

# Mainlander

# Blazing a trail

A small community on the West Coast is celebrating a new cycle trail that's expected to boost the local economy by almost \$8m a year, while another laments the loss of the cyclist dollar after part of a popular track closed. How can small councils and charitable trusts maintain trails that bring in millions? **Joanne Naish** reports.



**The Kawatiri Coastal Trail officially opens today, after years of work.**  
JULES ANDERSON



**The Kawatiri Coastal Trail near Westport is meant to be suitable for all fitness levels.**  
JULES ANDERSON

**T**en years after the idea was first mooted and five after the first shovel was put in the ground, the Charleston community is celebrating the official opening of the Kawatiri Coastal Trail.

The 40km family-friendly trail runs from Westport to Charleston in the Buller district on the West Coast, traversing native bush, wetlands, breathtaking coastal landscapes and rich historical and natural heritage.

It is expected to bring \$7.9 million to the region's economy every year and to support more than 100 full-time jobs by 2031.

But what happens when the tourist tap turns off? One business owner in the small Westland community of Ross says he has lost 20% of his customers after a bridge on the West Coast Wilderness Trail was closed due to safety concerns.

The 115-year-old bridge near Ross connects the old goldmining town with the West Coast Wilderness Trail, which lures 15,000 riders a year to the region.

The overall trail, from Greymouth to Ross, provides a direct return of about \$15m a year and its maintenance costs are shared by the Westland and Grey district councils.

Since the trail's opening, Ross has seen the development of the Ross Beach Top 10 Holiday Park and significant money being spent by riders in other businesses in the town, including the hotel.

Biddy Manera, who chairs the Ross Goldfields and Heritage Centre, says the cycle trail boosted Ross' businesses and created employment.

However, the trail no longer goes as far as Ross since the Westland District Council closed the historic Totara Rail Bridge in August after engineers warned it could fail at any time, with fatal results.

The council says it is preparing an economic and community benefit assessment and identifying possible funding opportunities but Westland mayor Helen Lash has said a replacement bridge would cost at least \$4m and the council simply cannot afford it.

Manera says the closure of the bridge, which she referred to as "the Eiffel Tower of Ross", had had a big impact on the township. "The tap is on drip instead of full flow."

Ross' Empire Hotel co-owner Mark Browne says he has lost 20% of his business since the bridge closed.

"It was getting bigger and bigger every year then they closed the bridge. Development West Coast has a lot of money. They should be putting their hand up to get the bridge open and even to get the trail right through to Harihari. The ratepayers shouldn't have to pay for it," he says.

Development West Coast chief executive Heath Milne says the funding of infrastructure repairs falls outside its mandate.

"We understand the significant impact the Totara Bridge closure is having on several businesses in Ross. This highlights a broader challenge faced across the West Coast and many other regions – how to sustainably fund the maintenance and repair of our tracks and trails."

The West Coast benefits economically from visitors to its many walking and cycle trails, he says. "To ensure they continue delivering these benefits, a long-term, sustainable solution is needed for ongoing maintenance, such as reinvesting international visitor levies into the regions that maintain them or exploring other funding mechanisms."

Charleston-Westport Coastal Trail Trust (CWCTT) chairperson Richard Niederer says it will cost about \$170,000



**Phil Rossiter chairs the Mōkihinui-Lyell Backcountry Trust, which created the Old Ghost Road.**

a year to run the trail. The trust has just appointed a trail manager with the help of a \$90,000 grant from the Buller Resilience Trust funded by BT Mining, aimed at helping the trust transition from its construction phase to a fully operational trail.

It hopes to put aside \$25,000 every year for emergency maintenance, and has launched the Rocky Point Run to help fundraising efforts.

"We have got initiatives like trail passes, official partners. That's not going to raise tens of thousands but every little bit helps. We will look at sponsorship, grants and the Buller District Council. It's a big job."

Niederer says most trails and Great Rides are funded partly by local councils but the Kawatiri Coastal Trail needs to be self-funded.

It was built as a grade 2 track, which would help in the trust's bid for the trail to become the country's newest Great Ride – with the benefit of unlocking more government funding.

The Great Rides of New Zealand is a network of 23 world-class cycle trails, including the West Coast's Old Ghost Road and West Coast Wilderness Trail, which benefit from government funding from the International Visitor Levy and the New Zealand Cycle Trail fund.

Niederer says the Kawatiri Coastal Trail might never have been built were it not for a previous government's Provincial Growth Fund grant of \$9.36m in 2020.

**T**he trail was first mooted by the Charleston-Westport Coastal Trail Trust, a group of volunteers, in 2015 and gained \$100,000 for a feasibility study from the National government after the idea was included in the West Coast Economic Development Strategy.

"It certainly took longer than we had anticipated. There was Covid and certainly cost escalation, land access, ecological reports – it all just takes time."

He says the original plan would have put the cost \$250,000 over budget so a small section of the trail would be on a gravel road and it would end at Charleston, which he believed was a better option than ending on the side of the road 4km to 5km further south.

The opening today would include a public blessing, ribbon-cutting ceremony, as well as community festivities, markets and live music.

Niederer says the trail was made possible by dedicated volunteers, private landowners and organisations, including Ngāti Waewae, the Department of Conservation, Buller District Council, Kānoa/Regional Economic Development & Investment Unit, Ngā Herenga ā Nuku/ the Outdoor Access Commission, and Development West Coast.

"We are incredibly proud to see

this project come to life. The Kawatiri Coastal Trail is a testament to what can be achieved when communities come together with a shared vision. It's not just a trail; it's an opportunity to connect with our land, our history, and each other."

The first section of the track – from Westport to Carters Beach – opened in December 2020 and has attracted 150,000 users.

Data from Infometrics shows visitor spending in Buller reached \$100m in 2024, an increase of 14.9% from \$87m the year before, one of the highest visitor spending growth rates in the country. The New Zealand growth rate is 3.7%.

Development West Coast destination and marketing manager Andrew Aitken says the completion of the Kawatiri Coastal Trail is a significant boost for the region, further strengthening the West Coast's reputation as a premier destination for outdoor adventure and cycling.

"With visitor spending in Buller increasing nearly 15% over the past year, the Kawatiri Coastal Trail will only accelerate that growth. This is an outstanding asset that not only highlights the district's spectacular landscapes but also encourages visitors to extend their stay, explore more and support local businesses."

Charleston is home to about 70 people. It has a small motel, a campground, holiday homes for rent and a local hotel, as well as a tourism business offering cave rafting and glow worm tours.

Underworld Adventures general manager Aidan Schurr says he is excited to have the trail opened. "It's going to change Charleston, with all those visitors coming through enjoying the amazing history we have got here."

The company is putting on train rides for today's opening day, with all proceeds going to the trail.

"The ongoing maintenance is significant. As official partners we will do what we can. We have donated time and resources, we have allocated a section of our parking for the trail and this end with bike stands, and we also provide bathroom facilities.

"It's in our best interest. It means more people coming to our business as well as the campground, the motel, the hotel, the airbnbs and the pounamu carver."

**T**he Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's David Talbot says the ministry plans to update its data on the performance of the Great Rides this year.

The latest evaluation available was from 2020-21, before the addition of the Lake Dunstan Trail, a 55km cycling and walking trail traversing Central Otago, in May 2021.

The 2021 report assessed the natural, social, human, financial and physical benefits and found the estimated health benefits were \$11m and economic benefits to regions were more than \$950m.

The report says almost 2.19m trips were taken across the network at a time when New Zealand's borders were closed.

The operating and capital costs of the trails were \$10m and trail managers planted almost 25,000 native plants, fenced 128km of waterways and laid 1200 pest traps.

Cycle trail advocate Phil Rossiter is chairperson of the Mōkihinui-Lyell Backcountry Trust, which created the Old Ghost Road. He says the Kawatiri Coastal Trail will complement and significantly add to the West Coast's cycle trail network.

"It's at the accessible end of the spectrum, with absolutely outstanding stunning natural landscapes that you usually have to go into the back blocks to get.

"It's going to be incredible for the West Coast and for New Zealand quite frankly."

The trail will also bring conservation benefits, he says, with habitat enhancement, planting and pest trapping all happening on the trail.

He knows fundraising efforts are vital for not only creating a world-class trail, but also paying for ongoing maintenance costs.

"Ongoing maintenance costs are not close to the benefits. The benefits are endless, they bring so much value, but the value is being spread in so many places rather than the small trusts responsible for maintaining them," Rossiter says.

"It's time we had a rethink. We need a systematic change, there needs to be a governmental shift. We also need people using the trails to willingly contribute. We share the value but we don't share the cost."



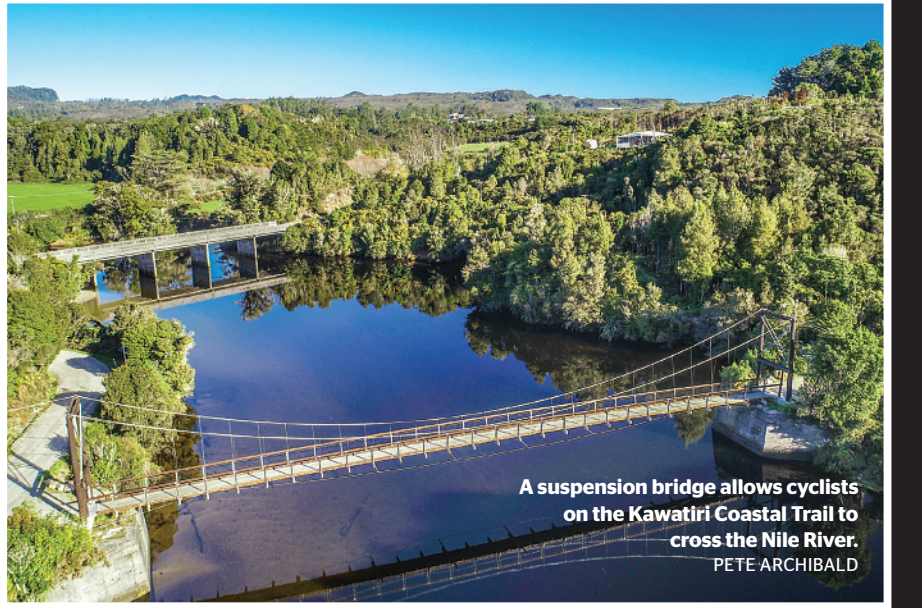
**Above: Ross has suffered a downturn in business since the Totara Rail Bridge, part of the West Coast Wilderness Trail, was closed.**  
JASON BLAIR/KATABATIC



**The Kawatiri Coastal Trail traverses 40km of the northern West Coast.**  
NOMAD VIDEO & AUDIO



**The shared-use Paparoa Track winds through some of the West Coast's most stunning and diverse landscapes.**  
ALDEN WILLIAMS/THE PRESS



**A suspension bridge allows cyclists on the Kawatiri Coastal Trail to cross the Nile River.**  
PETE ARCHIBALD