woollcombe and a novice could become completely hooked on fly fishing. It's not just being in a beautiful place or the prospect of fresh trout for lunch. It's the immersion into

a different world – the world of thinking like a trout.

Bill, who is also a trout guide, soon spots a good-sized fish. The deafening chorus from the surrounding willows makes his choice of fly easy: a meaty cicada made of deer hair. Bill explains his strategy: "Trout have excellent eyesight, hearing and smell, and Marlborough trout are wily trout; you really have to stalk them."

He crouches down, commando-style, creeps under the cover of the trees and approaches from downstream. With elegant arcs of his line, he picks off his prey, patiently waiting for the fish to be fooled. It reaches for the convincing fly, but slides off before it can be landed.

Bill doesn't seem to mind. "Fly fishing is a very therapeutic experience. I like being out on the water, at one with nature; landing a fish is a bonus. To me, seeing the fish is just as enjoyable as catching it."

He's fished the Wairau for 25 years and gets out two or three days a week, depending on the weather and his shifts as an aquaculture technician at New Zealand King Salmon in the Marlborough Sounds.

The Wairau is a favourite river for him. "Braided rivers are special in the sense that they're forever changing their courses. Pools and runs are forming and disappearing all

the time, so it's always a bit of an adventure. It's different every time you go out."

"With the TrustPower scheme, there would only be one or two braids (instead of three or four) at the point of take. And further downstream, who knows? It could disappear underground into the aquifer like the Branch River."

He says rivers are the arteries and veins of the country – you can't just take out a middle section and not consider the effect on the rest of the waterway.

"It's about grabbing a public resource and privatising it. This particular government is hell-bent on development, growth and more growth. We have to break that cycle because our natural resources, especially our clean rivers, are rapidly depleting."

