Research Report
Cross-Sector Partnerships

people+cities+nature

restoring indigenous nature in urban environments

Cross-sector partnerships

Eva Collins, Lisa Casasanto, Lucy Featherston

Background

Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) provide a potential model to scale up the impact of urban ecological initiatives by harnessing the power of collaboration. CSPs are defined as, "initiatives where public-interest entities, private sector companies and/or civil society organisations enter into an alliance to achieve a common practical purpose, pool core competencies, and share risks" (Gray and Stites, 2013, p. 17). Businesses are beginning to recognise the potential for CSPs to help build organisational and ecological resilience, while simultaneously contributing to long-term competitive advantage (van Tulder, et al., 2016). CSPs offer a strategic approach to deliver novel, innovative solutions for complex problems via the combination of diverse capacities and resources (van Tulder, et al., 2016).

The ability of CSPs to deliver scalable solutions to complex problems is known as collaborative advantage. Collaborative advantage describes the concept that a group of actors can deliver more collectively than the sum of their parts (Stibbe, et al., 2018). The extra value a partnership delivers compared with a single-actor includes the impact of the partnership "on individuals, organisations, sectors, systems and norms" (p. 11).

One of the most important factors in pursuing partnerships is whether they are effective in addressing the intended goals or value creation. In many cases, partnerships commence quickly with little to no formal planning or consideration of desired outcomes and impacts (van Tulder et al., 2016). The corpus of CSP literature has focused on anticipated benefits rather than actual evaluation of effectiveness. Therefore, researchers urge practitioners and academics to focus on monitoring, reporting, and evaluation of the outcomes and impacts (Clarke and MacDonald 2019; Van Tulder et al., 2016). This is not easy due to the evolving nature of CSPs and the attribution problem, which says the more complex the problem, the more difficult it is to isolate impacts of the CSP compared to other influencing factors.

This study seeks to fill existing gaps to explore how value is created beyond the firm and humanity, incorporating the natural environment. Importantly, the study examines whether that value created can be measured, and if so how?

One of the two fully electric shuttles from the Meridian-Zealandia partnership

Research aims

The focus of the cross-sector partnership research programme was to: Identify how cross-sectoral partnerships can be structured and implemented to achieve effective ecological restoration in urban New Zealand. Our research had three key aims.

Methods

A qualitative approach was employed by examining existing cross-sector partnerships focused on urban ecology in New Zealand. The research is a cross-case analysis of six cases written up as separate cases. All the cases were CSPs focused on urban ecological impacts. In 2020, CSPs for urban ecology were a relatively new social phenomena. Case studies are considered most useful in the early phases of a new management theory, when key variables and their relationships are being explored (Yin, 2017).

As shown in Table 1, there were two types of interviewees: case study participants and key informants. Case study participants were directly involved in one of the six case studies. Key informants are subject matter experts who have experience across multiple cross-sector partnerships generally, rather than urban ecology specifically. The result was a total of thirty-three participants interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured to focus on the main research questions, whilst allowing flexibility to extrapolate the context. Interviewees were asked about their CSP strategies, goals, success, evaluation, and what impact they had achieved. Both key informants and case study participants were asked the same questions.
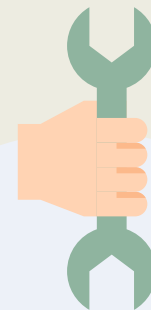
All thirty-three interview transcripts were loaded into an analysis software called NVivo. All transcripts were analysed collectively as the goal of this study is to

1

Best practice

- What is national and international best practice for cross-sector partnerships and how can best practice apply to urban ecology in New Zealand?

2

Operation

- How are cross-sector partnerships operating in New Zealand case studies and what is the feasibility of collaboration for effective ecological urban restoration?
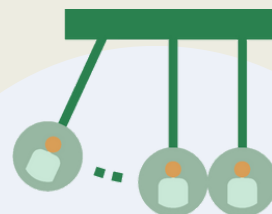
3

Impact

- How can we measure impact and success for cross-sector partnerships focused on urban ecology?

Table 1. Interviewees by case/scale, role and sector (*Participant given anonymity upon request)

#	Case and scale or key informant	Role	Sector
1	Hammond Bush Local scale	Former chair of community group	Community
2		Director, Community and Services	Government
3		Team leader, Parks and Recreation	Government
4		Principal Ecologist	Private
5		Volunteer, Project Echo	Community
6	Biodiversity Hawkes Bay Regional scale	Biodiversity Sponsorship Manager	Community
7		Manager of City Development	Government
8		Policy Planner	Government
9		Business owner	Private
10		Executive Dean	Academia
11		Chair of programme	Community
12		Land Services Manager	Government
13		CEO of Airport	Private
14	Zealandia City Scale	Director, Centre for People and Nature	Semi-Private
15		CEO of Zealandia	Semi-Private
16		Chief Marketing Officer	Private
17		Environment Partnerships Leader	Government
18	Tauranga Moana Biosecurity Regional scale	*Anonymous	Community
19		Communications Advisor	Community
20		Cargo Services Manager	Private
21		CEO and Founder Resource Developer	Community
22		Operations Manager	Community
23		Head of Communications	Pan-industry
24		External Relations coordinator	Pan-industry
25	Vector Urban Forest City scale	Sustainability Manager	Private
26		Senior Biodiversity Adviser	Government
27		Head of Strategic Partnerships	Government
28		Co-founder, Sustainable Coastlines	Community
29	Community Guardians City scale	Executive General Manager, Strategy and Marketing	Private
30		Project Manager	Community
31	Key informants	Executive Director, Sustainable Business Council	Non-profit
32		Environment Partnerships Leader	Private
33		Principal Partnerships Advisor	Government

find commonalities across all partnerships and sectors. Once loaded into NVivo, the data was disassembled by coding according to the research questions.

Findings

An unexpected finding was that participants commonly advise that having the right people involved in the partnership was critical to success. The right person is someone with a particular skillset that turns out to be more important than the organisation the person is representing. One participant said, "The best will in the world won't get you through the tough times unless you have people who can and want to work together."

Participants described a specific type of person we call a "**connector**." Not everyone used the term connector, but the characteristics were the same. A connector is exceptionally good at relationship building, productive, social, good at building and maintaining their own network. Most importantly, they are driven by values, which means they are committed to the cause, and role model this in their daily life. The value of a connector is that one influential person can connect and mobilise large groups of people.

A good example of this type of person is Corporate Sponsorship Programme Manager in the Hawke's Bay, Sam Jackman. Sam is a passionate people person, is known as 'the connector,' he is someone who can build long-lasting relationships. His talent is talking to people in a way they understand, getting them excited, making sure they understand the responsibility they have as a business or organisation, and helping them find the opportunity to grow. As he puts it, his role is "to take a client to the top of the mountain and show them the view."

Connectors can help grow the network by seeing opportunities and bringing others in.

Connectors can help grow the network by seeing opportunities and bring others in. Sam is credited with bringing the airport into their regional biodiversity strategy. The

Connectors

The value of a connector is that one influential person can connect and mobilise large groups of people.
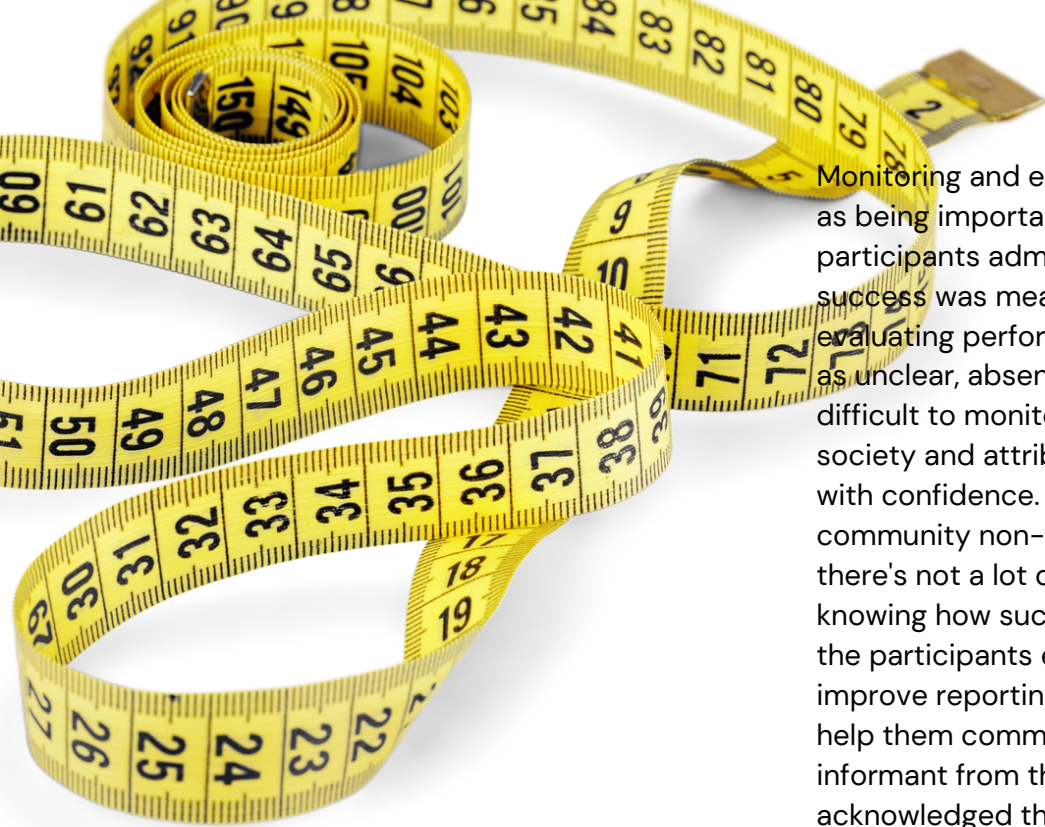
airport was motivated to contribute to positive sustainability outcomes for the region as the aviation industry is under scrutiny for its negative sustainability impacts. The airport sees its role as connecting people and businesses in the region. Many of the airport's employees live in the community. The airport does not want to harm the local biodiversity, which made the CSP an effective way to align for urban ecological values.

How is success measured?

What clearly came out in the CSP literature was the importance of setting milestones and regularly measuring and monitoring the progress against those milestones (Clarke and MacDonald 2019; Van Tulder et al., 2016). When asked how the CSP measured success, interviewees were least confident about positively answering this question.

Monitoring and evaluation was recognised as being important, however most participants admitted they were unsure if success was measured. Monitoring and evaluating performance were also reported as unclear, absent, or poorly utilised. It was difficult to monitor impact on the wider society and attribute it to the partnership with confidence. A manager from a community non-profit said, "to be honest, there's not a lot of work done on that, knowing how successful we are." Several of the participants expressed a desire to improve reporting regimes, which would help them communicate CSP impact. A key informant from the private sector acknowledged that evaluation is important to socialise CSP projects and show value to decision-makers.

For example, the CEO of Hawke's Bay Regional Airport stated, "this is because some things like profitability can easily be measured, but more important things like the impact on the environment, or the impact on community groups that you've helped can't be measured, it's subjective. It's looking at the broader contribution to the community."

Participants consistently confirmed that monitoring and evaluation needs improvement across CSPs. Some groups were measuring success with qualitative and/or quantitative methods. The most common ways CSPs measured success was with feedback, referrals, engagement, surveys, and hard data on the projects completed. However, in many partnerships, monitoring and evaluation was not resourced or documented.

Table 2: Summary of top themes related to how to collaborate effectively across sectors

HOW TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE	NUMBER OF TRANSCRIPTS	NUMBER OF REFERENCES
Relationships and communications	30	193
Monitoring, measurement and evaluation	29	86
Diversity of culture and expertise	25	94
Connectors	17	42

CSP measurement of impacts or value creation is not straightforward, particularly when the goal is focused on ecological resilience. For example in the CSP for biosecurity, success was about how prepared they are for a biosecurity incursion. One community participant in that CSP said, "we don't have clear metrics for success, but what we do have is a kind of protocol for the whole group" in the event of a biosecurity incursion. It is difficult to put a quantitative value to a goal like ecological resilience or emergency preparedness, yet the value is clear. If there was a biosecurity incursion, there is a clear protocol for management. Overall, this increases the region's resilience to the threat. They monitor the performance annually with a survey to their audience about the information they receive and biosecurity awareness, which informs the CSP work programme. The CSP for biosecurity may not have typical metrics for success, however, they highly value feedback from their audience.

A common view was that setting milestones would scare people away from participating in voluntary CSPs. A participant of Tauranga Moana Biosecurity Capital stated, "getting organisations willing to join and be part of the initiative was helped by a relaxed front, of contributing what you are able to contribute, when you can, with no set commitments to the group. Ensuring that people are there because they want to be there has meant that people are willing to stay around and put in effort to see results." Although setting milestones, measuring and managing progress were agreed to be important, most of the CSPs in the study felt the more critical part was coming together.

What impact are CSPs achieving?
If measuring and monitoring are underdeveloped at best, or non-existent, how can a CSP claim any type of impact? Each of the CSPs reported an element of mutual benefit for the planet, people and profit. The main themes were benefits to the organisation and community, scaled up impact and achievement, and system change. The CSPs in these case studies are all focused on urban ecology issues, including reducing emissions, improving biosecurity, weed and pest control, scaling up community conservation, creating a long-term restoration plans, protecting local species, monitoring and data collection, and raising awareness and education about biodiversity.

CSPs for urban ecology create an opportunity for people to connect with nature, which mutually benefits people and nature for generations to come.

CSPs for urban ecology create an opportunity for people to connect with nature, which mutually benefits people and nature for generations to come. One of the CSPs was founded by a power company that had to cut down trees, which interfered with power poles. The partnership began

Table 3: Top themes on impacts and benefits of CSPs from 33 interviews

IMPACT AND BENEFITS TO ORGANISATION AND COMMUNITY	NUMBER OF TRANSCRIPTS	NUMBER OF REFERENCES
Benefits to organisation and community	30	220
Scaled up impact and achievement	28	126
System change	9	30

with a clear overarching objective, to tackle the issue of tree inequality, which the CSP defined as increasing "awareness about the trees being planted in the wrong place," says one of the partners, a private sector manager with ecological expertise. The first part of the strategy was that for every tree cut down, the business planted two more. The second part of the strategy was to increase education and awareness about planting the right trees in the right place. In addition to tackling tree inequality, there were many additional benefits associated with the CSP activities, such as "getting our staff out, being connected with our suppliers and actually making environmental improvements."

Table 4 details the main themes that emerged from the data analysis showing mutual benefits are the key to scaling up impacts. The interviewees referred to the difference with partnership is that your impact is not added together, but multiplied, amplified and exponential. The reason is simple, because pooling your resources and coordination between sectors creates a lot of input for shared value. A Communications Advisor for the community sector found that "we're more likely to be successful, or more likely to ensure success, if we partner with people, because when we partner, we are all having...a louder, stronger voice towards whatever the goals are that we're trying to reach."

> Co-design is the process of stakeholders jointly framing the problem and contributing to problem-solving, an opportunity for significant innovation.

Figure 2: Word cloud showing the most frequently used words across 33 transcripts

Co-design is the process of stakeholders jointly framing the problem and contributing to problem-solving, an opportunity for significant innovation. According to a participant from Zealandia:

> If you are funding these projects, which provide outcomes for both the organisation and the project, that's where you get the ongoing engagement. But they're not just trying to achieve the outcome as a deliverable for the project. It's actually forming part of their day to day job as well. And that's where you get that big bang for buck.

The impact of the CSP depended on where it was on the sustainability partnership continuum, from reactive to transformational (Gray and Stite's, 2013). According to the CEO of Zealandia, "A lot of companies that I have spoken to over the years are still transitioning out of the concept of sponsorship [transactional] into a concept of partnership [transformational], and that can be an uncomfortable space for them."

What are the tensions between measuring for impact and inclusion?

This study confirmed that there was no consistent way of monitoring and reporting

Table 4. A summary of key impacts, high-level themes, and examples from the CSPs cases

Impact	High-level themes	Example
Collaborative advantage creates mutual benefit and scaled up impact	Forming and expanding networks	Approach organisations that have a harmful relationship with the estuary to change to a synergistic relationship
	Pooling resources	Better ecological outcomes for the estuary
	Multiplication of impact	
	Normalisation is creating the change	
Rewarding	Making a difference is good for wellbeing	Connected to community
	Harness society's genuine interest and expertise	Meet interesting people
		Learn about ecology and biodiversity in your own backyard
Competitive to synergistic Isolated to connected	Different threads come together to see across a system	Community engagement by hosting social and educational events, trainings, ecological monitoring
	Strengthen a network	Through good communication channels, get to know partners and heighten what each other is doing
	Co-design solutions to problems	Add to existing projects to bolster their impact and save transaction costs of starting your own project
	Diversity of inputs create a more robust approach	
Self-sustaining cycle	Sustainability values are normalised across society	Great self-sustainable model that can feed itself from lots of different places
	Strengthen community	Established network and codesign protocol for biosecurity response scenario
Co-evolve	Constantly improving synergies in relationships over time	Invest in the highest priority natural areas for restoration
	Increased resilience for plants, people and profit	Adaptive management approach to get the best results, maximum efficiency and effectiveness
System change	Accelerated progress toward grand challenges	Health and safety policies are ahead of legislation for industry
	Simplest solution to complex challenge	Better health and safety outcomes
		Top 10 geothermal producer in the world

for CSPs. In fact, interviewees suggest that measuring outcomes can be detrimental to impact by inhibiting participation. Ironically, most of the CSPs were in fact doing some kind of measurement and monitoring.The findings showed that success could be measured by participation and engagement. CSP participants emphasised that members of the community should be involved in strategy planning for biodiversity outcomes as they are highly invested in the outcome.

What interviewees seem to be saying is that typical metrics were not capturing the value creation they experienced. The CEO's statement is typical, "…more important things like the impact on the environment, or the impact on community groups that you've helped can't be measured." There certainly could be proxies for those objectives, but interviewees rejected measurement as a transactional account of what they viewed as transformational. Even further, some interviewees viewed the pursuit of metrics coming at the costs of transformational value. One business participant explains the challenges related to measuring success:

> When it comes to a metric or an end goal, that's not always entirely clear right at the very start. And often it does become clearer as you go. Especially if it's a partnership that involves a lot of comms and a lot of the work that I do, because comms is so hard to measure, and if you try and measure it you start doing things that are not worthwhile.

Recommendations

One way to communicate the dynamic achievements of CSPs is **telling the story of the partnership**, which is the narrative of what the partnership is doing. The narrative is useful to keep all partners on the same page and justify the investment to funders. As one not-for-profit participant explains, "it is really important to us…to be able to explain the benefits of that community investment… we need to be conscious of

KEY FINDINGS

1

Having the right people involved in the partnership is critical to success

2

Monitoring and evaluation needs improvement across CSPs

3

The impact of the CSP depended on where it was on the sustainability partnership continuum, from reactive to transformational

that and wise about where we spend it, invest it." One business participant said they are "thinking about how…[to] better tell our story around the role of nature in an urban environment and how people can connect with that." One of the case studies, Zealandia, is an exemplar for **innovative reporting which integrates ecological, social and economic data, along with storytelling**. The CSP is based on enhancing a 225-hectare eco-sanctuary in Wellington, New Zealand, the nation's capital city. Zealandia reports its progress against the four capitals: social, environmental, human and financial (Zealandia, 2019). The integrated reporting approach is described as a narrative, "a concise, communication about how an organisation's strategy, governance, performance and prospects, in the context of its external environment, lead to the creation of value in the short-medium and long term." At the same time, they have been developing an evidence base for their work enhancing connections between people and nature and "improving over time" says the Director.

The results of this multiple case study showed that **setting milestones, measuring and monitoring progress towards the milestones was inconsistently done, and in fact, viewed as an inhibitor to getting participation in CSPs. Lack of measurement made the impacts of CSPs hard to determine.** Participants felt strongly that coming together gave them collaborative advantage, but to what end remains unclear. That does not mean the CSPS for urban ecology were not making significant biodiversity and biosecurity progress, but it made the overall picture for systems change difficult to determine. We argue that using storytelling and narrative may be a more effective technique to report on impacts of CSPs.

CSPs for urban ecology were brought together by shared interest in biosecurity, better engagement between people and nature, and biodiversity values. Several participants across sectors said the ecology perspective needs to be part of the strategy of the partnership. This could be done by including scientists, such as ecologists or biodiversity experts. A partnerships advisor for the government said it is critical to have businesses involved in urban ecology partnerships, "so that we can help to build this social momentum of mass we need to make the scale of change we need to make as a society. They're just too important from that point of view." **Participating in ecological restoration and understanding why is the key to teaching people biodiversity values.**

References

Clarke, A. and MacDonald, A., 2019. Outcomes to partners in multi-stakeholder cross-sector partnerships: A resource-based view. Business & Society, 58(2), pp.298–332.

Gray, B. and Stites, J.P., 2013. Sustainability through partnerships. Capitalizing on collaboration. Network for business sustainability, case study, 24, pp.1–110.

Stibbe, D.T., Reid, S. and Gilbert, J., 2018. Maximising the Impact of Partnerships for the SDGs. The Partnering Initiative and UN DESA: New York, NY, USA.

Van Tulder, R., Seitanidi, M.M., Crane, A. and Brammer, S., 2016. Enhancing the impact of cross-sector partnerships. Journal of Business Ethics, 135(1), pp.1–17.

Yin, R.K., 2017. Case study research and applications: Design and methods. Sage publications.

Publications

Casasanto, L. 2020. "How cross-sector partnerships are scaled up for urban ecological impacts: Strategising biodiversity and tackling grand challenges to create synergies for the planet, people and profit." Master's Thesis.

Casasanto, L. and Collins E. (Under review). Cross-sector partnerships to benefit plants, people and profit. Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal, special issue "Cross-sector dialogue for sustainability: To partner or not to partner?"

RECOMMENDATIONS

TIMELINE

ISSUE

INTERNAL

MISSION | INPUT | ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES | OUTPUT

EXTERNAL

OUTCOME | IMPACT

IMPACT LOOP

CONNECT

Benchmark: Project efficiency

Partners are building a relationship between people, creating a network to tackle the issue. Connectors combine interpersonal skills and dedication to the CSP values and vision to keep people engaged, bring new people in, and motivate others to be a part of the change.
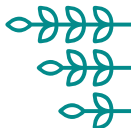
1

ALIGN

Benchmark: Project performance

Monitoring the project performance, measured by comparing the inputs to the outcome ensures CSPs incorporate the values and goals of the partnership into their organisation. Alignment within a partnership increases the impact by amplifying the CSP messages and integrating it into their own practices.

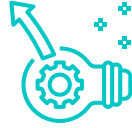**2**

GROW

Benchmark: Mission-related performance

Growth occurs as the benefits from delivery of the project activities are realised. This is enhanced through delivering outcomes and normalising change through increased reputation and reaching a new audience.

3

EVOLVE

Benchmark: Issue-related performance

Once the CSP gains enough momentum and the right partners, there is potential for real system change. At this stage, CSPs are described as self-sustaining cycles for managing the issue. If you want to plant trees, instead of starting a new organisation, it is more strategic to connect with an existing project. This selfsustaining model for tackling grand challenges aligns with sustainability values, and those values become normalised through partnership. In this way, CSPs can be used as a vehicle for system change.

4
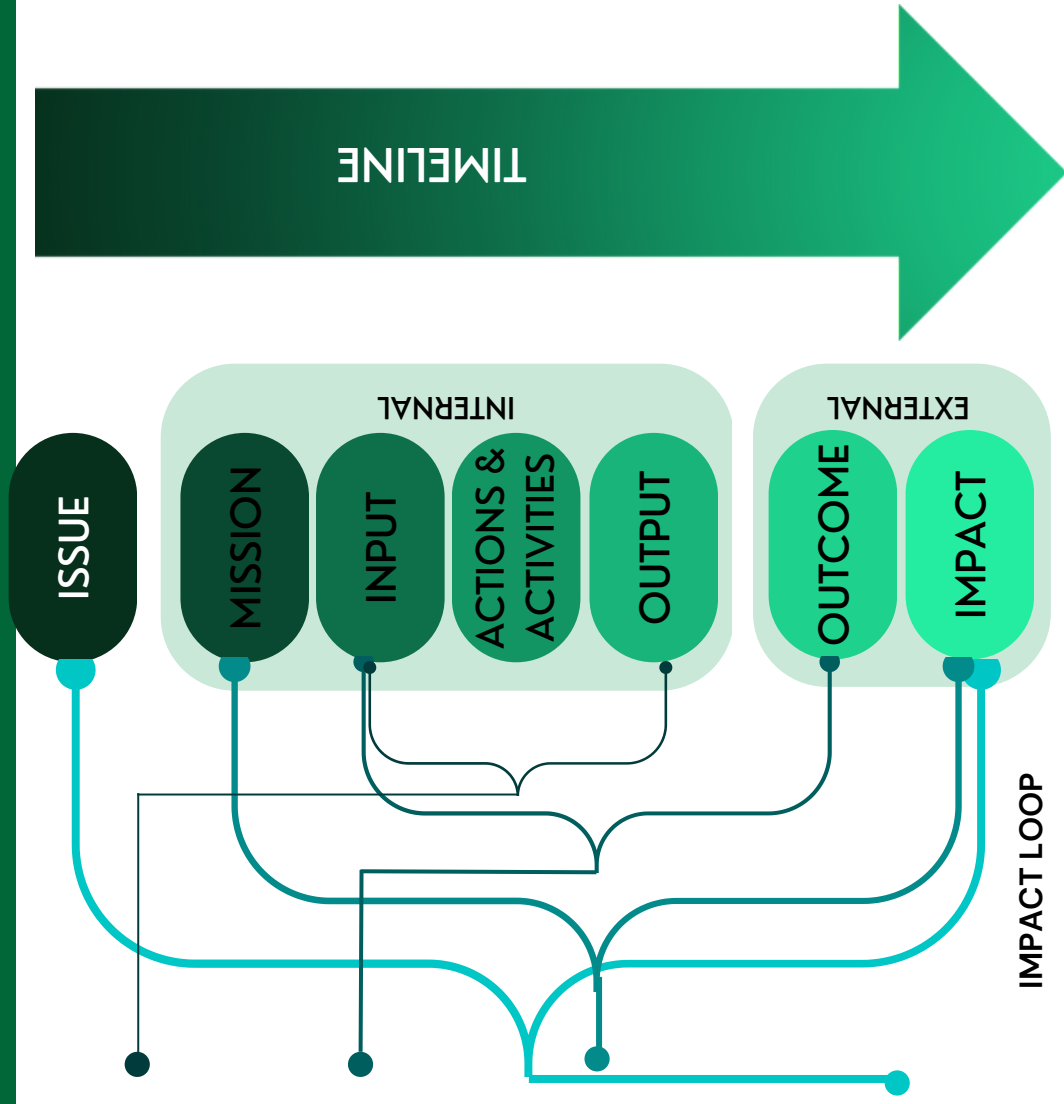
people+cities+nature

Restoring indicgenous nature in urban environments

Thank you for supporting our programme

People, Cities & Nature is a world-leading research programme harnessing expertise from New Zealand and Australia to enhance restoration of indigenous biodiversity in cities.

Our researchers are working in 10 cities across New Zealand gathering data to determine what makes urban restoration successful. People, Cities & Nature is developing and refining best practices and foundational knowledge required for efficient urban restoration. We believe that restoring nature in urban environments is critical for sustainable, functioning ecosystems, and for human health and wellbeing, and we are working hard to make urban restoration targets achievable in New Zealand and around the world.

Visit www.peoplecitiesnature.co.nz/media to download our other booklets in the series:
Urban Greenspace
Urban Mammals
Urban Plantings
Maori Values
Urban Lizards

For further information visit
www.peoplecitiesnature.co.nz