

Friends of Nelson Haven & Tasman Bay Inc

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Annual General Meeting will be on Tuesday August 25 2026 at 5:30pm at 29 Bronte Street, Nelson. From 5 pm social with nibbles. All are welcome.

Annual Report July 2025 to June 2026

"We do not own the world. Our place in it is merely leased to us by nature. If we persist in waging war against our natural landlord ... our lease will soon expire." - Roy Phinney

Much of Friends of Nelson & Tasman Bay coastal conservation efforts are no longer possible due to the present New Zealand government's Fast-track Approvals Act 2024, supporting its War on Nature. It is by-passing process, ignoring hard-won Environment Court decisions and has stopped funding volunteer conservation work.

We realise that restoration of coastal, and even off-shore zones, is unlikely without policy change. Factors making restoration challenging is the pollution and eutrophication of receiving waters and the ever-increasing sediment loading. Aggravating this is re-suspension of the fine sediment due to bottom dredging and trawling which disturbs both the benthic and the lower water column. Efforts to encourage coastal regeneration are now happening, mainly with volunteers.

We now know that the ocean's ability to absorb modern technological innovations has limits and these limits are likely being approached. Nature can heal to a point, but eventually there is a Tipping Point.

We know that biodiversity is decreasing for many ocean life forms. The most obvious is the ninety percent of New Zealand's seabirds which are at risk of extinction along with a quarter of marine mammals. A Statistics New Zealand report also tells us that we have the highest number of threatened seabird species in the world. These species are the tip of the iceberg we can see and record, but the countless invertebrates and microorganisms would also be connected to what is happening to the birds. As Joni Mitchell's song tells us "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone...", and in this case we likely don't begin to know what's gone. Friends' annual report of last year shows how orange roughy is on its way to commercial extinction (Friends' annual reports can be accessed on our website).

Friends continues to support two coastal research projects and educational projects.

Friends has complied with the requirements of updating its Rules of Incorporation as well as complying with requirements for its status for the Charities Commission.

Two original estuarine water colour paintings by Perrine Moncrieff, given to Friends, have been gifted to the Suter Art Gallery. These paintings are on the covers of Friends two history booklets available on Friends' website.

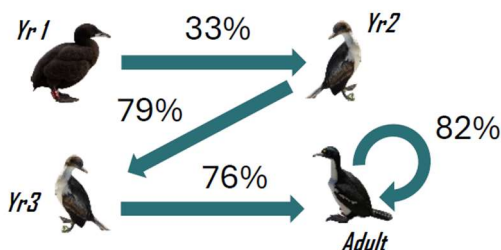
A. Research and Educational Projects Support

The king shag (*Leucocarbo carunculatus*) is endemic to the Marlborough Sounds and currently classified as 'Threatened-Nationally Endangered'. Hence it is important that research is done to track population trends, their feeding and survival. Friends is supporting the following two projects: -

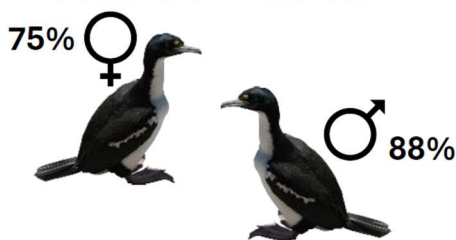
A. 1. King Shag Banding and Re-sighting

Banding and re-sighting of king shag chicks is being done at several colonies by Toroa Consulting in a joint project of Friends and the Marine Farming Association. The work is aimed at answering the questions on juvenile survival to breeding, to age of first breeding, and annual adult survival. Three years data have been collected and this has been combined with work previously done at king shag colonies and DOC funded surveys. The analysis does not paint a rosy picture.

How does survival differ between age classes?



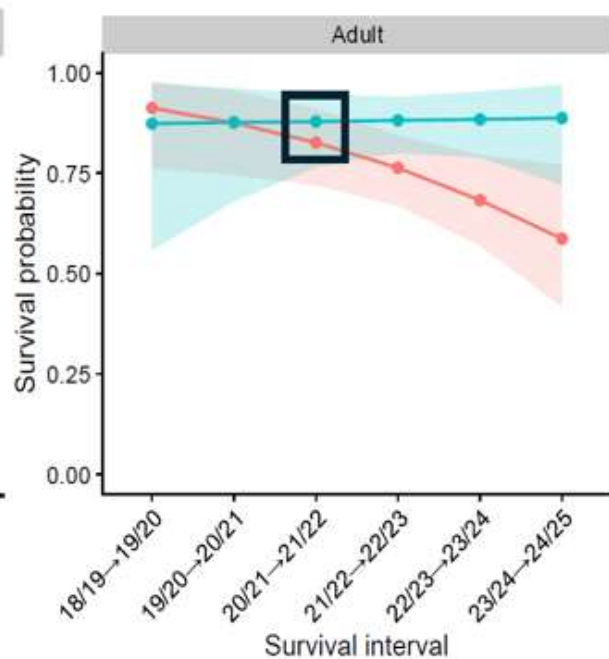
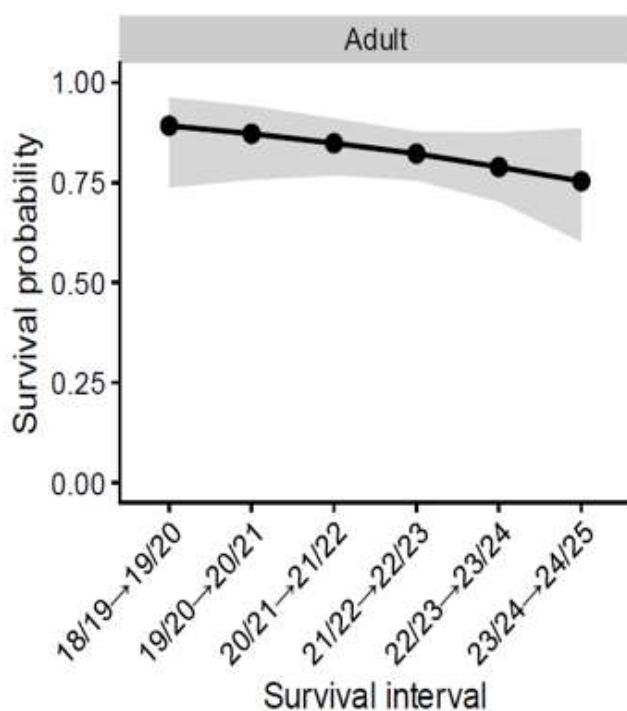
Is there any sex specific differences on survival?



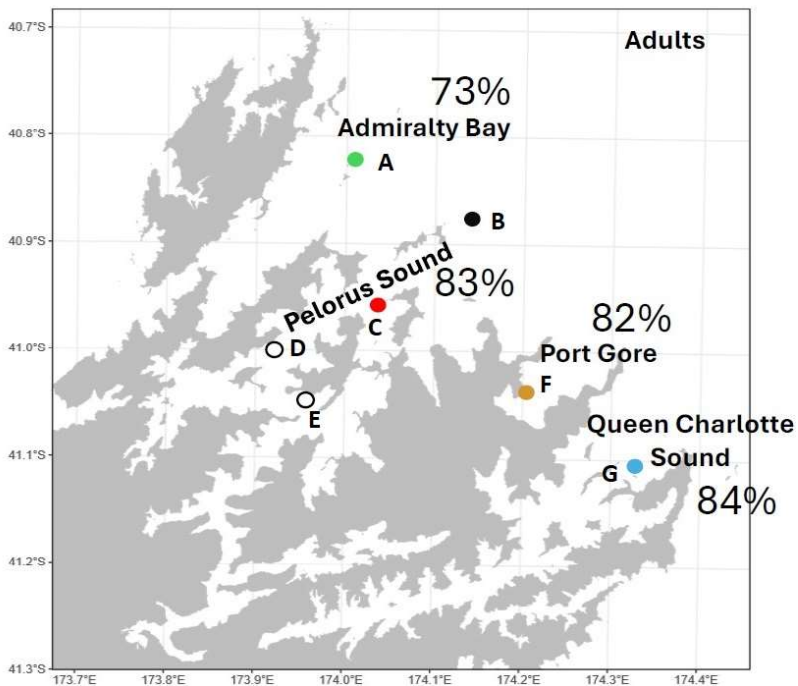
Referring to the diagram to the left, juvenile survival is low at only 33% of birds surviving over the year after they become independent of parental care and assistance.

Annual adult survival is also on the low side, with females doing worse than males.

The two graphs below worryingly show that there has been a decrease in annual adult survival over the seasons since 2019. Left graph - at the start of the project survival was about 90%, but has since dropped to about 75%. However, when you separate out the sexes, right graph where pink = females and blue = males, since 2021 there is divergence in survival between the sexes, with adult female survival crashing, whilst male survival is stable at 88%, which is relatively high.



Is survival more difficult in different parts of their range?



This map shows the survival difference in regards to colony. The biggest population decline has been seen at Duffer's Reef, red dot (C), which here is amalgamated with the other Pelorus Sound colonies.

The big question now is what is causing this population decline.

Diagrams courtesy Mike Bell, Turoa Consulting.

A. 2. King Shag Feather Analysis

Friends is funding research on the nutrition level of King Shag using feather analysis. Birds moult each year and grow a new set of feathers, so studying feathers provides a snapshot of the bird's health and diet when the feathers are growing during the moult period.

Two study methods use breast feathers collected from adult live birds and museum skins dating from 1902 to 2024 to investigate whether the position in the food chain of king shags has changed between historical and contemporary populations (temporal variation) and if it differed between five contemporary colonies (geographic variation). Referring to the map in the previous section (King Shag Banding), the colonies studied for historical comparison were Trios (A), Chetwode islands (B) and White Rocks (G); and for contemporary geographic comparison were Sentinel Rock (B), Port Gore (F), White Rocks (G), Duffers Reef (C) and Tawhitinui (E).

The work is being done by Earth Sciences New Zealand and Canterbury University. The field work is complete and the data has been interpreted by Vanessa Kennard as part of her PhD thesis. The final study outcome is being written up for publication in a scientific journal. This is not yet available for summarising here. Our next Annual Report will give a full summary, and the scientific paper will be available from a link on Friends' website.

Other Project Involvement:

A.3. Seagrass Studies.

Seagrass (*Zostera muelleri*) is being studied in local estuaries by Cawthron Institute. The unit sponsors students from several universities and has published a book on their findings to aid seagrass regeneration efforts in other coastal places. The book, and a shorter summary version, is available for all interested people. A regular newsletter keeps us informed of their work, which Friends support with annual grants. See <https://www.cawthron.org.nz/research/our-projects/seagrass-restoration/> for more details.

A.4. Educational projects

Friends believes that environmental education, especially of the young, is fundamental to help protect our coastal region in the future. A superb example of this was when a Kamo High School geography teacher guided his students over 14 years in projects that led to the creation of the Whangarei Harbour Marine Reserve (approved 2004). Over the period hundreds of children contributed. One student continued in the field of education and co-founded the Experiencing Marine Reserves programme. This is delivered to school children and involves a classroom introduction, learning to snorkel, then visiting a local marine reserve. The children see first-hand the difference between protected and unprotected environments. Then they act upon the knowledge with follow-up projects.

Friends helps support local organisation Tasman Bay Guardians (TBG). TBG is the regional provider of the Experiencing Marine Reserves (EMR) programme across the Top of the South, and also delivers Love Rimurimu for local school students. While both programmes connect young people with the marine environment, Love Rimurimu has a particular focus on seaweeds, seagrass, and their restoration.

B. Nelson/ Wakatu City Council (NCC) area.

B.1. The Nelson Biodiversity Forum meets four times each year and keeps about thirty interested groups informed of local environment projects. The Forum cooperates with both Tasman and Marlborough Councils where jurisdictions overlap. An example of a topic discussed was the desktop mapping of wetland loss, which in Nelson stands at 99.2% loss with most remaining wetlands less than 0.5ha in area. We encourage Council to work with landowners, developers and pest control to save, as well as find, wetland and creation possibilities.

B.2. The Te Tai-o-Aorere Marine Biodiversity Forum meets three times a year and we learn of coastal research and work such as the recent establishment of Coastwatch, which already has 41 volunteer members. Coastwatch uses cameras and other technologies for navigation safety, fisheries compliance and marine reserve offending. One Glen member has a camera on their property watching the marine reserve. This is a helpful game changer in patrolling the reserve.

B.3. An Auckland University PhD student research report tells of the effect of putting mussel shells back into coastal waters. There are 14 million tonnes of shells in landfill, and back-loading these results in a fascinating regeneration story with lots of plus and minus surprises.

B.4. Another project is investigating horse mussel's ability to clear suspended sediment in coastal waters. Volunteer divers work alongside research scientists from Cawthron and Nelson City Council. These, and other coastal initiatives reported at the Forum, are available on line.

C. Tasman District Council (TDC) area

C.1. Mapua boat ramp resource consent application was a major focus in 2025. In 1974 Friends urged the regional water board to re-examine the discharge permits of Fruitgrowers' Chemical Company in Mapua which was discharging some of its 139 agrichemicals into the nearby land and coastal waters resulting in what was later described as NZ's most polluted site. The company sold on several times and thirty years later \$8 million dollars of rate and taxpayer funds were used to attempt to clean up the area, a classic example of privatising profits and socialising clean-up. Some material was removed but that remaining was diluted with clean soil then capped with clay. When a recent consent was applied for to build a boat ramp across the capped area there was concern on many fronts. It was justifiably feared that any disturbance of the clay cap would result in exposed chemicals draining into the estuary and Bay. In the event of a likely increase in boat club membership the extra traffic including large vehicles pulling boat trailers along the single access road would adversely affect the many walkers and Great Taste Trail cyclists who use Aranui Road. The Commissioner declined the application to build a ramp.

D. Marlborough District Council (MDC) area

D.1. Wakatu Resources Ltd (WRL) resource consent application U000361: WRL was granted 450 ha for spat catching and mussel marine farming in eastern Tasman Bay, 7 kilometres west of Rangitoto-ki-te-Tonga (D'Urville Island). In 2003 Friends appealed and in 2013 following negotiation, it was decided that development could proceed in four stages, with a number of monitoring conditions.

Consent conditions 19 – 24 required, from the beginning of Stage one, for phytoplankton and zooplankton sampling and identification at fortnightly intervals, with WRL, Friends and MDC to determine any sampling protocol changes 18 months on.

Condition 20 outlined the purpose of the fortnightly zooplankton and random phytoplankton sampling is to characterise zooplankton communities and typify phytoplankton density and species at the marine farm site throughout the year.

Water Column Monitoring as negotiated in conditions 19 - 27 were a particularly important consideration as issues of plankton, including zooplankton composition and depletion, are critical for life in the marine ecosystem. Friends believe that zooplankton monitoring in the Marlborough Sounds and Tasman Bay has been deficient by international standards, and the improved monitoring programme at the WRL site signaled a positive shift towards improving knowledge for WRL, science providers, regulators, and the public good. WRL undertook the fortnightly water column monitoring programme in accordance with the consent conditions. Cawthron Institute analysed the samples and reported on findings. A "Final Report" (Cawthron Report 3269) summarising the 18 months of monitoring was produced in December 2018.

Subsequent to the initial 18 months of zooplankton and phytoplankton monitoring, WRL and Friends engaged with further discussions on the merits of continued fortnightly sampling, counting and identification. The discussions did not conclude, and WRL have not progressed development of the mussel farming at the site, although Plant & Food Research have the use of a small portion of the site for their post-Covid fast tracked fin fish trials.

In consideration of the expense of the intensive sampling and identification protocol, and WRL not generating income from further development currently, Friends have recently signed an agreement to pause the monitoring until four years following the initiation of Stage two, should WRL decide on further development of mussel farming at the site. Both Best Practices and sampling methods have changed in recent years and Friends are hopeful that future sampling can contribute better to the management of the marine environment.

D.2. Proposed Marlborough Environmental Plan (pMEP)

The Long Road to the Marlborough Environment Plan.

Almost to the day, on 31 August 2016, Friends of Nelson Haven and Tasman Bay lodged a comprehensive submission on the Proposed Marlborough Environment Plan (pMEP). Helen Campbell and Rob Schuckard prepared the submission, concentrating on landscape, natural character and the protection of the coastal environment. By then, Friends had already spent decades contributing thousands of volunteer hours trying to ensure that aquaculture developed within meaningful environmental limits rather than according to the simple principle that if a bay contained water, it probably needed another marine farm.

The rapid expansion of the Greenshell™ mussel and King Salmon industries during the 1990s and early 2000s placed enormous pressure on the consenting system. Applications multiplied, objections followed, appeals flourished, and everyone acquired an intimate understanding of planning law whether they wanted to or not. Rather than asking whether enough ecological space remained for nature, the legislative response was to find a more efficient way of allocating marine space for aquaculture. The Aquaculture Reform Act 2004, which came into force in January 2005, fundamentally changed how new marine farming space would be allocated. Friends remained deeply involved throughout, preparing extensive submissions on Variation 1 (Marine Farming) and Variation 1A (Finfish Farming), arguing, sometimes optimistically, that landscape, natural character, biodiversity and public access deserved to stand alongside economic development rather than beneath it.

As Marlborough's unitary authority, the Marlborough District Council enjoys the unusual privilege of wearing both regional and district council hats. In theory, this offered the opportunity for genuinely integrated coastal management. In practice, it demonstrated that "integration" often means discovering entirely new ways for environmental, political and commercial interests to collide. After countless technical reports, hearings, caucuses, mediation sessions, expert conferencing and enough revised planning maps to wallpaper the Council chambers, the aquaculture provisions finally became operative on 14 April 2026, only a decade after the original pMEP was notified. By planning standards, this was almost brisk.

The journey itself was remarkable. The former Two-Zone system divided the Sounds into Coastal Marine Zone 1, where new aquaculture was largely prohibited, and Coastal Marine Zone 2, where marine farms could seek resource consent. It was a relatively simple framework, which perhaps explains why it could not survive. The replacement introduced Aquaculture Management Areas (AMAs), with existing lawfully established marine farms generally deemed to occupy AMAs, while future expansion was directed into designated areas, increasingly located in deeper waters.

Curiously, one consequence received remarkably little attention. The AMA framework facilitated what was arguably the largest strategic allocation of new aquaculture space ever provided for in the

Marlborough Sounds. This was presented as smarter planning rather than more development, although the mussels and salmon were unlikely to appreciate the distinction. Behind the language of "optimisation" lay a simple commercial reality: maintaining production increasingly requires more marine space. Nature, unfortunately, has shown little enthusiasm for expanding at the same rate. Competition between industrial production and natural ecosystems is no longer an emerging issue; it has become the defining environmental challenge for the Sounds. Whether continual expansion to maintain production can genuinely be described as sustainable management remains open to debate. Whether the environment has actually kept pace with the planning framework remains an equally open question.

Perhaps the greatest irony was that the chapter dealing with one of Marlborough's most significant environmental pressures proved too controversial to proceed with the rest of the Plan. In 2016 the Council deferred the aquaculture chapter from the notified pMEP, acknowledging that environmental information had evolved, public confidence had evaporated and the planning framework required rebuilding from scratch. Unlike the remainder of the pMEP, the aquaculture provisions were effectively rewritten from first principles. What eventually became operative in 2026 bore little resemblance to the chapter originally proposed a decade earlier. When a plan requires a Working Group, two Variations, a decade of mediation and several Environment Court appeals before it can become a plan, one begins to appreciate the unique elegance of New Zealand's resource management system.

The Marlborough Aquaculture Review Working Group was subsequently established, bringing together the Marlborough District Council, industry representatives, iwi, government agencies, community organisations and environmental groups. It was planning by endurance. The process lasted years and consumed thousands of hours of volunteer effort. For Friends, participation meant far more than lodging submissions. It meant analysing technical reports that could comfortably double as doorstops, commissioning expert evidence, attending mediation sessions, participating in caucusing, preparing Environment Court cases and discovering that retirement can, in fact, become a full-time occupation.

The eventual outcome was Variation 1 (Marine Farming) and Variation 1A (Finfish Farming), which survived hearings, mediation and Environment Court appeals before being approved by the Minister of Conservation. The new provisions provide greater certainty for marine farmers while creating mechanisms to relocate poorly sited farms away from ecologically sensitive areas, outstanding natural landscapes and high-amenity locations. On paper, this represented genuine progress. As always, the true measure lies not in the aspirations of the Plan but in its implementation.

Friends views the final outcome with mixed emotions, and perhaps a measure of understandable bitterness. Many of the issues that had motivated years of research and advocacy, particularly landscape, natural character and the need to establish legal precedents for managing the cumulative impacts of dredging and bottom trawling in the Marlborough Sounds, never reached the Environment Court. After years of preparation, considerable expense and the engagement of highly qualified expert witnesses, procedural technicalities prevented these matters from receiving a full judicial hearing. It was a sobering reminder that environmental outcomes can sometimes depend as much on legal pathways as on ecological evidence.

There were important successes. Friends played a significant role in securing recognition and protection for the internationally important habitat of the endemic King Shag. Yet many other cumulative pressures affecting the ecological integrity of the Sounds remained beyond the Court's

consideration. The resulting planning framework undoubtedly improved aspects of aquaculture management, but stopped well short of delivering the comprehensive environmental safeguards that many had hoped for.

If the expectation was that the PMEP would finally settle decades of conflict, that optimism proved short-lived. Even before the ink was dry, the Fast-track Approvals Act appeared on the horizon, promising to accelerate the very development that had taken two decades of painstaking planning to constrain.

Friends considers that the Fast-track regime introduces three significant risks:

- biodiversity and threatened species may receive weaker protection through a greater emphasis on development outcomes;
- increased ministerial discretion introduces greater political influence into environmental decision-making; and
- reduced opportunities for public participation diminish transparency, accountability and community confidence.

Its ultimate environmental consequences will depend less on the legislation itself than on the types of projects approved, the conditions imposed and, perhaps most importantly, the willingness to enforce those conditions. One could almost admire the efficiency. Twenty years were spent designing environmental safeguards; the next reform sought to discover how quickly they could be bypassed.

After three decades of submissions, hearings, mediation, expert conferencing, Environment Court appeals and collaborative planning, the industrialisation of one of New Zealand's most iconic coastal landscapes continues to reshape the Sounds. One could be forgiven for concluding that, in environmental planning, the finish line is simply moved every time you get close to it.

For those who have devoted decades of unpaid effort to the public interest, the journey has been demanding, occasionally rewarding and frequently exhausting. Environmental planning rarely produces outright victories. More often it slows the rate at which the environment loses. The volunteers who carried this work through hearing rooms, mediation tables, caucuses and courtrooms have demonstrated extraordinary perseverance, but they also recognise that stewardship is measured in generations, not election cycles or planning reviews.

Their greatest achievement may not be the Plan itself. It is that throughout this long and often frustrating process they ensured that the landscapes, natural character, wildlife and public values of the Marlborough Sounds always had a voice at the table, even when the table appeared increasingly reserved for industrial expansion.

Whether future generations inherit a resilient coastal ecosystem or simply a more efficiently allocated industrial seascape will depend on decisions that are still unfolding. After three decades of planning reform, one lesson stands above all others: **sustainable development** too often becomes an exercise in finding ever more sophisticated ways of asking nature to make room for us. That may prove to be the most enduring legacy of the Marlborough Environment Plan.

For Friends, the PMEP was never the destination. It was simply another chapter in the continuing responsibility of ordinary citizens to remind governments that the environment is not merely another stakeholder in the planning process, but the very foundation upon which all other interests ultimately depend.

E. Acknowledgements

1. The voluntary work of committee members is essential and makes the above possible. Friends exists due to the dedication of these people - as is true of many volunteer groups.
2. Member support is also essential and very much appreciated.
3. The pro-bono and reduced-fee work by various experts and legal counsel is essential and is very much appreciated.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Gwen Struik and the committee members.