

What's up with Weedbusters?

Progress report: 2003-2007

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The trouble with weeds

Weeds are recognised by ecologists as one of the major threats to New Zealand's biodiversity, damaging bush, coastal and wetlands areas, degrading areas of significance to Maori, and costing over \$100 million a year to manage.

There are two new weed species establishing in New Zealand every year. In 2006, for the first time, the number of exotic species that had gone wild in New Zealand exceeded the number of native species.

Weed problems in New Zealand are exacerbated by human activities. Most weeds are ornamental species that have 'jumped the fence' from gardens, either through natural means of spread, or through dumping of garden waste. The vast majority of New Zealand's future weed problems will arise from species already established in gardens throughout the country.

Public awareness, behaviour change, and the promotion of on-the-ground community action to tackle this weed problem, has been fragmented in the past by a lack of easily-accessible information about what species are weedy, how to identify and control these species, and inconsistent messages from a variety of agencies all working independently of each other.

This is where Weedbusters comes in...

*Once planted as an ornamental garden species, Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) is now smothering large areas of native bush.*



In the Beginning

Weedbusters national launch, 2003



Then Minister of Conservation, Chris Carter, joins Woody Weed in launching Weedbusters New Zealand.

While ecologists recognise that invasive plant and animal species are one of the most serious threats to biodiversity in New Zealand, weeds have a low profile amongst those who can help stop their spread - New Zealanders.

To raise the public profile of weeds, an idea that had been germinating for two years finally came to fruition in October 2003: Weedbusters New Zealand, based on the successful Australian campaign of the same name, was launched.

Starting as it meant to go on, firmly within the framework of collaboration and sharing best practice, New Zealand got permission from Australia to use their Weedbusters logo and clone their mascot, Woody Weed.

Comprehensive market research was undertaken by AC Nielsen to provide baseline information on weeds awareness (see later section) against which a national strategy could be formulated and evaluated.

Weedbusters vision is: *that New Zealanders are aware of and taking action to reduce the impact of weeds on the environment, economy and human health.*

We're all in this together

Before Weedbusters could be launched in New Zealand as an umbrella campaign for weeds awareness efforts, widespread support of agencies working on biosecurity issues had to be secured.

Funding to get the Weedbusters programme off the ground and provide national coordination was secured through the Department of Conservation as the lead agency.

Support from the Nursery and Garden Industry Association, Federated Farmers, Landcare Research, Landcare Trust, MAF Biosecurity New Zealand, Biodiversity New Zealand, NZ Plant Protection Society and the NZ Biosecurity Institute, was also confirmed, as well as from all regional councils and unitary authorities.

For the first time, New Zealand had a truly interagency weeds awareness programme to address the growing issue of weeds, using social marketing to achieve desired behaviour changes.





A regional flavour for a national issue

While sharing some common weed issues, climatic, geographic and demographic variations mean that every region in New Zealand is facing a range of individual weed problems as well. It is vital that Weedbusters works strongly in each region to address these variations and find solutions that work for the communities involved.

Most regions of New Zealand now have two Weedbusters co-ordinators, one from the Department of Conservation and one from the regional council or unitary authority. These co-ordinators work together, carrying out their Weedbusters role as part of their main (usually weeds-based) employment.

As well as providing a local face to the Weedbusters programme within their communities, regional Weedbusters coordinators:

- Provide an information hub from national to local levels
- Support new and existing groups, and encourage new initiatives
- Advocate for the Weedbusters programme within their own organisations
- Form partnerships and work together with staff in other organisations to address weed issues.

In most regions there is now a Weedbusters team made up of regional co-ordinators as well as other supporters within their organisations, interested staff from district and city councils, Landcare Trust representatives, and representatives of other community-based groups (e.g. Forest and Bird). The local knowledge and experience that these representatives bring to Weedbusters means that initiatives can be tailored to the concerns, needs, and resources available in local communities.

Regional coordinators and their Weedbusters teams are instrumental in undertaking some of the most effective and memorable weed awareness events. These have ranged from stands at shows, expos and fielddays, to weed identification walks and workshops, and weeding bees.

Schools and businesses have been encouraged to 'adopt a spot' and bust weeds there, clubs have tackled weed issues in local reserves, and Scouts and Guides have used weedbusting for their community service requirements.

Regional Weedbusters coordinators and the national Weedbusters coordinator keep in contact to share best practice about what works and what doesn't work from country-wide experiences. They also take part in a two-day workshop each year to consolidate weedbusting efforts throughout New Zealand.



Sara Brill (Environment Bay of Plenty) helps Brookfield School students with their weedbusting efforts.

Keeping in the loop

Every three months, a 4-page colour newsletter, *Weedbusters!*, is circulated to a mailing list made up of around 1000 community groups and key representatives of government and industry organisations

Even more copies are circulated electronically within regions and to those registered with Weedbusters via the website.

This newsletters showcases Weedbusters success stories from around New Zealand, and highlight weed issues that are of concern to local communities.



Using social marketing

Beyond weeds awareness

Decades of experience and research has shown that awareness about an issue doesn't automatically mean that people will change their behaviours to make things better.

For many years, organisations working towards weeds awareness have relied heavily on factsheets and information brochures to educate the public about weeds issues and encourage them to take appropriate action.

Unfortunately the results have been less than stunning, as our ongoing weeds problem in New Zealand shows.

These efforts have, however, provided a strong base to build on, with a good proportion of the population at least aware of the issue, if not actively doing something about it! Approximately 80% of the population is already switched on to the weeds message at some level – a pretty good start.

Rather than settling for just weeds awareness, Weedbusters is committed to behaviour change to address weed issues, using social marketing techniques.

Social marketing has been widely used to tackle a variety of health issues, and is starting to be used in New Zealand for environmental issues also. It is based on the understanding that the transition from awareness to behaviour change follows five stages, and each stage requires different methods of communication to effectively move the target audience to the next stage.

The five stages are:

- Awareness – introduction to a new idea or behaviour
- Interest – seeking more information on that new idea or behaviour
- Evaluation – considering whether that new idea or behaviour is useful to them or not
- Trial – trying out the new idea or behaviour
- Adoption – accepting the new idea, or adopting the new behaviour.

Weedbusters, using a social marketing approach, targets people at each stage in ways that will most appeal to them, and move them further along this path towards adoption or maintenance of desired behaviours.

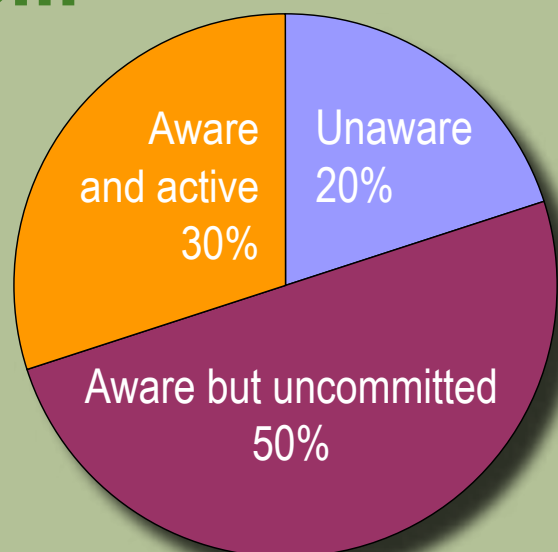
A baseline to work from

AC Nielsen was commissioned in 2003 to undertake research to give Weedbusters a weeds awareness baseline to work from. This was the first time that such comprehensive research into public awareness, attitudes and behaviour with regard to weeds had been undertaken in New Zealand.

Research respondents were found to fall into three broad groupings: the unaware (20%), the aware but uncommitted (50%), and the aware and active (30%).

One key message from the research was that people didn't recognise poor garden practices (growing weedy plants, dumping garden waste) as contributing to environmental damage. Knowledge of which species were weedy was also lacking - a major barrier to effective behaviour change.

The results of this research formed the basis of the 5-year Weedbusters strategy, running from 2003-2008. The survey will be repeated in 2008 to see what changes, if any, have occurred in awareness and behaviour during the time that Weedbusters has been active in New Zealand.



Target market segmentation for weeds awareness.

Source: AC Nielsen, 2003.



Weedy pin-ups

In 2006, Weedbusters released its first weeds calendar. It was hoped that those who were already aware of the weeds issue would purchase it to initiate conversations about 'garden escapes' with not-so-aware friends, family, and colleagues.

All respondents in a subsequent survey of calendar purchasers were positive about the calendar, with 77% saying that the calendar met its stated aim to "encourage discussion about ornamental garden plants that have 'jumped the fence' and gone wild."

In 2007, a weeds calendar was again released, with more information about the weeds featured.

The weeds calendar looks to become an annual Weedbusters fixture, featuring different weed species in each edition.



"What are you talking about?"

Reaching those at the first stages of awareness of an environmental issue is a huge challenge. The AC Nielsen research showed that this 'unaware' group (20-25% of those surveyed) do not consider weeds environmental threats; aren't concerned about weeds being a threat; don't feel that individuals have a responsibility for weeds; and don't feel that everyone should be helping to deal with the issue.

People in this group have less knowledge of the problem of weeds compared to other people, and are less likely to take action if they saw a weed - assuming of course that they could identify it as such!



A caged Woody Weed gets locals' attention at the National Agricultural Fieldays in the Waikato.

To reach this segment of the population, Weedbusters efforts need to create awareness and interest of this issue, raising the profile of weeds as an environmental threat, and highlighting the possible consequences of weed invasions.

Social marketing knowledge indicates that people at the first stages of awareness of an issue need information delivered to them, as they are not likely to seek it out for themselves. Delivery is best undertaken using less personal approaches: mass media, shows, displays, and repetition of slogans and gimmicks that catch their attention.

Many of the more visual aspects of Weedbusters events - such as the use of the full-size mascot, Woody Weed, live weed collections, and large colourful banners - are aimed at this segment of the population.

Print materials that are short on written information but are intended to catch the eye and start conversations about the weeds issues - calendars, badges, posters, T-shirts - also target this group.

Combine these with some unusual attention grabbing events - Christmas parade participation, mascot races, 'Dirty Weekend' promotions for home gardeners - and you are on the way to starting an uninterested audience thinking about something that is often considered one of the most 'unglamorous' of all environmental issues.

Social marketing (cont'd)

“Why should I care?”

The ‘aware but not active’ group is identified by AC Nielsen as making up about about 50% of those surveyed. Past emphasis on weed fact sheets and passive information spread may well have contributed to such a large group of people who at least have an understanding of what weeds are and why they are a problem.

People in this group accept that weeds are an issue, but lack skills or motivation to do anything about them.



Two keen locals give wild ginger the bash at a Weedbusting event in Tauranga Mall.

People in this group need the profile of weeds issues to be maintained, but also needs specific knowledge, skills and instructions to allow them to consider action, as well as personal networks to encourage and motivate them.

As with the ‘unaware’ group, the ‘aware but not active’ group need the information delivered to them: they will not seek it out themselves. Peer involvement is important to these people; they look at what others around them are doing as a guide to what is ‘normal’ behaviour, and are likely to accept a message that their peers have already accepted.

The ‘aware but not active’ group is targeted with Weedbusters presence at shows, expos, field-days, and so on around New Zealand. Often this has involved putting the weeds issue into a wider setting and context - for example, a city mall, a home and garden show, or a lifestyle expo, where the visitors are there to see things related to other aspects of their everyday lives.

The staffing of these events by dedicated weeds people from regional and local councils, DOC, and other involved organisations allows questions to be answered, misconceptions to be corrected, and options to be discussed in a neutral environment. It gives the ‘aware but not active’ group exposure to the issues surrounding weeds, and the chance to consider how they could adopt desired behaviour changes in their own lives to stop the spread of weeds in their own communities.

Quick and easy

Setting up a good display can be an expensive and time-consuming job. Getting suitable resources that are big and bright enough to draw the crowds and make them take notice can be difficult on limited budgets.

One of the most popular and well-used resources produced nationally by Weedbusters has been the mix and match set of 19 different weed-themed quickscreens.

These quickscreens are self-supporting, negating the need for heavy and cumbersome display boards and increasing the flexibility of show and stand layouts. They can be used inside or outside.

Each year another three to five quickscreens are added to the collection. These quickscreens are available free of charge on a national booking system.





Weedbusters Awards '06

Those who are already 'converted' to an environmental message shouldn't be ignored in subsequent awareness efforts. They should be encouraged and recognised, and their efforts held up as an example to motivate others in their community who are considering what personal action they could take.

The 2006 regional Weedbusters awards did all the above, resulting in 64 groups, individuals and organisations being nominated. Some amazingly inspiring stories came to light, and some humbling examples of community involvement making a huge difference were showcased in the media.

The Weedbusters Awards will be run every two years.

"What more can I do?"

The 'aware and active' group (about 33% of those surveyed) accept that weeds are an issue, and are already motivated to carry out 'good practice'. This might be on their own patch (backyards, gardens, lifestyle blocks) or on community-owned reserves and parks where they bust weeds.

This group needs positive reinforcement about the weedbusting they are already been doing, and more skills, information, and encouragement to get involved in more and broader eradication activities.

This group is targeted with weed identification walks, organised weeding bees, assistance to set up their own Weedbusters groups, and so on. The two-yearly Weedbusters awards (see inset) are also an important way to acknowledge the work that is already going on in the community, and to promote personal weeds action through the positive examples people in this group provide.

Much of the content of the Weedbusters website at www.weedbusters.org.nz is with this 'aware and active' group in mind, providing weed identification and control information, details of weedbusting events being run, and current issues about weeds in the media.

In 2006, Weedbusters and participating regional councils and unitary authorities launched an initiative to provide small amounts of funding to groups to cover such things as weed disposal, herbicides, tool kits, and so on. Weedbusters matches funding put in by each regional council and unitary authority up to a maximum of \$1000. Each participating regional council and unitary authority is also provided with a 'tool pool kit' full of weeding tools that can be made available to local weedbusting groups for use on their projects.



Malcolm Brennan (DOC) and Willi Borst (Marlborough District Council) with a Weedbusters tool pool kit.



Tuamarina Weedbusters, recipients of Weedbusters small scale initiative funding.

Telling our stories

Making weeds visible

Weedbusters relies heavily on press coverage, rather than paid advertising, to get the message about weeds out to target audiences. Articles in the newspaper tend to have more credibility than advertisements, but this comes with drawbacks, the biggest being getting media to run the stories in the first place!

Stories about weeds do not often make it into newspapers; stories about people and communities with a weeds message do. Weedbusters has concentrated on stories that emphasise a sense of normality about weedbusting work - that it is something that people do as a routine part of their life.

One of the major obstacles to getting weedbusting stories out to the media has been getting those on the ground understanding how important it is that their efforts are given coverage to highlight the weeds issues. There have also been problems with sourcing good photos of weedbusting groups in action.

Once the initial reluctance of weed warriors to tell their stories was overcome, however, some great coverage was achieved!



Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust members getting ready to bust weeds.

Getting the coverage

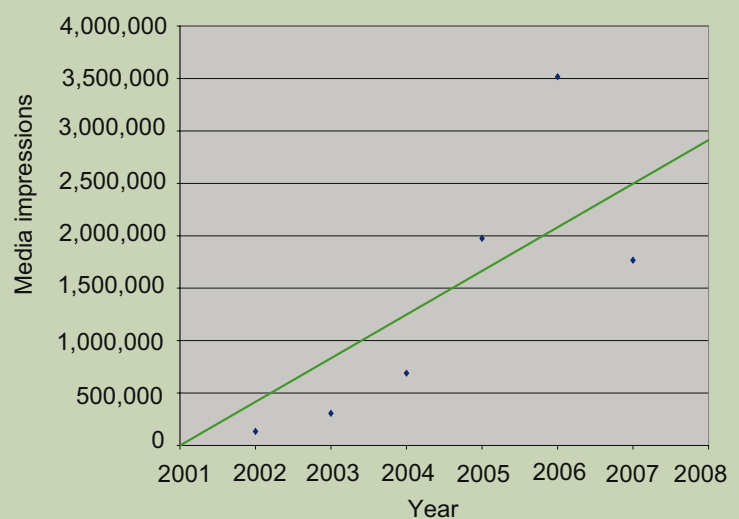
While media impressions (the sum of the readership of all publications an article appears in) measures outputs not outcomes, and does not give a good measure of whether the message has actually been taken up by the reading audience, it does show a level of exposure to a message.

It also shows the 'newsworthiness' of an issue if there is good uptake of press releases and media interest in events.

While major newspapers occasionally run Weedbusters stories, it is the community newspapers that tend to provide the most coverage. As these papers are usually distributed to all households in their circulation area free of charge, it means that the message is likely to reach more local people anyway.

These media impression figures do not include readerships of magazines in which regular Weedbusters columns are run (Weekend Gardener, Growing Today, Let's Go Gardening) or paid advertising.

Total Weedbusters media impressions, 2002-2007





NOT another beige campaign!

As a national awareness programme, Weedbusters has to compete with a mass of other commercial and non-commercial messages to reach its target audiences. With limited budgets for advertising, and relying heavily on media coverage, Weedbusters is necessarily an attention-seeking programme!

As one council communications manager succinctly put it, 'the last thing we need is another beige environmental education campaign'. Weedbusters strives to be anything but.

One of the most important strengths of an interagency programme such as Weedbusters is the ability to go outside the corporate square with both content, design and implementation.

The Weedbusters look is deliberately varied, using a mixture of cartoons, photos and strong graphics based around the core colours, purple and green, of the Weedbusters logo.

At the end of the day, the weeds message is key; how that serious message is delivered to the public is up to the people implementing the programme, as long as it encompasses the core Weedbusters values of interagency cooperation, community involvement, and fun.



Kapiti DOC staff get into the spirit of Weedbusters 'Dirty Weekend'

Dirty Weekend '07

When Weedbusters was launched in New Zealand, a conscious decision was made to avoid the bulk of Weedbusters activities revolving around one national Weedbusters Week, as tends to happen in Australia. If the weeds message was to be normalised into peoples' everyday lives, it had to be spread throughout the year.

Having said that, there is also the need to undertake national events to focus media and target audience attention on particular issues. The month of October provides an ideal opportunity for this; with spring in the air, gardeners start planning their coming growing season, and clean out their gardens to make way for new plants. So in 2007 Weedbusters decided to encourage them to have a 'dirty weekend in their own backyard' during this month.

As well as a range of 'weeds for natives' swaps around the countryside, there was a national weedfree makeover competition encouraging people to clear weedy species from their garden and replace them with non-weedy species.

The Dirty Weekend concept looks like becoming an annual fixture on the Weedbusters calendar.



Promoting best practice

Weeds on the web

Weedbusters is committed to promoting best practice weed control and ensuring that this information is accessible to those who want it. One of the most cost effective ways to get this information to the target audiences is via internet.

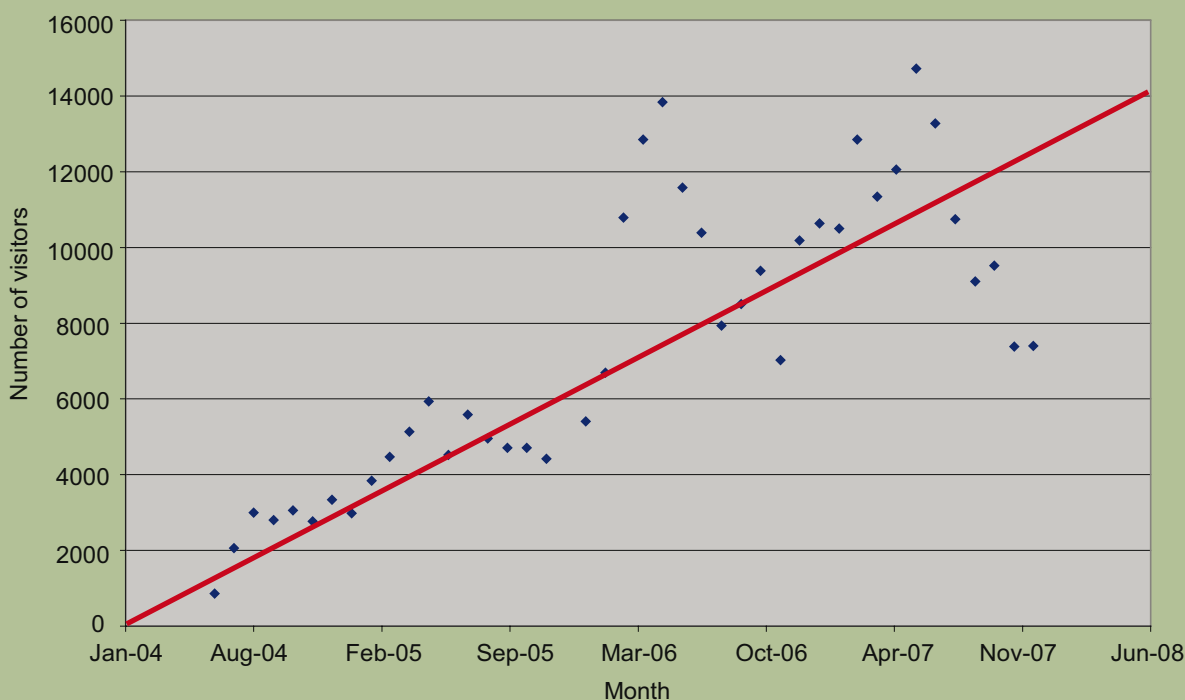
Weeds in New Zealand fall into three broad classifications: those banned from sale, propagation and distribution throughout New Zealand); those under regional control (declared pests under regional pest management strategies); and those that for whatever reason have no legal status, but are still of concern because of their environmental impact.

Because of these categories, on-line weed information has traditionally been split amongst organisations, depending on their weed control and enforcement responsibilities. Weedbusters has created its website www.weedbusters.org.nz to act as a one stop weeds shop for all information on weedy species, regardless of legal status.

This information includes identification (including photos), habitat impacts, spread and reproduction, and control, including herbicides and rates. Visitor numbers since this site was launched in 2004 show a steady increase in site usage.



Virtual visitors to www.weedbusters.org.nz





Weeds in print

Many individual organisations involved in weed management produce a range of material to educate their stakeholders about weed issues of concern to that particular region or organisation.

Weedbusters complements this by filling the gaps where issues bring together a number of organisations' concerns. Print resources are coordinated, developed, and produced by Weedbusters at the national level, and then offered to interested organisations at cost. This allows both Weedbusters and the participating organisations to produce materials that would be too expensive for any one participating organisation to produce on its own.

One unexpected advantage of this is that Weedbusters has built up a significant library of weed photographs that can be used by agencies for weeds-related resources as needed. There is a large network of individuals and groups providing photographs for this collection, most of which will be loaded onto the Weedbusters website as part of the weed search material available.

Weedbusters logos are now used on weed-related publications of most supporting organisations as a sign that they are supporting interagency cooperation and community involvement in tackling weed issues.



Plant Me Instead

Following on from the highly successful Northland/Auckland and Wellington 'Plant Me Instead' books, Weedbusters initiated similar books for the Nelson/Marlborough/West Coast, Waikato, Canterbury/Otago, and Southland regions.

Weeds selected for inclusion were those causing concern to staff and volunteers working with weeds on the ground from a variety of organisations and groups. Some of these weeds are already banned from sale, propagation and distribution nationally; others are required to be removed from properties under regional rules; yet others have no legal status but are still of concern to local weedbusters.

The non-weedy alternatives, both native and non-native, were chosen with input from nurseries and from weed assessment experts, and were screened against a variety of New Zealand and overseas databases to minimise risk of later weediness issues.

'Plant Me Instead' books are now being planned for Bay of Plenty and East Coast/Hawkes Bay.



Kids' stuff

Enlisting new weed warriors

Weedbusters recognises that the message about weeds needs to reach all age groups, and that children are an important audience. Not only do they take messages on board themselves, hopefully guiding their behaviour as they grow older, but they also influence the behaviours and attitudes of their parents and grandparents!

Although there are plenty of resources about the environment available for children, there are very few that even touch upon the issue of weeds. With this in mind, a Weedbusters storybook for the younger age group (4 to 8) was produced. This book was inspired by the weedbusting work in the Hamilton gully system, but has a universal message that even small people can make a big difference in protecting their special environments if they get friends and family to work together.

Regional weedbusters coordinators work with a variety of groups, from Girl Guides and Scouts weedbusting as part of their community service, to primary school classes encouraging parents to run weeding bees in school bush areas, to country schools wanting to share their weedbusting experiences with other schools through PowerPoint presentations and guided weed walks.

Often the weedbusting work is only one stage of a bigger restoration project or replanting of school grounds. In these situations, Weedbusters coordinators work in with native plant experts (or are able to provide this expertise themselves) to ensure that the children understand the vital role that weed control plays in successful restoration of natural areas.



Jack Bluett (4) and Conor Bluett (6) read Woody a Weedbusters adventure.

Schools 'Adopt a Spot'



Gisborne students with regional Weedbusters coordinator, Kirsty MacLaurin

Gisborne regional coordinator Kirsty MacLaurin has found the ideal way to combine her weedbusting expertise with her passion for native plants.

When she works with local schools, she encourages them to 'adopt-a-spot' that they can clear of weeds, replant with natives, and maintain until these new plants can survive on their own.

Kirsty's efforts have seen several classes of students getting their hands dirty in local reserves with the support of district council parks and reserves staff.

It is hoped that providing the children with an opportunity to experience and interact with natural areas in their community will result in an ongoing connection to their local environment that continues even after they have finished this weedbusting and restoration project.



Kimbolton School's weed trail

The kids from Kimbolton School aren't letting the weeds grow under their feet. Since 2003, with the support of Manawatu District Council, they've been clearing tradescantia and thistles out of a bush remnant near the school, and with the help of parents, have tackled elderberry, sycamore, and a few red cestrum patches that have established.

This piece of bush is now used as an extended classroom by Kimbolton School for data collection, research and projects.

To spread the word about keeping bush remnants free of weeds, the students have been conducting guided tours through the bush for Cheltenham School pupils, Waituna West Environmental Club, Kiwi Conservation Club, and their own school senior class and parents.

Kimbolton School won a 2006 Weedbusters Award for its outstanding efforts, and in 2007 was presented with a YHA Young Conservationist Award for this work.



Kimbolton students, Woody Weed, and Minister for Conservation, Chris Carter, celebrate the YHA Young Conservationists Award 2007 presented to their school for their weedbusting efforts

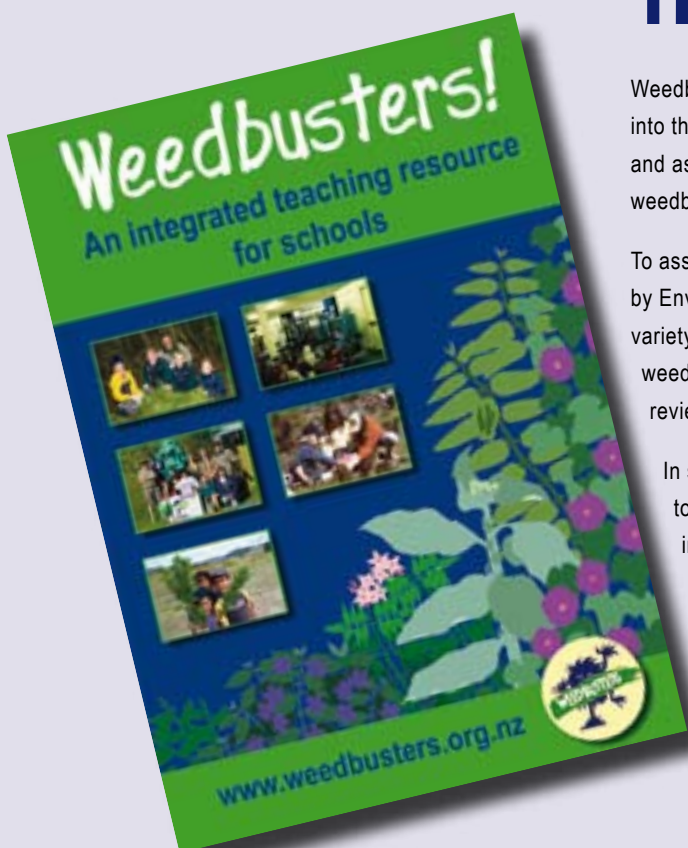
Training the teachers

Weedbusters in schools relies heavily on the enthusiasm of teachers to incorporate it into the wider curriculum they deliver. Regional Weedbusters coordinators support and assist schools where they can, with weed identification sessions and planning of weedbusting work.

To assist teachers, Weedbusters has adapted a school resource originally developed by Environment Bay of Plenty to be used nationally. This resource is based around a variety of curriculum links, from arts and English, to science and maths, and brings the weeds issue to life through real world experiences and examples. This resource was reviewed by West Coast Weedbusters in 2007 to bring it up to date.

In some regions, Weedbusters and EnviroSchools coordinators are working together to deliver the weeds message to schools through hands on activities in school grounds and adjoining natural areas. These activities often involve identification of weeds issues, planning for weed control and restoration work, through to control of weeds and replanting with non-weedy species.

In some cases, the students have successfully used their advocacy skills to appeal to parents, boards of trustees and councils to help them achieve their weedbusting goals where the project has been too big for them to cope with it on their own - a very effective way of initiating community action!



Bringing communities on board

Big tick for biodiversity

The first independent review of the national biodiversity strategy released in 2006 singled out Weedbusters for honorable mention. The review identified the Weedbusters programme as “one of the most important developments in the past five years” for biodiversity gains in New Zealand.

The review stated that Weedbusters had capitalised on the synergies between DOC, regional and district councils and community voluntary efforts. It noted the success of the Weedbusters strategy in significantly extending priority areas under management for weeds.

The review noted that Weedbusters was well established throughout New Zealand, and had contributed to a close alignment of weed control programmes between the Department of Conservation, regional councils, unitary authorities and other organisations

However, while the review confirmed that Weedbusters is now a significant force in protecting New Zealand’s natural heritage, it also highlighted the need for Weedbusters’ role in New Zealand to grow further.

The authors warned that Weedbusters would need ongoing support to reach its full potential, with new weeds emerging at the rate of two to three per year from the pool of over 24,000 introduced species of plants already in New Zealand.



Weedbusters has done remarkably well since establishing just over four years ago, with over 300 groups, individuals and schools registered in the battle against environmental weeds, and countless more exposed to the weeds message.

In the next few years, Weedbusters will continue to vigorously pursue its goals to boost public awareness of the weeds problem, encourage more people to actively participate in the management of weeds, assist agencies involved in weeds work, and secure more support and funding for the Weedbusters programme.

CASE STUDY: Jubilee Bush Weedbusters

Jubilee Bush is a kahikatea remnant in the heart of Hamilton which was once part of a much large forest system. In 2004 a group of local residents, aided and abetted by the Hamilton Environment Centre and Hamilton City Council, formed a Weedbusters group to tackle infestations of weeds, many of which had come from adjoining properties.

Over the last three years, this small band of determined (and sociable) volunteers meeting once a month for a couple of hours of intensive handweeding has reduced the infestation of tradescantia to a few thick patches, as well as clearing out ivy, montbretia, wild cherry and windmill palm seedlings.

Their efforts have been supplemented by larger school and service club groups lending a hand on occasion, as well as work experience teams tackling some substantial infestations. The results are there for all to see - reduced weed cover, and increasingly healthy native bush understorey reestablishing in its place.



Jubilee Bush Weedbusters tackling tradescantia



CASE STUDY: Waiheke Weedbusters

Determined not to win the title of 'weediest island in the world', Waiheke residents are tackling their weed problem with a vengeance.

Waiheke Island has gone Weedbusters mad, with community efforts spearheaded by a team from Waiheke Weedfree Trust, Auckland City Council, Auckland Regional Council, Forest & Bird, and the Department of Conservation.

Outstanding support from local newspapers has allowed Waiheke Weedbusters to run 'weed of death' competitions, with a different weed each month, and showcase and promote weedbusting efforts around the island.

Commuters on the Waiheke ferries have been met by Woody Weed and friends on a regular basis to ensure that they are up to speed with what's happening with weedbusters. Market day visitors have even been serenaded with songs especially written to promote the weedbusting message.

Waiheke businesses have also come on board, with areas of roadside where weeds have taken over being adopted and transformed into weedfree spaces. The 'adopt a verge' initiative gives businesses the opportunity to provide TLC to otherwise 'ownerless' areas, and be involved in a worthwhile community project.

Waiheke Weedbusters also took to the 'Dirty Weekend' promotion with enthusiasm, with locals being offered a chance to win a 'Naughty Nights' package at Auckland's City Life Hotel for their efforts.

Waiheke Community Board chair, Ray Ericson, has the last word on Weedbusters with regard to Waiheke Island.

"We have a serious problem with some really invasive weeds on this island and Weedbusters is a bit like an ambulance, it has come to Waiheke at a critical time. It is a fantastic movement uniting government and local bodies with communities in the fight against weeds."



Waiheke locals busting boneseed at a local bay - one of the many Weedbusters events being held on the island.

What's next for Weedbusters?

Amber Bill, the first national Weedbusters coordinator, aptly described Weedbusters as a 'controlled snowball'. It's been my job since I took over as national coordinator in 2005 to keep this snowball rolling as it grows in size and popularity, and steer it in a relatively straight line towards the outcomes of the 5-year Weedbusters strategy that are now visible on the horizon.

The success of Weedbusters has been mainly due to the willingness of organisations and individuals to jump on board and see where Weedbusters takes them, adding their own unique flavour and style as the snowball rolls along.

At times, the ride has been rather rocky. Along the way, there may have been worries that we were collectively heading for a spectacular uncontrolled crash, or even a gradual meltdown, at the end of all the time and effort invested in Weedbusters. But after four years, it is becoming apparent that yes, Weedbusters is sustainable, and yes, it is helping provide the awareness, behaviour change, and community involvement that have long been sought in relation to weeds issues in New Zealand.

It's an absolute pleasure to be associated with Weedbusters, and to work with all the wonderful people involved in this initiative. With the continued enthusiasm and support of those involved, Weedbusters will continue to grow as an effective interagency and community programme addressing weed issues in New Zealand.

Carolyn Lewis, National Weedbusters Coordinator



National Weedbusters Coordinator Carolyn Lewis and Weedbusters mascot Woody Weed at the National Agricultural Fieldays, 2006.

Photo acknowledgements

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		Page 16:	Carolyn Lewis

Published by Weedbusters, February 2008

ISBN: 978-0-9582844-6-2

