



An invitation to join The Learning Environment journey

“The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.”

- Wendell Berry

The Context

Our connection to the natural world is strengthened through hands-on environmental education, nurtured by supportive communities of passionate land stewards. Growing food, harvesting natural medicines, purifying waterways, regenerating forests, making soil - these are foundational skills for the 'green jobs' of the future.

Aotearoa New Zealand will benefit greatly by having more place-based learning hubs for ecological education - not just in the classroom, but on the land - where people can develop a range of Earth-based skills and see real-life demonstrations of regeneration in action. Improved food sovereignty, local resilience, and community well-being are just a few of the outcomes these 'living labs' can deliver.

The Project

The Learning Environment is an innovative new ecological education center in Whanganui, Aotearoa. The Learning Environment is poised to set a positive example of what's possible for the country (and the world). By way of this letter, I'm excited to share more about why we're backing The Learning Environment with our philanthropic support, and invite you to do the same.



The Learning Environment campus vision.

What first got me excited about The Learning Environment is the founding team. This extraordinary group of young Kiwis exemplify the Māori concept of kaitiakitanga - guardianship of the Earth - with practical ingenuity, a diversity of skills, and foresight that is very inspiring. They have been tending The Learning Environment vision for years, carefully looking for land until arriving on the chosen site at Whanganui. They've relocated and anchored their lives in the town, and have been respectfully building trusted relationships with the broader community, including district council and Māori partners.

Though starting from a low capital base, the crew has an abundance of social capital, with many friends and allies around the country to call on for help with construction, facilitating, cooking, mentoring, guest teaching, and more. This grassroots network of goodwill is a testament to the team's contagious enthusiasm and positive energy, which will undoubtedly reflect in their educational experiences as well.



The Learning Environment coordination team.

The Challenge

There exist many risks and obstacles ahead, as with any early-stage project of such ambition. **The most critical hurdle is getting access to the land itself.** As New Zealand housing demand and debts rise, young people are being priced out of the real estate market, let alone for the pursuit of nonprofit educational endeavors. The existing land owners Melinda Hatherly and Murray Jones have stewarded the Whanganui property for 15 years and are ready to retire. They fully embrace The Learning Environment vision and are ready to sell the property titles for under market value, while also continuing to support the team with their local knowledge and experience.

Once the land is purchased, there are multiple revenue sources The Learning Environment can grow to sustain itself. The educational offerings will have commensurate course fees, as well as scholarship opportunities for increased accessibility. As the project establishes its footing and is de-risked, more traditional education funding sources can also be unlocked to accelerate growth. Some of the course offerings will include: Permaculture Design, Organic Horticulture, Market Gardening, Regenerative Agriculture, Ecological Regeneration, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Mindfulness & Meditation, Bush & Survival Skills, and Community Organizing.

There is a mature apple orchard on the property, and a new market garden grown by the team, both of which will provide a baseline cash flow - including through value-added products, like their soon-to-be-famous spiced apple juice, "The Mull" (yum!). A native tree nursery is also underway to meet New Zealand's growing demand for native forest regeneration and carbon farming.





View from The Learning Environment hill site. In 2017, the Whanganui River became the first river in the world to be designated rights of legal personhood.

That's why this philanthropic intervention is so important: it will enable the land title transfer into a charitable trust, and catalyze this group of people and location to be of significant long-term benefit to the community and country, while setting it up for a sustainable financial trajectory. **This funding will also fill the crucial early-stage gap that existing government and foundation grants are failing to meet,** because land acquisition does not qualify for most programmes.

The Goal

The goal for the crowdfunding campaign is NZ \$1,000,000 (US \$750,000), in order to purchase both desired land parcels. The team is comfortable and used to running on very lean budgets, but I think additional working capital would be wise at this stage. It will reduce the number of outside part-time jobs and low-margin activities needed for the core group to sustain their livelihoods, as well as ensure quality construction for the infrastructure buildout.

By expanding this campaign to our global networks, we are hoping to assist The Learning Environment team in raising upwards of NZ \$1,500,000 (US \$1,125,000), which would sufficiently capitalize the next stage of development. We are contributing a gift of NZ \$250,000 from the Namaste Foundation, one of our largest philanthropic donations to date, and a reflection of our belief in this project.

The administrative side of the organization is very well run. You can review the team's comprehensive financial forecasts and project materials below. The charitable deeds and compliance have been reviewed and signed off by [The Gift Trust](#), which is receiving the project's tax-deductible donations from NZ and the US, in connection with its partnership with [RSF Social Finance](#).

Appreciated stock can be donated, which has a double benefit of [reducing capital gains liability](#) in addition to the primary tax deduction. RSF has also indicated a willingness to receive cryptocurrency - they simply need their first donor to build-out the process with. So if you're interested in pioneering crypto giving, you will be laying the tracks down for future nonprofits and donors. All inquiries can be directed to [Cheryl Spain](#) at The Gift Trust and [The Learning Environment coordination team](#). I'm also happy to discuss any of these matters as well.

Vital to the flourishing of Aotearoa New Zealand are bioregional land projects that foster ecological education for food sovereignty, community health, and regeneration. I hope you'll consider jumping on board this waka (canoe) and becoming an 'angel donor' for this important initiative. Your generosity will build upon significant existing groundwork, and have a major impact on the project's success. The campaign closes on March 30, 2021. Thank you for your time and consideration.

[Click here to make a donation now.](#)

Warm regards,



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More information:

- [The Gift Trust donation page](#)
- [The Learning Environment website](#)
- [Project Overview](#)
- [Land Overview](#)
- [Financial Overview](#)
- [Charitable Trust details](#)
- [Crowdfunding page](#)
- Letters of support:
 - [Mayor of Whanganui District](#)
 - [Whanganui River Enhancement Trust](#)