

The twenty year struggle for Travis Wetland

In June 1976, an announcement was made in a local newspaper that set off one of the biggest conservation and environmental fights Christchurch had seen.

The announcement said that plans had been drawn up for a multi-million dollar housing development in north-east Christchurch to provide homes and community facilities for 5000 people.

A feature of the housing development was to be a 16 hectare lake, created when sand was taken from the area to provide fill for the building sections. From that date on battle lines were drawn.

The fight went on until May 1996 when the Christchurch City Council announced its decision to buy the remaining 60 hectares of Travis Wetland “after prolonged and often bitter negotiations with the owner, Travis Country Estates Ltd.” The article in the Press said: “When added to the 55.92 ha area already owned by the council, the area would be developed as a nature heritage park.”

Long history

More than 500 years ago, the wetland was at an earlier mouth of the Avon River before the present Avon-Heathcote Ihutai Estuary formed. Its layers of shingle, sand, mud and peat soils are a unique record of the area’s natural history showing successive environments.

Pollens, preserved wood and sediment enable scientists to date and identify the life that existed hundreds of years ago.

The wetland is sited over the confined aquifers of the Canterbury Plains’ underground water system which takes water from the Waimakariri River, north-west of Christchurch, passing it through the gravels towards the sea. The sand-peat soil mixture was highly retentive of water.

The wetland generally has a surface layer of one to two metres of clay-silt below. This sits above an artesian aquifer from which a number of city wells draw water.

The Travis Wetland area was also important to Māori as a mahinga kai – a place for gathering food and other resources. Ōruapaeroa, referring to the ever-present easterly wind, was the name given to the site now known as Taiora-QEII, right beside Travis Wetland.

Ecologists believe that Travis Wetland still contains about 85 percent of the diversity present in local wetlands at the beginning of European settlement.

Hazardous area

One of the leading campaigners to save the wetland as a reserve, Anne Flanagan, said in 1991 that the land was very low-lying and full of springs. Part of the wetland was about half a metre below the high tide level. She said a lot of cattle drowned in the wetland and that one former landowner told her that a tractor was once lost there. In 1991, the local volunteer fire brigade was called out to rescue a bogged cow.

Anne Flanagan said the wetland was the province of the birds with half of the city’s pukeko living there and an additional 45 species having been seen there of which more than 20 were indigenous.

In the late 1990s and early 2000, more and more birds were seen in the wetland including a sighting of the rare bittern.

Area named after early dairy farmer

The wetland is named after one of the early owners, William Travis. The land was part of the Sandhills Run in the 1850s which took in all the land between the Styx and Avon rivers, including the areas now known as Bottle Lake and Burwood Forests. The run was one of the first town-milk suppliers to Christchurch.

Jack Travis bought this wetland block in the 1860s, apparently against the wishes of his wife, and continued to run it as a dairy farm. He lived in what is today Carlton Mill Road and he is said to have walked from there to here every day – about 16km.

The Florance family ran the block as a dairy farm and milk supply for much of the 20th century before selling the property. Later owners, such as Landcorp, have leased it out for seasonal grazing.

City's largest housing estate planned for area

Way back in the 1960s, moves were being made to get the Travis Swamp ready for residential housing. By 1972 the land was zoned residential and a proposal, known as the Eastern District Scheme, envisaged the excavation of a ring canal system to provide fill for the rest of the property, an arterial drainage plan and an open-space recreational area. However, the then Christchurch Drainage Board refused to approve open waterways or maintain them.

Christchurch Development Ltd bought a portion of the land in 1973 and the balance in 1976. Because of the drainage board's objections to open water, the company engineers went to south Queensland in Australia, to study the latest techniques in man-made lakes. A plan emerged to excavate a huge lake in the swamp to obtain landfill for the housing scheme.

By 1977 however, the project was bankrupt and the original owners, the Florance brothers bought 80 hectares of land back of the company.

New consortium

In 1984, it was sold again to a consortium of March Construction and Merritt Homes. This new partnership, Travis County Estates Ltd, planned the city's largest subdivision with 1200 sections of 150 hectares which would take 10 years to complete. It retained the name of Sandringham. The lake was to be an integral part of the scheme which would have a "village core" of shops and community buildings, and a light industrial estate on the outskirts of the swamp.

Inroads made into swamps

Development at Travis Swamp gets under way in August 1977. However, even at that early stage, doubt clouded the viability of the housing development, as reported in the paper of the day, due to the unavailability of bridging finance to pay for the lengthy and costly process of excavating a lake to supply fill for the low-lying land.

Grassroots' effort secures wetland for future generations

Community groups voiced strong opposition to the use of Travis Swamp for housing. By the time the developers were putting forward proposal for housing, the campaigners had long been at work fighting to prevent the loss of Travis Swamp.

Newspaper articles presented the view that the swamp was one of the last natural wildlife refuges in Christchurch. It was once home to herons, Stilts, bittern and crane.

Canadian born wildlife lover Bert Skinner said: "Once it's gone, it's gone for good – it's a tragedy. City dwellers have little enough contact with nature."

Campaigner

A campaigner for the swamp's retention from the early days, Anne Flanagan, told a community paper that people living nearby would be at risk from flooding if the swamp was filled. Anne was also the president of the North New Brighton Community Council, a group that waded in with a campaign to save the swamp.

Then came the experts, Christchurch botanists Colin Meurk and David Norton studied the city's remaining wetlands and concluded that Travis Swamp was worth saving. Dr Meurk said in 1988 that the swamp was important for education, scientific, historical and aesthetic reasons.

The Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society gave support. The Department of Conservation was concerned about the loss of the swamp and Ngai Tahu did not want it destroyed, particularly as it had played an important role in the lives of their ancestors.

Anne Flanagan became a founding member and chairman of the Travis Wetland Trust, which was dedicated to saving, improving and developing a wetland heritage park.

Central to the success of retention was the long term restoration work by local conservation groups, Dr Meurk said. He and other campaigners had to fight the critics.

The then chief executive of the Canterbury United Council, Malcolm Douglas, believed the swamp was too small remnant to be worth preserving.

Land secured

Before amalgamation of local bodies in 1989, Christchurch's mayor Hamish Hay, gave guarded support to preservation but after amalgamation in September that year the enlarged Christchurch City Council was clearly in favour of saving the swamp for the city.

In 1994, city councillor Gary Moore, who was to become the city's Mayor in 1998, said the council had to get the land for conservation. "If we don't...future generations will look at us and say we have failed," he said.

Over the next couple of years, the swamp was secured for Christchurch and since then it has received a number of conservation awards and support from many who originally opposed it.

Timeline

1960s

- Moves made to get the Travis Swamp ready for residential housing

1972-1976:

- Land zoned residential purchased by Christchurch Developments Ltd.
- A proposal, known as the Eastern District Scheme, envisaged the excavation of a ring canal system to provide both fill for the complete property, an arterial drainage plan and open-space recreational area.
- New plan emerged to excavate a huge lake in the swamp to obtain landfill for the housing scheme.

1977

- Development bankrupt, land repurchased by original owners, the Florance family.

1984:

- Sold again to consortium of March Construction and Merritt Homes. This new firm – called Travis County Estates Ltd – planned the city's largest subdivision with 1200 sections over 150 hectares – also to include a lake, village “core” of shops and community buildings, and a light industrial estate.

1984 – onwards

- Concerns raised about loss of natural areas:
- The swamp was one of the last natural wildlife refuges of Christchurch – raising fears that the level of the swamp would lead to the flooding.
- Wide support for preserving wetland from local groups, botanists and conservation organisations, government departments and tangata whenua.

1989

- Local body amalgamation saw a city council tht was clearly in favour of saving the wetland for the city.

1990

- Nature park mooted in a Press article.

1991

- Travis Wetland Protection Group (later to become Travis Wetland Trust) formed.

1989-1994

- Major public campaign for protection of whole wetland

1994-1996

- Council purchases over 110ha for a wetland heritage park