

TIAKI IN WAITOMO

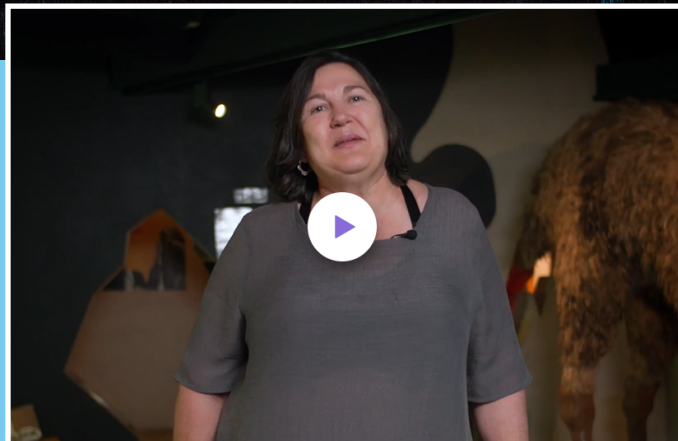
Waitomo isite and Waitomo Caves Museum

Knowledge is power: protecting Waitomo's environment through storytelling

As the first locals many visitors speak to when they arrive in the Waitomo Village, the team at Waitomo isite and Waitomo Caves Museum & Discovery Centre play a vital role in helping people understand how to look after the area's unique environment.

The museum is located right in the middle of the village and doubles as the area's isite visitor centre. That makes it a popular first stop for many visitors who are looking to orientate themselves and get to grips with Waitomo's history, landscape and culture.

"We are here to make your visit to Waitomo richer," says Museum Director Bridget Mosley.



"As people do the cave tours, their experience in the museum means they understand what they are seeing, they understand the values to the community, how caves are formed from limestone and how we take care of them."

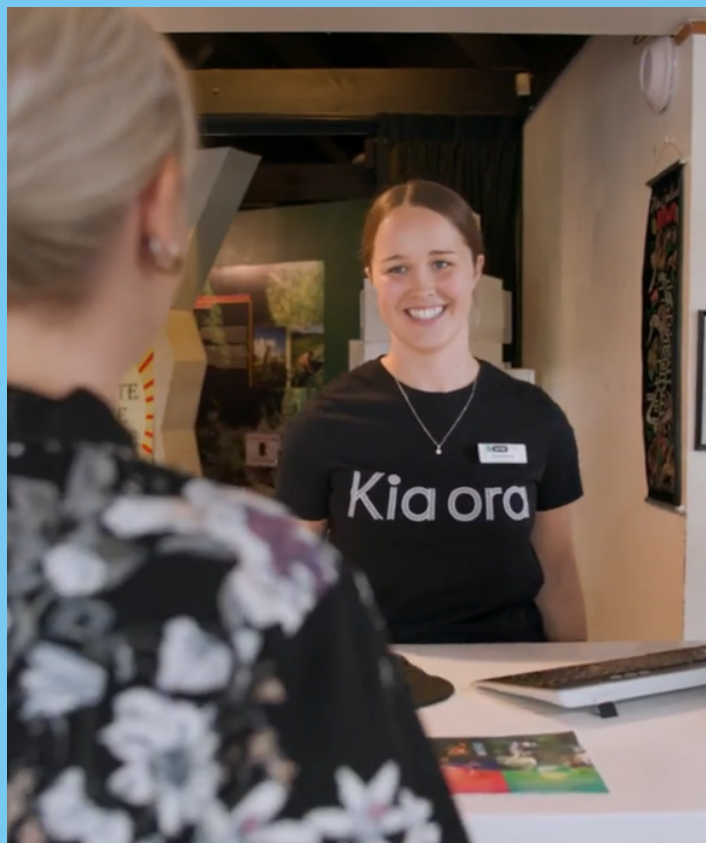
The information provided by staff and the museum's exhibits opens people's minds to just how ancient the limestone formations in the caves are and the precarious existence of many of the highly-adapted flora and fauna that call the underground world home.

In doing so, the centre plays a vital role as a kaitiaki, or guardian, through education and raising awareness of the Tiaki Promise – New Zealand's commitment to protecting its people, land and waterways.

"The reason that Tiaki, environmental care and water quality is so important to us here is that you only get glowworms in caves where there are rivers. That water coming through is the source of life to everything that lives in the caves."

As visitor numbers in New Zealand continue to bounce back following the global pandemic, the work of visitor centres is becoming increasingly important. One person touching a stalagmite or stalactite may not make a significant difference, but if you multiply that impact by thousands, it quickly adds up to something damaging, Bridget says.

"Our landscape is still changing and tourists coming through are part of that change. We need visitors to understand how to care for the landscape so it's here for us, for them and for generations to come."



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While information and education is the most obvious contribution the Waitomo isite and Waitomo Caves Museum makes to Tiaki and the environment in Waitomo, they are also working hard to ensure the way their own facility and team operates is sustainable.

They work with their largest retail supplier, to raise money for native tree plantings, with a portion of sales of the retailer's products going towards a fund to purchase saplings. Many of these saplings were planted in the Waitomo catchment in recent years as part of the Department of Conservation's Kaimahi for Nature programme and a fresh batch will soon be planted on another plot of local land that is being put aside for the purpose.

"That means when you come into the shop, when you buy something from our retail area, you are also contributing to our sustainability," Bridget says.

The museum team has also worked with a local sustainability professional to understand the impact it has on the environment and measure its energy and water use. This has led to the team re-using bags that are in acceptable condition when customers in request a carry-bag for items they purchase, as well as efforts to replace information-centre lights with energy efficient bulbs over time and reduce hot water use – particularly in the summer months.

Efforts like these, as well as the warm welcome and advice given to visitors every day, are all to protect a place and way of life that is cherished by those who have grown up in the area, Bridget says.

"Waitomo is special because of the connection between the people and the landscape, the history of tourism that changed the district, the guides and people that interact with us today. The landscape is unique and the builds unique people. It's truly an amazing place we live in."



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