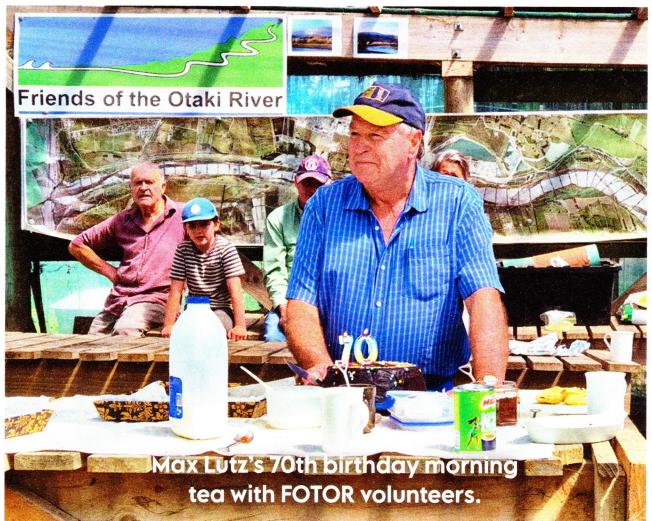


you've got a friend

An environmental group celebrates a milestone.

Beautiful Chrystals Lagoon.



Friends of the Ōtaki River celebrated its 25th anniversary last year. The group has played a central role in transforming a local river into a recreational paradise.

Since FOTOR's inception, its hundreds of volunteers have planted more than 150,000 native trees along the Kāpiti Coast river, with another 5000-7000 trees added each year.

But that's just the start. Its heady ambitions and skill in securing funding have led to the completion of a 4km walkway from State Highway 1 to the sea and a second 2km walkway at the popular Chrystals Bend area, as well as the installation of picnic tables, park benches, viewing platforms and public toilets along the river.

Third-generation Ōtaki dairy farmer, Max Lutz, whose farm runs adjacent to the river, has chaired FOTOR for the past 21 years. He and his late father, Carl, were involved right from the start, when a handful of locals established FOTOR in 2000 as a consultative group to the Ōtaki Flood Mitigation Plan. "It's been a wonderful chapter in my life as a farmer," he says.

The Ōtaki River is a well-known and much-loved feature of the local landscape, flowing under State Highway 1 south of Ōtaki as it makes its way from the Tararua Ranges to the Tasman Sea. Popular with swimmers, kayakers, trampers and fishers, at one time it also had a long history of flooding.

Initially, FOTOR's role was to monitor the Plan's progress under the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), take part in annual river walkovers, and carry out environmental plantings and other projects.

However, the group's ambitions quickly grew. Initially reliant on council funding, FOTOR quickly secured an additional grant of \$30,000 to develop the Ōtaki estuary. Along the way, it also obtained funding from the Ministry for the Environment to employ staff, and the Philipp Family Foundation, headed by philanthropist Robin Philipp, has been another major contributor.

Additionally, an increasing number of Ōtaki families, community groups and businesses are choosing to sponsor named planting areas alongside the river.

For a sponsorship of \$5000, FOTOR will plant 1000 trees, carry out site maintenance, and install named signage at the planting site. Interest in the scheme has "snowballed", Max says, and there are now 121 sponsored plantings along the river, about half of them funded by families.

"It's a lovely way for a family to create a permanent legacy alongside the river, and to provide a positive place of remembrance for family members," Max says.

Support from local businesses has also been ongoing. A bridge over the Waimanu Stream, a tributary of the river, was funded by Transpower in 2008. Pots for FOTOR's nursery are provided by Watson's Garden of Ōtaki.

Establishment of the nursery has led to significant savings in seed acquisition. The nursery currently produces about 7000 trees a year for use in subsequent plantings. Seed collection, propagation, potting and pruning are all done on site.

A group of volunteers gathers tree protectors and canes from previous plantings, which are normally used three times before being recycled. Pots are re-used in a similar way.

Another group of volunteers maintains the Ōtaki River Estuary. FOTOR has also created a fern grove in the bush and an arboretum.

Max says they have about 60 active members in total, including a group of 30-35 stalwarts who turn up every Wednesday morning without fail for the weekly volunteer sessions; these are always followed by the all-important morning tea.

At these sessions, volunteers will pot seedlings in the nursery, plant and mulch trees, and weed planting areas. "The volunteer mornings provide a sense of achievement, build community and keep our retired volunteers active," explains Max.

To celebrate its 25th anniversary, FOTOR held a special celebratory lunch for volunteers and planting partners as well as GWRC staff. It also created a new entrance to the river, complete with fencing, walkway access and historical railway plinth.

The entrance has been named Eric's Patch after one of FOTOR's founding members, Eric Matthews.

"The anniversary was a great opportunity to reflect on the huge achievements of hundreds of volunteers over the past 25 years," Max says. ■

FOTOR meet every Wednesday at the nursery down Riverbank Road at 9am-11am.



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.