

Interviewee: Joby Mills

Title: GWRC Senior River Ranger

Interview Date: 02/13/24.

Interview Time: 9:30 - 10:02 AM

Audio file

[Joby Mills interview.m4a](#)

Transcript

00:00:00 Bettina

OK, so Joby, could you introduce yourself or someone who doesn't know who you are?

00:00:07 Joby

My name is Joby, Joby Mills and I am the senior River Ranger for Greater Wellington Regional Council here in the Wellington region of New Zealand. And I look after the rivers in the region, and the space surrounding them for recreational amenity, and conservation purposes.

00:00:39 Bettina

How long have you worked in your role for GWRC?

00:00:44 Joby

I've been River Ranger for over 2 years now here in flooding operations. So I worked with the Floods division. However, before that, I was in the Regional Park role as the Battle Hill Park Ranger for nine years. And I've been park ranging in Wellington since 2008.

00:01:09 Lexi

Can I just have a quick question? Sorry, you mentioned how you are a river ranger, but is it just for the Hutt River or is it for other another as well.

00:01:16 Joby

There's other rivers, too. Yeah. Waikanae and Ōtaki on the Kāpiti coast.

00:01:24 Bettina

Can you explain how you first got involved with your work at the hutt river corridor?

00:01:32 Joby

I basically applied for the job when it came up as the Hut River Ranger position, so I've been living on a park locally on site. I was looking to have a change whereby the family and I could live in a in a different setting as opposed to living at work. And this was a good opportunity to cross over into the river space and broaden my horizons in the in my career.

00:02:06 Bettina

And as someone who has been working on developing recreational use of the corridor and also flood protection, can you describe how the place has evolved over time?

00:02:19 Joby

Well, I mean, in the in the few years that I've been working on the river corridor here in the valley. We've invested a lot into cleaning up the space on the surround, which is a historical problem of litter and rubbish and what we call fly tipping. So I've done a big campaign on that. We haven't resolved it. I haven't stopped it, but we certainly have made some inroads and the issue is more widely socialised now with people and you know, people in the community being more aware of it.

I've also seen a lot of change in terms of some of the gravel extraction that's been done for Riverlink and also I've learned a lot about flooding operations and how we maintain the River Corridor river space from the stock banks to the willows to the to the actual gravels in the river in the you know in the wetted margin.

00:03:28 Bettina

What did you initially expect when you first started working with the Hutt River Corridor?

00:03:38 Joby

Because I had experience as a park Ranger, I kind of knew what to expect in a lot of ways with the urban populace, because this is New Zealand's most densely populated urban floodplain. So I knew that we would have problems with motorbikes, for example, and some conflicts between dog walkers and cyclists as well. And I knew that was a challenge that wasn't going to be easy to solve. And I wouldn't say I have got, you know, solved it but I'm doing my best.

And now that we've got two positions because you know, I was able to help expand the role so we can get more resources to get to get this guy on board. That meant that we no longer one person having to do everything where I can focus on the strategy and the direction and set the game plan and Brad can deliver out in the field and do community engagement.

00:04:32 Bettina

What is your current role in projects surrounding the Hutt River Corridor, for example, River Link?

00:04:42 Joby

Currently we have got projects all through the river in terms of the physical work, rock work, that flood OPS are delivering currently. So, for example, we have some edge protection defenses currently being built down in the lower section of the river and so I am part of the communications marketing and the signage for that. So, the guys will say, right we need we need to put the public onto the stock bank and the off the trail detour. And so, I'll run that process through our media people and the communications and I'll make sure that very quickly we've got adequate provision signage that can be put on the ground today and they had a blessing for the work this morning. So, the work can carry out safely with the contractor.

00:05:46 Bettina

Can you explain a little bit more about specifically River Link and what's your opinion on the project, the progress it had to overcome and everything?

00:05:56 Joby

Well, the Riverlink project is ambitious, it is multifaceted and I think it is great opportunity to improve and enhance what we have, not just for the city, but also more importantly in terms of resilience against flooding.

00:06:30 Bettina

And who or what do you think has been the most impactful to the evolution of the corridor, like person or organization?

00:06:43 Joby

Well, I would find it difficult just to pull, you know, pick out one person because really, I'm in the great scheme of things only two years into this, so there's there are people here that have been working on this corridor for decades. So, I think it's been a combination of...

Well, if we take the Hut River Trail part of the corridor, that was started by, you know, Rotary and Linton who you spoke. You know, those guys back then and that was supported by the Regional Council and also with the other territorial authorities. So, they've come on board to put sealed pathways and stuff. So it's a collaboration between the councils and the community.

The people enjoying the corridor in terms of recreation are the public and tourists for cycling and walking and dogs and all these things, but a lot of the work is achieved through machinery, so there's contractors, you know, moving beaches and realigning rivers, takes heavy machinery. Without big contractors, machines and operational devices it would be a very different picture, yeah.

00:08:10 Lexi

Another question, we were talking with our advisors yesterday and they mentioned that a lot of different like spaces and trails around the world to have, like volunteers that help with like clean up and things like that, does the Hutt River Trail have that?

00:08:28 Joby

Yeah, absolutely. We have various groups that help do, you know, everything from litter picking to tree planting, and garden maintenance of native gardens. So groups like Friends of the Hutt River, and also Hut Valley Rotary, the local colleges, schools and colleges, such as tighter college.

00:08:57 Bettina

And can I ask how does one join these groups and how does the protocol to actually work on them work?

00:09:02 Joby

I think the best thing to do would be to contact the administrator, and if there's an issue you can go through me as, you know, as a contact and I have connections to these communities here, yeah.

00:09:19 Lexi

So for all when we were working on the trail, I feel like I saw a lot of people always in the high vis, would that be one of you guys or do volunteers also go out?

00:09:31 Joby

No, not so much volunteers, because at the moment we have a lot of monitoring occurring because of the River Link project. So we have things like black disc surveying going on, which measures the turbidity or the visibility in the water to you're looking at how clear the water is. So, if it's too murky and there's a lot of, what we call, sediment loading. Then there's sediment being carried in the river and that we have problems around sedimentation, IE the build up of sediment, and that's why we need to monitor it so you'll see people in the river doing flood protection work such as John who we talked to earlier and those guys with the waders. You'll also see the monitoring people monitoring for water quality, so bacteria looking at the actual, you know, gremlins in the light. So they can tell if there's, you know, E coli, for example, and they can also look at the toxic algae problem that's has to be monitored very carefully at this time of year. So we've got contractors for Riverlink monitoring for Greater Wellington in terms of water quality and operational.

00:10:41 Lexi

Just so we have it on record, could you explain a little bit about the toxic algae?

00:10:49 Joby

Oh yeah. The toxic algae is an ongoing problem that usually occurs in this time of year. The height of the summer, whereby the rivers are warmer, they are lower and there's less rain and the algae has a chance to grow. Now it's a naturally occurring phenomena, it's a dark coloured algae, so it's not really green. It's more sort of dark brown or even black. It's not unique to this river, it's found in the region and other rivers too. So, we monitor for it in Waikanae, Kāpiti Coast and we monitor very heavily here in the Hutt and the Wairarapa because it is toxic, especially to dogs. And they are interested in the dried mats of it, when it comes on the shore, because it smells interesting to them and it doesn't agree with dogs. So, we have to be careful to alert the public to the level of risk with our signage and with our communications, you know, social media posts and websites and all the rest of it. And then people have to be careful of their dogs.

00:12:09 Bettina

And if the algae were to rise to a level where it's concerning, do you guys clean the river off the algae, or how does the problem get solved?

00:12:17 Joby

I don't think we have a way really of cleaning the river. I'd love to know if there was a cure that we could put some kind of additive or change the ecology in a way which would prevent it. However, you have to be careful interfering with nature's processes because if we look at what we discussed earlier in the in the truck about introducing a pest to control a pest, in this case introducing Stokes to control

rabbits. And you look at the problems that that creates, your problems can go twofold, when you try to reduce something, it can actually increase it.

00:13:04 Lexi

And just to clarify, the algae isn't toxic to horses at all, if they were to eat it? Do you know?

00:13:12 Joby

Not as far as I'm aware, but I don't think it's particularly good for any mammal to eat, even for people swimming, it's not advisable, but yeah, especially the dogs are the main risk, yeah.

00:13:23 Bettina

Can you describe any challenges you have had to overcome in the development of the Hutt Corridor?

00:13:32 Speaker 1

Challenges. Yeah. You often have developmental challenges with politics, with public opinion, with crime, with unauthorized use and abuse of the river margins. The development you have different opinions of how we should develop, which you would see through your interviews and surveys with the different stakeholder groups and advocating for the for different various needs of course, because it is not a singular provision, so it doesn't just cater to 1 group of people or person, it's actually for all of us or tries to be. Except we don't like motorized recreation in the form of loud and noisy motorbikes, for example, so we try to keep it socially correct and safe.

00:14:31 Bettina

And in your own words can you describe why the Hutt River Corridor is important to the community.

00:14:36 Speaker 1

Because of the peace and tranquility it offers close to an urban population. It's an opportunity to exercise dogs, go for some exercise, commune with nature, and be close to the to the moving water, which is therapeutic in itself.

00:14:56 Bettina

And can you express your opinion on the possible addition of a commuter route to the Hutt River Corridor?

00:15:05 Speaker 1

My personal opinion on a commuter route... I mean, if there is a way of doing it that can host that need, but would be relatively maintenance free, IE wouldn't require policing and you know we minimizing conflict between user groups. If there was a way of doing it, then I'd be interested.

I'm not sure that a singular route for one group can be exclusive. You know, it's quite hard to stop people if they want to go on that path. For example, Why wouldn't a Walker want to go on there or a runner, perhaps? And if you sort of seal off the gravel and turn it into an asphalt path. Then if it's the only path in the vicinity, then of course everyone's going to use it, including commuters and dog walkers and runners and cyclists and everybody. You know, for example, horses don't particularly like going on

asphalt, but I recognize there is a safety need to try to get commuter cycles off the busy roads because cycles and vehicles on roads don't necessarily mix too great. It would be good to get connectivity to Wellington with all the other pathways which are being developed currently and I think that kind of makes sense.

My overriding feeling is that the corridor needs to cater for various groups, not just one.

00:16:59 Lexi

How much of the trail would you say has a path on top of the stop bank and down below like the actual trail? If you were to give like a ballpark percentage?

00:17:21 Joby

The Stopbank often has sealed pathway on top. In lower, especially the stock banks on the eastern side of the river, for sure, you know, like, right outside the window here, this stock bank is sealed. There's a pathway right along there. And I would say that, you know, 90% can cater for that in certain areas of the of the corridor. The River Trail itself tends to be further in the margin, but there is the option to use these seal pathways as well, so it's not just one track of courses, you know several.

In the Upper Hut vicinity there are some areas which are gravel only on the stopbank pathway, so they're not sealed to the same degree. But I think the emphasis would be, or rather, I think the desire from that region is to seal more of the pathways.

I would, I would say if you look at the trail and consider it to be all these different kinds of pathways from 4 wheel drive access roads, to gravel pathway, to sealed pathway, and you know stuff in between bridges them on average, I'd say that the sealed areas probably comprise maybe 40% of the entire network because some of the bigger swaths are roads, gravel access roads and pathways.

00:19:03 Lexi

So do you think it would be plausible to or feasible in your opinion, for commuters to take the stop bank and everyone else takes the path during peak hours?

00:19:19 Joby

No, I don't think that's feasible.

00:19:21 Bettina

Not feasible. Can you elaborate?

00:19:25 Joby

People walk dogs early in the morning. Yeah, they will walk on the seal pathway where it's available. It might be local to them and easy to get to access wise. to make it exclusive, I don't think we're there yet. I think we have to consider a commuter belt in a slightly different way. It is a different pathway or close to adjacent to or something.

I don't have all the answers but I don't think you're gonna be able to just adopt the sealed path on the stock bank as commuter only at certain times of the day. How on earth we police that? You know who's

gonna stop the person taking the dog for an early morning walk or an early morning jog, or an evening one for that matter while the commuter passes? There's gotta be some give and take and some shared pathways.

00:20:27 Bettina

What directions do you see the trail evolving into the future?

00:20:37 Joby

I see more ceiling of pathways in the upper region. I see more signage and amenity improvement. I see greater connectivity between the cycleways in the region to Wellington. I see link linkages. I see an improved urban landscape corridor and the rivers place through Riverlink in the Lower Hutt City. I see improved native conservation attempt and increased biodiversity through those gardens, and I see a not necessarily an increase in one particular user group, but I see improvements to the part like setting environmentally. I also see it becoming more of a resilient corridor through the necessary works because the flooding risk is great, yeah.

00:21:51 Speaker 2

And can I ask, ask a river Ranger, how do you manage to balance the flood protection aspects but also the creational aspects of the Hutt River Corridor?

00:22:08 Joby

There are two different things to an extent whereby the river works. We're talking big money, big machines, big rock volumes moving rivers around is a big deal, you know. It takes especially big rivers like this. You know, it takes some real input. Recreational facility and environmental enhancement on the edges can complement that work. But it's not to be misunderstood as inferior because of the amenity value and the recreational value of these corridors.

The public would be horrified if the flood bank was to fail and the flood protection was inadequate in an event of rain that, you know, flooded out some of this play, they would be horrified. But they'd also really have something to say if we were to reduce their ability to enjoy the river space, they'd have something pretty strong to say about that too.

00:23:21 Bettina

And can you describe what has working along the river corridor meant to you so?

00:23:26 Joby

Look, I've found it to be of great value and I've I see great potential. I see areas that we can improve. It's been an experience, not without its challenges in terms of some of the abuse that you find IE you know. Burnt cars that have been stolen and the abandoned in the river space or massive dumpings of trash that we will go through and people will be infringed and will find names and addresses and stuff that we follow up on. It's quite sad actually some of that behavior, you know. So some of the stuff that occurs is not great, but that doesn't stop us from trying to make a difference in a positive way.

00:24:20 Bettina

And in your own words, can you describe what the Hutt River Corridor is to somebody who's never heard about it before?

00:24:30 Joby

I would say the Hutt River Corridor is within the Hutt Valley, New Zealand's most densely populated floodplain, close to an urban center. Therefore, high risk. I would say the corridor has numerous opportunities and facilities for cycling, fishing, walking, community work, planting, restoration. There is multi development such as bridge building occurring for, you know, that's a big project at the moment I forgot to mention earlier in the project section about, Silver Stream and the Water Resilience Bridge, which includes a cycle pedestrian pathway to link East and West Bank. So that's another huge project that we are co-managing Greater Wellington with Wellington Water. So, it's an opportunity for travel, cause the train crosses over the river.

It is easily accessible via transport links because there's population everywhere. We have the motorway, we have the train line, we have the river corridor, we have the river, we have access roads, we have stock banks, we have pathways, we have gardens. It's an opportunity for people to connect to the power or the river and I'm trying to shift attitudes in a way which is favorable to the natural environment.

00:26:28 Bettina

And would you agree or disagree if somebody told you the following statement: The Hutt River Corridor is the most highly engineered floodplain in New Zealand.

00:26:42 Joby

Perhaps, yeah, I would agree with that, yeah.

00:26:46 Bettina

And what do you think the progress and developments made along the river have been? How do you think have they been, do you think they've been positive, negative? What have the effects been so far?

00:26:57 Joby

I think the effects have generally been OK, positive. I think necessary that stop bank work has been established for over 100 years. I mean from the days of horse and cart or horse and dry, you know, moving material around to protect a growing population. Given this is a relatively juvenile country in terms of, you know, being heavily populated, so it's growing, it is still growing of course, from population and we need to cater for that. So yeah, it's an interesting place.

00:27:43 Bettina

And if you were to imagine you were taking the survey yourself, and we asked you the question of what improvements would you like to see in the trail to enhance your experience, which ones do you think you would suggest?

00:28:02 Joby

I would like to see diversity of planting between Willow edge protection and native. I would like to see more effective pathways, perhaps wider? And I would like to see a really vibrant and artistic creation through Riverlink in the Hutt City vicinity. Within the engineering that this project is for, because the main thing is the engineering for flood resilience.

00:29:08 Bettina

What's your favorite part of the job?

00:29:12 Joby

00:30:25 Bettina

What are you hoping to gain from this project in your opinion.

00:30:33 Joby

I just think a fair and rounded survey which captures a wide breadth of opinion. Delves into some debate, solution and opportunity.

00:31:09 Bettina

Do you have any final reflections or comments you'd like to say?

00:31:13 Joby

Ohh, I'd just like to say it's been a pleasure working with you, you know, thank you so much for all the effort you've put into this, it is really cool. And you know, you're welcome to come back anytime if you're ever in New Zealand to, you know, reconnect. That's, you know you're embarking on your careers. You know you're gonna start through, you know your students, and you're gonna go home with all this under your belt and think we really achieved something in New Zealand, you know.

And that this survey will go down like the one in 2016. They'll refer to the survey of 2024. You know, who knows? Maybe you'll be published with your names and the university and all sorts of stuff, that's pretty cool.

00:32:03 Bettina and Lexi

Thank you!

[Audio file](#)

[Joby Mills 2.m4a](#)

Transcript

00:00:00 Lexi

I feel like you are here a lot, how do you manage to look over the other rivers you manage?

00:00:09 Joby

I've been here a lot over the last two years because I've been based here. I used to do Bradt Rob and then I've grown into the senior position. The bulk of my work is in this corridor. Brad reports to me, so we have a close working relationship. I'm also closely linked to this whole operation. So for example, in the next couple of weeks, I'm going to be the boss of this place. I've done it before, it's just a question of being responsible and you know. I'm not a young man anymore. So it's about, you know, it's good that I can do these things, but yeah, look after the place, make sure everything is sweet and if anything comes up, then we address it.

00:01:02 Bettina

I actually just thought of this. Sorry, but to address the motorbikes and I guess you could possibly say the horses, which are groups that are not completely free to use the trail however they'd like. Have you ever thought about having a space for them, like for example, I know horses can come and be on the track, I know they're not allowed on the grass, can I ask why?

00:01:36 Joby

No one's really stopping Horsey going on the grass, yeah. The thing is, this place has developed, it's become more and more urbanised. More traffic, more developed than over the last 150 years or whatever you can see the change. So, horses, even in Beth's lifetime, she would ride them down here off Belmont up there down and come even across the motorway, you know, down into this area and it was more acceptable. And it was more conducive to riding horses because it was quieter. Now, we don't have a horse park here because it's generally too developed already. There's too much going on. You know, you've got the motorway with constant fast moving traffic, the trains you know, like it's not really conducive because of the bowl shape of the corridor. Like this. We don't have a flat paddock nearby, that can run around, there's a small, flat paddock in Belmont Domain where the Pony Club, Belmont Pony. And Beth's involved with all that. So, there is provision for horses there. And horses are welcome, but there be certain areas where they probably wouldn't ride because there's too much potential for interaction and you know, like you've got people coming at you with bicycles, you've got, you know, it's hard to share a narrow path if you're all on the same thing, on a mix. It's one thing having a 5 meter wide trail through a wilderness area whereby the horses can cruise along and then the cycle might come past far away. But, when you've got a narrow part, like Taita near Stokes Valley, for example, there's no real room to move. So it's the reality of it, you know. But I've got nothing against horses. Of course. You know, I've worked with horses a lot at Battle Hill for a number of years and became quite fond of them. But I think it's hard for people like them to feel like they're not being recognized. The horse fraternity are kind of marginalized because things like this commuter cycle thing has a lot of development around building new cycle waves and stuff in New Zealand and you don't hear much about new horse pathways.

00:04:10 Bettina

And for the mortar bikes, for example, has the Council ever entertained the idea of possibly having a space for them, since you can't really kick them out because there's not really any policing on the trail or legal way for you guys to say you are not allowed here.

00:04:28 Joby

Well, there has been, but because it's further up, you know you have to travel to Akatarawa forest and they are even reviewing work, I think even some of that's under review. But people can ride trail bikes

up there in the forest. Not everyone has the resources to trailer up, gas out of town up into the hills, do a track, and then come. Some of these renegade riders around here, they're just local kids really and they just come out of wherever they come out of, these houses or whatever, they hit the trail, cause a bit of, you know, cause a bit of a drama and then disappear. So then they're not going to a motorbike park. So I mean, there's a BMX track that you might have seen and there is horse paddock grazing. So there's horse paddocks on the Taita Park side. There's horses grazing, right, like on that side, on the other side, of the river there.

A motorbike park... No, we haven't. We haven't entertained the idea of a motorbike park in to my knowledge. But I'd imagine that it has been discussed before because the question is, where do they go? They will say, well this is our own neighborhood, but where? Where are we supposed to go? And that's the challenging thing you know is catering to all these things and they can be quite antisocial in my opinion because it's loud, it's fast. They can be written quite aggressively, you know? And it just sort of changes the nature of the quiet, you know. But what do I know?

00:06:25 Bettina

But it's good. We just wanted to get your opinion on it because a lot of people have different opinions, but they always tend to go more towards one. We only got 2 motorcyclists.

00:06:34 Joby

Did they have much passion about this subject? Like were they, you know, were they quite invested in all this stuff, or were they just like ohh whatever.

00:06:44 Bettina

The one I talked to, which was a kid with his dad. The father was like ohh these are the activities I do and the kid said Ohh and Motorbiking and the dad said no, you can't say that that's not allowed. I said you're not getting in any trouble, we don't really know your name like nothing's going to come out of it, we just want your honest opinion.

00:06:57 Joby

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:06:59 Bettina

And the kid said, well, I just go with my friends once in a while.

00:07:17 Joby

And they're probably not doing any real harm.

00:07:18 Bettina

No, he was just like I just ride once in a while with my friends and leave because I don't have anywhere else to ride. That's everything he said really.

00:07:24 Joby

Yeah, and they're close by and you know. They go and they're being quick and then they disappear. But it's the older ones or the young men or you know that ride aggressively and loud and fast and deliberately sort of. They know they're being naughty, so they hide their faces and identities and stuff.

And yeah, that can cause a few issues, but yeah, now the police are aware of it too. The people do complain about it. And you know, I don't wanna get into a situation whereby I'm trying to sort of corner someone with my Ute on a motorbike because that kind of opens up for an incident and we don't really want any more incidents than need be. But, there's gotta be some controls. It can't be a lawless place where anything goes otherwise it wouldn't be safe.