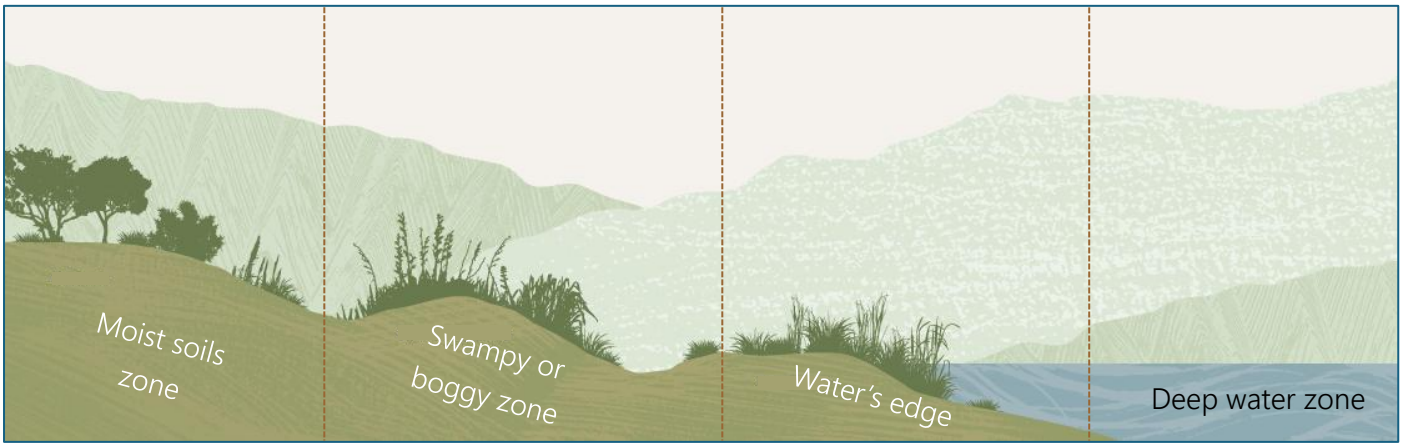
Te Kura Taka Pini

Wetlands – Why They Matter

Wetlands are critical natural systems with a range of benefits.

- Wetlands are living taonga that store carbon, remove water pollution, buffer against the effects of flooding and sea-level rise, provide habitat for native species and sustain cultural practices. These benefits are lost when wetlands are drained or damaged, and wetlands can be more expensive to restore than to conserve.
- In Aotearoa–New Zealand, wetlands once covered 2.4 million hectares, but nearly 90% of our wetlands have been lost or converted to a different land-use. The current rate of wetland loss will have an enormous impact on people, nature and economies, amounting to losses of up to $65 trillion (NZD) globally by 2050.
- Councils in Aotearoa–New Zealand already need to spend nearly $50 billion on expensive water infrastructure over the next decade; wetland conservation and restoration therefore offer an alternative approach to improving water safety and security while concurrently enhancing water ecosystems.
- Wetlands form a critical connection between our land and water, support an incredible array of plants and animals and are an important nature-based solution that can reduce the impacts of climate change.



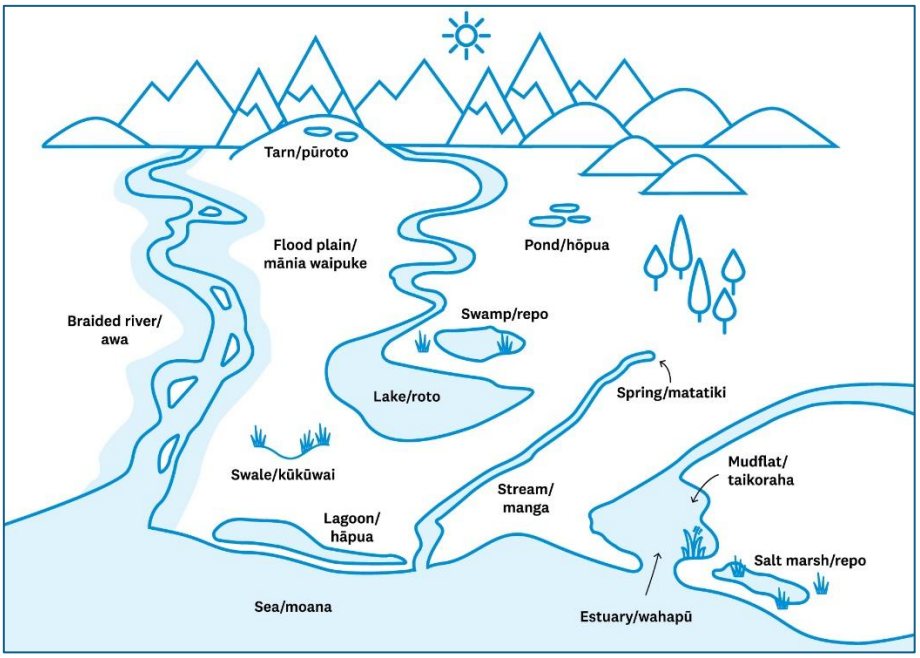
Source: Adapted from the Department of Conservation, (2021). Wetland and river/stream margin native plants. Note: Wetlands are categorised by shallow water sources and flows. This impacts other wetland characteristics like vegetation.

Healthy wetlands support mahinga kai, water access, recreation, food security and livelihoods.

- 'Wetlands' is a collective term to describe areas where water covers the land intermittently or permanently. This includes an extensive range of wet margins, including swamps, marshes, fens, bogs, seepages, tarns, lakes, rivers, streams, estuaries, coastal lagoons, intertidal areas, geothermal pools and plutonic wetlands.
- Wetlands are classified by the type of ground they sit on and how the water moves through them, including whether they are sourced by rainfall, groundwater, rivers or tides. These characteristics determine how nutrient rich or acidic the water and soil are and what plant and animal species will use it as habitat.
- Wetlands 'sequester' or absorb carbon from the atmosphere and can store it for centuries. Wetlands also trap pollutants, sediments, heavy metals and nutrients, which enables microbes within these environments to make the water cleaner. In addition, wetlands act like physical sponges by soaking up rainwater and slowly releasing it to delay flood flows or to recharge groundwater supplies.
- Aotearoa–New Zealand has many important wetlands, and seven of these are recognised internationally for the significant ecological and cultural values they support—known as Ramsar Sites. Two are located within Te Waipounamu: the Awarua Waituna Lagoon (Southland) and Farewell Spit (Nelson–Tasman).
- Other examples include: Ō Tū Wharekai wetland (Canterbury), Te Waihora–Lake Ellesmere (Canterbury), Waihola–Waipori wetlands (Otago), Ōtumahana Estuary (West Coast) and Ōkārito wetland (West Coast).

Wetlands are vital to maintaining healthy ecosystems, but they are under threat from human pressures.

- The most significant loss of wetlands is from pastural conversions, and human activities provide the biggest threats to our remaining wetlands. These threats include wetland drainage for urban or rural development, damages to vegetation from stock grazing and careless recreational practices, pollution from excess sediments and nutrients and the spread of invasive plant and animal species.
- Climate change is also expected to have a range of impacts on wetlands, including from invasive species, natural hazards, sea-level rise, altered rainfall patterns and impacts from reduced snow and ice cover.
- Although the Resource Management Act 1991 has outlined protections to conserve wetlands, there are ongoing challenges regarding implementation and compliance with the policies and rules that have been established. These challenges are compounded by a legacy of catchment degradation and land-uses.
- The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty for the conservation and use of wetlands and their resources. It provides a formal government-led approach to protect and preserve wetlands. Protecting wetlands on private land is often enabled through voluntary projects or by entering a Queen Elizabeth II National Trust covenant: an agreement to protect ecosystems and biodiversity.



Source: Environment Canterbury, (2025). Importance of wetlands. Note: Types of wetlands across Canterbury.

Wetlands are essential natural infrastructure, and their preservation is of international importance.

- Actions to conserve and restore wetlands helps to build resilience to climate change impacts, improve water quality and protect the important habitat for native plants, fish, insects and birds.
- Enhanced coordination and the development of cross-sectoral partnerships can ensure wetland projects will be more effective and sustainable, overcoming current fragmentation and resource barriers.
- Wetland restoration and conservation projects are natural solutions against the pressures caused by human activities and land-use. These projects present new opportunities to adopt interdisciplinary approaches that combine mātauranga Māori with scientific understanding to ensure the sustainability of these crucial environments. However, greater action is required to prevent the further loss of essential wetlands.

Sources: Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ, (2026). New Zealand's Environmental Reporting Series: Our Freshwater 2026; Dymond et al., (2021). Revised extend of wetlands in New Zealand; Department of Conservation [DOC], (2025). Further losses predicted for wetlands in future; New Zealand Infrastructure Commission, (2026). National Infrastructure Plan; DOC, (2021). Wetland and river/stream margin native plants; National Wetland Trust of New Zealand [NWTNZ], (2023). Types of Wetlands; Environment Canterbury [ECAN], (2026). Wetland Management; NWTNZ, (2021). Awarua Waituna Lagoon; NWTNZ, (2021). Farewell Spit; DOC, (n.d.) Wetlands by region; Denyer & Peters, (2020). The root causes of wetland loss in New Zealand: An analysis of public policies & processes; DOC (n.d.) Wetlands protection; DOC, (2025). Ramsar National Report to COP15: Aotearoa New Zealand; DOC, (n.d.). Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; Queen Elizabeth II National Trust, (2022). Benefits of protecting your land; ECAN, (2025). Importance of wetlands