

6. THE STYX 'SISTER RIVER' RELATIONSHIP

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The purpose of this report is to obtain the support of the Council for the establishment of a 'Sister River' relationship between the Styx River in Christchurch and the Styx River in Alabama, United States of America.

The report was submitted to the May meetings of the Shirley/Papanui Community Board and Fendalton/Waimairi Community Board. Both Boards supported the proposal.

BACKGROUND

The Christchurch community group 'Guardians of the Styx' was formed in 1999 in response to local residents' increased awareness of environmental issues. This awareness has itself arisen from educational initiatives of the Water Services Unit of the Christchurch City Council. The Guardians group is incorporated under the Charitable Trusts Act and states its aims as follows:

"To protect, conserve and restore the Styx River and environs, plus turn the tide on the decline of its biodiversity."

A member of the Guardians, Mr Warwick McFadden, has become aware of another Styx River, located east of Mobile in Alabama, USA. Mr McFadden has made contact with the local community river watch group and with Baldwin County. It was suggested that a 'Sister River' relationship be developed between the two waterways, to promote international rapport between the communities and local governments associated with each Styx River. Opportunities would follow for environmental education and for promotion of both rivers. Baldwin County is very keen to formalise this relationship with both Guardians of the Styx and the Christchurch City Council.

Mr McFadden will be visiting Baldwin County in May 2000 to meet with officials of the County, who are organising a ceremony to exchange proclamations with Guardians of the Styx.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE TWO STYX RIVERS

The Styx River, Christchurch

The Styx River and its tributaries constitute one of the three major spring-fed river catchments in the Christchurch area. The Styx is 23.8 kilometres long; its tributaries Kaputone Stream and Smacks Stream are 10.8 and 2.1 kilometres in length respectively.

The upper catchment flows partly through suburban areas, but the majority flows through rural industrial (particularly Smacks and Kaputone Streams) and rural land uses. This wild and rural character makes the Styx unique among Christchurch waterways. The river flows through many landscapes. In the middle reaches it widens out and is visible from main roads, lined often by willows and native plantings. Toward its mouth it flows through tidal wetlands with significant saltmarsh habitats, before emptying into Brooklands Lagoon. The Styx River, its tributaries and associated wetlands have values of high ecological, recreational, landscape, heritage, and cultural significance. They also form an important functioning part of the natural drainage system of the northern part of the city.

Opportunities are available for sustainable management and development of this catchment. The local community is actively involved in creating a vision for the future of the Styx area, through establishment of Guardians of the Styx and by working with the Water Services Unit and the Spreydon/Heathcote and Fendalton/Waimairi Community Boards.

THE STYX RIVER, BALDWIN COUNTY

A brief description of the Styx River, Alabama

The Styx River is located in Baldwin County, Alabama. It is 56 km in length, and stretches southward from the city of Bay Minette (population 8,200) to its confluence with the Perdido River, which divides the state of Alabama from Florida.

The depth of the river varies from 1.5 to 1.9 metres, subject to seasonal variation; its width varies from 4 to 45 metres. It flows through a mainly rural environment that also contains some rural residential development. The size of the catchment is approximately 53,000 hectares, of which forest lands comprise 46,000 ha; crop and pasture lands 3000 ha; and residential development 2000 ha.

The Styx River is considered to be in good health, being a major tributary of the Perdido River, which is itself classified as an Outstanding National Resource Water (the nation's water quality designation for the most pristine waterways of ecological and recreational importance). Waterways within Baldwin County are generally threatened by rapidly increasing urbanisation, dirty roads and other sources of sedimentation, and run-off from horticultural activities. Flooding from the hurricanes and other hard rains that annually plague the region are another threat (the nearby city of Mobile is often ranked as the rainiest city in the USA).

The natural environment includes numerous species of fish, snakes, birds and insects, as well as deer, squirrels, opossum, raccoon, bats and the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

The two community groups working in the area are the Perdido Ecological Resource Group and the Friends of Perdido Bay.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

The Water Services Unit feels that this is an excellent chance to develop a relationship with another part of the world, and to exchange information, increase publicity, and enhance environmental education and management practice transfers. Such a formal relationship has not been undertaken previously in New Zealand.

The opportunities that such a relationship offers include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Educational links between schools and universities
- Exchanges in techniques of conservation and environmental management, both at the policy and practical levels
- Publicity and promotion of the waterways
- Extension of the international connections between New Zealand and other parts of the world
- The linking of like minds, and creation of friendships
- The chance to share environmental and consultation ideas
- Enhancement of local interest in the local environment
- Linking of views related to the various values of each waterway; for example, ecological, recreational, heritage, and cultural aspects.

Christchurch City Council International Relations Co-ordinator (Sue McFarlane) commented:

“Many international relationships at a community level exist throughout Christchurch, from Christchurch’s sister cities programme to formalised relationships between service organisations, schools, sporting groups and other like-minded organisations.”

Councillors will be aware that a Sister Cities Strategy is currently being developed. That strategy may propose alternative types of relationship, as well as sister cities e.g. strategic alliances, friendly city relationships etc.

The proposal before the Committee advocates support of an international relationship. It should be understood that what is being sought is for the Water Services Unit to support a community group (The Guardians of the Styx) in their development of a relationship with a like organisation in the United States of America. Such a relationship will allow for the sharing of information and ideas relative to the protection, conservation and restoration of a waterway.

The Council's responsibility for the relationship with the Guardians rests within the Water Services Unit and not the International Relations Section.

The Guardians are now functioning independently of the Council, as a charitable trust, and require very little support from the Water Services Unit. An assurance has been given that any support provided by the unit will not add to the net cost of the unit's operations.

The Shirley/Papanui Community Board has made a grant of \$3,000 to the Guardians to assist with the publication of a history of the Styx River.

Recommendation: That the Council support the Guardians of the Styx in their developing the Styx 'Sister River' relationship.