

Lake Ellesmere, or Te Waihora, is New Zealand's fifth largest lake and is internationally recognised for the abundance and diversity of its birdlife. The Lake is actually a brackish lagoon covering 20,000 hectares and is neither entirely freshwater nor estuarine.

History

The Lake was once an estuary of the Waimakariri River - and twice its present size - bounding Tai Tapu with extensive wetlands giving way to forests of kahikatea, red beech, matai and totara leading to present day Christchurch.



Te Waihora, meaning 'water spread out', has been home to Maori for 20 generations. The principal settlement was at Taumutu, where the local runanga is still based today. The Lake was revered as the most bountiful site in the South Island (Te Wai Pōnāmū) for resources (mahinga kai) and was referred to as 'Te Kete Ika Rākaihautū' or 'the fish basket of Rākaihautū'. The Lake gave sustenance all year round and provided resources such as flounder (patiki), eels (tuna), whitebait (inanga), brown teal (pateke), pingao, and flax (harekeke). The lake bed was vested in the Ngāi Tahu tribe as part of the settlement of its Treaty of Waitangi claim.

The European name of Ellesmere comes from the Earl of Ellesmere, a member of the Canterbury Association which promoted the early settlement of Canterbury. The settlers drained the wetlands and converted the land into fertile farmland. The forests of Banks Peninsula were felled for timber and transported via the Lake from the mill at Little River to Timbervale point, on the western shore of the Lake. Commercial fishing for flounder began in 1864 with up to 250 men employed on the Lake. Commercial eel fishing began in the 1960's and Lake Ellesmere was the most important eel fishery in the country.

The Lake still supports commercial fisheries governed by quota and the Ellesmere district remains principally agricultural. The local runanga is still based at Taumutu and is instrumental in efforts to restore the mauri, or life spirit, of the Lake.



The village of Taumutu in 1874 by Eliot Whitley - Courtesy of the National Library of Australia

Waihora Ellesmere Trust

The Waihora Ellesmere Trust (WET) was formed in 2003. Two years of extensive community involvement culminated in the formation of the Trust and the publication of a community strategy. WET has more than 100 members from all walks of life, including: farmers, conservationists, bird-watchers, iwi, fishermen and interested local residents. The full community strategy for the Lake can be downloaded from www.wet.org.nz



- A place where healthy and productive water provides for the many users of the Lake while supporting the diversity of plants and wildlife that make this place unique.
- A place of cultural and historical significance that connects us with our past and our future.
- A place where environmental, customary, commercial, and recreational values are balanced while respecting the health of the resource.
- A special wide open place for the enjoyment and wonderment of present and future generations.
- A place of contemplation and tranquility as well as activity; a place just to be.

WET works on three fronts to achieve its vision: actively restoring the ecosystem through riparian and wetland restoration, hosting field trips and seminars to educate the public about the Lake, and through liaison with the statutory agencies who manage the Lake and its catchment.

For contact and membership information see:
www.wet.org.nz
coordinator@wet.org.nz
 03 353 9712
 PO Box 116
 Lincoln



This brochure was produced with the assistance of the Biodiversity Advice Fund and printed with the assistance of Environment Canterbury. Design by Chocolate Dog.

