

7 Principles for Effective Collaboration: The Pit Park Example

Marise Clark, Pit Park People Chairperson¹

For seventeen years, the Pit Park People have been working to transform the Edwards Pit Park in Palmerston North into a thriving habitat for indigenous biodiversity and an enjoyable recreational space for people.

These dedicated community volunteers are steadily and successfully achieving their goals for their neighbourhood park. Their success can be attributed to a number of factors, such as the persistence of dedicated leaders, their ability to build a committed team of volunteers, and their savvy action to promote the project and provide necessary resources.

Another factor in Pit Park People's success has been their readiness to collaborate with other groups. The rest of this article highlights what the Pit Park People have learnt through years of effective collaboration with landowners, councils, funders, regulators, and other community groups.

1. **Persistence matters.** One concern with community collaborations is whether they will be sustained. The persistence of a group builds trust.
2. **A consistent organisational face can be a big bonus when building relationships.** One of Pit Park People's key relationships is with Palmerston North City Council (PNCC), the Edwards Pit Park landowner. One challenge in this relationship has been the regular turnover in PNCC personnel. For their part, Pit Park People have persisted through these changes, relying on one or two key community members to serve as their council contacts. This consistency has helped make the group a reliable and consistent partner for PNCC.
3. **Formal agreements with site owners are invaluable.** In time Pit Park People were able to develop a positive partnership with PNCC and to successfully negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This MOU has helped to sustain the project through regular changes in PNCC personnel.

Background – A Brief History

During the mid-1980s, Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) used the land that is now Edwards Pit as a dumping ground for concrete from roading projects. Over the next two decades, city residents offered a variety of proposals for the development of the park. In 1999, PNCC established Pit Park People as a liaison group for local residents.

It took years for PNCC to agree to the Pit Park People's vision for the park, in part because of what was then the climate at PNCC, and in part because Pit Park People's approach to environmental and community action was quite innovative at that time. Yet Pit Park People persisted, and their work is now governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with PNCC that supports their rehabilitation and conservation efforts at the park.

Visitors to Pit Park now have the opportunity to walk planted pathways and visit three flourishing wetlands that provide noteworthy habitat for native birds.

Long-Term Goals for Pit Park

- Development of a passive recreation space in an under resourced area of Palmerston North;
- Beautification of a former wasteland;
- Native species plantings to improve the environment;
- Native habitat restoration to encourage native bird species to return to the area;
- Creation of an environmentally-friendly tourist attraction that links with the historic Hoffman Kiln;
- Creation of an accessible recreation space for all ages and physical abilities;
- Provision of opportunities for all ages to learn about native species, land formations and the impact of industry on the environment, and to participate in community resource development;
- The offset of carbon emissions in an urban environment.

¹ This article is based on an oral presentation to the ENM Workshop on Collaboration and Biodiversity, held 15 February 2014 at the Ashhurst Village Valley Centre. Written summary of oral presentation by Sharon Stevens, Environment Network Manawatu, with the background section adapted from the Pit Park People Facebook page. This article is available from the ENM web site (<http://enm.org.nz>), under the menu item “resources” and “collaboration.” ENM thanks Marise for sharing her practical wisdom!

4. **Take what help is offered, not only what you think you need.** Pit Park People see themselves as a group whose primary need is for volunteer planters. However, they accepted an offer from a group of exchange students to help them by developing their online presence. Saying 'yes' to this offer has extended the Pit Park People's outreach and ability to recruit new interest.
5. **Communicate within a network.** Much of Pit Park People's support has been sourced through the Environment Network Manawatu (ENM), which have provided them with general support for public outreach. Additionally, ENM have helped Pit Park People build specific connections, such as connections to the A Rocha native tree nursery and to the large volunteer tree planting force Dera Sacha Sauda.
6. **Reach out to other organisations, and cast a wide net.** Pit Park People have been able to build helpful collaborations with a wide range of organisations, and not always those most expected. For example, they have worked with a number of schools—and not always the local schools. Outreach to service clubs and businesses is also valuable.
7. **Pass on collaborative support to others.** Just as Pit Park People have received referrals from other groups, they have passed them on, for example by connecting Dera Sacha Sauda with other groups. By thinking beyond their own project and organisation, they have helped create a stronger community, contributing to a culture of mutual support where what goes around comes around.

Would you like to learn more about Pit Park People?

Pit Park People are active on Facebook! You can find them at <https://www.facebook.com/pitpark.palmerstonnorth>. You can also join them on the third Sunday of the month for their regular work party.