

# TIAKI IN WAITOMO

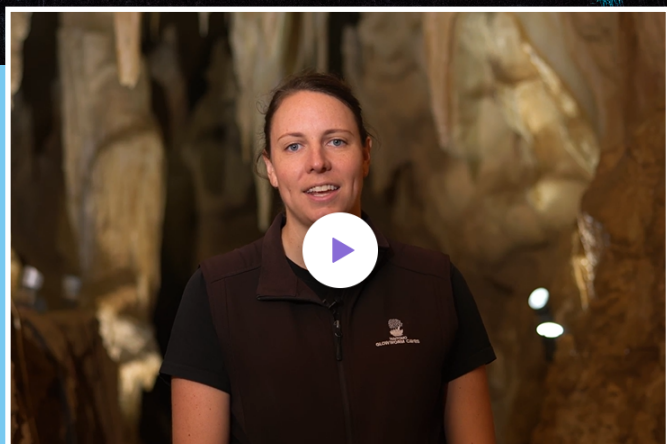
## Discover Waitomo

### Underground revolution: Discover Waitomo's quest for sustainable cave tours

Tours through Waikato's world-famous Waitomo Glowworm Cave, Ruakuri Cave and Aranui Cave have come a long way over the past few decades.

From carbon dioxide sensors and solar power to pest management and education programmes, cave manager and tour operator Discover Waitomo has been pulling out all the stops to ensure the underground world remains healthy and thriving for generations to come.

**"The Waitomo Glowworm Caves, Ruakuri and Aranui are some of the most environmentally monitored caves in the Southern Hemisphere,"** says Shelly Reilly, who works as Tourism Marketing Manager for Discover Waitomo, the company running tours and underground experiences in the three caves.



"We now have a vast array of cameras and sensors in place recording everything from glowworm numbers, carbon dioxide levels, temperature and humidity to wind speed and direction, water temperature and water levels."

The company employs a dedicated Environmental Manager, Shannon Corkill, who uses the sensor data to inform decisions about how the caves are managed, with the goal of protecting their flora and fauna, as well as the spectacular stalactites and stalagmites that have naturally formed over many millions of years.

Four people have joined her team to preserve the cave environment and enhance the surrounding streams and forests, funded by the Department of Conservation's Kaimahi for Nature scheme. They are busy planting native trees, doing track maintenance and monitoring for invasive species, including rabbits, as well as plant diseases such as myrtle rust.

Shelly says initiatives like these are part of Discover Waitomo's work to fulfil the Tiaki Promise – a shared commitment by the tourism industry, New Zealanders and visitors to protect Aotearoa's environment, communities and people.

Discover Waitomo's parent company Tourism Holding's Limited sits on the national Tiaki Promise governance group, indicating their commitment at the highest level. The company's core values of Kaitiakitanga (guardianship and protection), Manaakitanga (looking after others) and Whanaungatanga (relationships) all speak to the ethos of Tiaki, which means caring for people, place and culture.



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Shelly says the smaller group offering at the glowworm cave meant walk-up glowworm tour bookings are harder and pre-booking is now strongly encouraged, but it's an important step towards supporting the sustainability of the environment they hold dear.

Another benefit of the increase in pre-bookings is that it has spread visitors across the high and low seasons and provided more certainty of visitor numbers on any given day, Shelly says. This has allowed Discover Waitomo to offer more of its staff long-term or permanent contracts, giving them the job security they need to build a career and life in the local area.

The sensors and lighting throughout Ruakuri Cave and visitor centre are solar powered and screens have been installed on pillars in the Aranui Cave, showing live data about carbon dioxide levels and other metrics to raise awareness of the importance of caring for the environment.

The retail shop sells locally produced and crafted products where possible, and the café has an on-site herb garden and worm farm, as well as using milk delivered in a keg rather than plastic bottles.

Similar efforts are being made on The Legendary Black Water Rafting Co trips; the wetsuits guests wear are recycled into yoga mats when they reach their end of life and the booties guests wear to protect their feet are recycled into new boots when they become too damaged.

**"All of this is just the start," Shelly says. "We're constantly challenging each other to do more."**

Education is starting to come more sharply into focus too, Shelly says, not only to help guests understand what they should do to protect the cave environment but also to enrich the tour experience through the sharing of local stories.

THL work closely with Ruapuha Uekaha Hapū Trust & Department of Conservation to ensure the accuracy and quality of the cultural storytelling that takes place during tours. In this way, the history and traditions of the area are sustained.

**"There's going to be a whole lot more development in the education space – there's a lot more potential to tell these stories and to talk more about the flora and fauna in the caves."**

All of this work is just the start of the underground revolution taking place in Waitomo. With ongoing care and continued commitment from tourism operators, guides, visitors and the community, the future of Waitomo's underground world looks bright.



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