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A shining example for us all

From just a seed, a mighty tōtara can grow. That is, if it has the right encouragement and nurturing from its surroundings, a climate which cherishes it, and its roots are firmly anchored in strong and stable ground. So, it is with environmental initiatives taking place around the world. Millions of well-meaning people want to make, and are making, a difference to the plight of our planet by putting the environment first, doing what it takes to ensure ecosystems are healthy, and taking steps to reduce pollution and waste.

Environmentalism is not a movement or state of mind which is confined to any particular cohort of people of certain age or background. Like all lobby or interest groups, it benefits both from having a cross-section of members with different experiences and abilities, and from being able to persuade young people to get involved.

In New Zealand, EnviroSchools has provided a pathway into environmental action for hundreds of thousands of school students who may be worried about the way things are going, allowing them to undertake initiatives towards a more sustainable and resilient future. EnviroSchools began the year after the groundbreaking 1992 Earth Summit in Rio De Janeiro, answering a call to think globally and act locally. From those embryonic beginnings in Waikato and the Bay of Plenty, the programme became a national one in 2001, thanks to funding from the Ministry for the Environment.

In Otago, EnviroSchools have now been running for 21 years, an achievement which was marked this week with a celebration in Dunedin's Edgar Centre.

Pupils from 15 schools took the opportunity to highlight their recent work, including an award-winning short film by Waikouaiti School's 10-year-old Sophie McWilliam on the environmental threats facing albatross, particularly microplastics in the oceans.

Like all individual efforts, they can seem small in the face of such huge problems. But the total effect is larger than the sum of the parts.

Otago Regional Council EnviroSchools regional co-ordinator Dr Robyn Zink points that out, saying pupils are empowered by seeing others caring about the issues and doing their bit, and it all contributes to a "really big change in our community".

EnviroSchools has grown to be a major nationwide schools programme. Nationally about 1530 schools are involved, comprising about 360,000 pupils and 15,700

teachers and staff. In Otago, there are 101 Enviroschools, 89 at primary and secondary level and 12 in early childhood education centres, with more than 24,000 pupils taking part.



Kane Holmes explains the use of pia harakeke (flax gum) as a wound dressing during a Enviroschools Hui in Balclutha this year. PHOTO: RICHARD DAVISON

The importance of getting young people involved in saving the planet as early as possible cannot be overstated. Far better for them to be developing their own beliefs by looking at the future world through an environmental lens than focusing instead on never-ending economic development and consumerism.

Middle-aged and older generations are often castigated for not doing enough to look after the Earth for their children and future generations.

With Enviroschools, a critical ethos is being instilled now in these young, committed people to protect the planet for their own children and grandchildren down the line.