

Ep 5 - Kate Scott – reflecting on Thriving Southland's journey

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Rachael Halder: Catchment Convos with Thriving Southland. Your link to Southland catchment groups and their impactful projects. Each episode we'll dive into grassroot effort by local farmers and communities that are driving change and sustainability in our regions. Listen in for inspiring stories and insight. Real people, real change, the Southland way.

In today's episode of Catchment Convos, we're celebrating the evolution of Thriving Southland and diving into the role it plays into transforming our rural communities. Today's guest has been an integral part of that journey, Kate Scott, who many of you may know as our Deputy Chair. Kate has been with Thriving Southland from its very beginnings, helping shape it into what it is today, a network of passionate catchment groups working to protect and enhance our landscapes and rural sector.

Kate brings a wealth of experience in the [00:01:00] agribusiness sector. Currently, she's the Executive Director of environmental consultancy firm LandPro. And more recently, she has been appointed CEO of Horticulture New Zealand. She's played a key role on New Zealand's Rural Leadership Trust and is a Nuffield Scholar.

As someone deeply involved in Thriving Southland's growth, she has seen firsthand how catchment groups have created positive change across our Southland region. In today's conversation, we'll explore Kate's insight on how Thriving Southland has evolved, the surprises along the way, and what the future holds for catchment groups and their potential influence.

We'll also talk about the value these groups bring and how Kate's time on the board and our project panel has shaped her thoughts moving forward. Welcome to the show, Kate.

Kate Scott: How are you Rach?

Rachael Halder: Good. Good. Thank you. Hey, thank you so much for joining me today. So like I said earlier, we're talking to Kate with her Thriving Southland hat on, as she is looking to move in her [00:02:00] big new role with Hort NZ, so, we thought we'd have a bit of a conversation with you and talk to you about, since the beginning you've been involved and, you know, curious to hear your thoughts about how you've seen Thriving Southland evolve over the years since you've been involved.

Kate Scott: Yeah, thanks, Rach. And look, you know, it's one of those, things that I'm a little bit sad to be coming to the end of my time with Thriving Southland because it's been, as you say, one of those journeys right from the beginning.

But when I look at, you know, where we started, , you know, all those years ago, , there was a collection of us who had this real, , I guess, passion and view for how do we actually enable our farmers in Southland to actually deliver on these, challenges in front of them, by giving them the skills and the tools to do it for themselves.

And, that passion remains the same today. And, that's pretty amazing. But in terms of as an organization, we really have evolved from just a few of us volunteering to try and get things off the ground to now having, an amazing team of people and a really, [00:03:00] enduring organization we hope that can, continue to bring about, benefits, support the change and actually really, show that leadership that we need for the whole of the primary sector to be able to, you know, deliver on those challenges, particularly in the environmental space, but also I think Thriving Southland has evolved to being , this national leading voice and showing leadership nationally, which in my view is not what we anticipated when we started, all these late night meetings chatting about what it could be. But I think that's just a real testament to the commitment that everyone who was there right from the beginning has shown to Thriving Southland and the value that it adds.

And yeah, that's, such an interesting thought, isn't it? Because you think back and what, do you guys sort of say 2018,2019

It took a while to get through kind of those initial conversations and then trying to get funding and then COVID got in the way, but yeah, about 2019.

Rachael Halder: And you think about the rapid pace of change that has hit this province [00:04:00] and the sector. It, yeah, it is something to how you guys had that mindset back then to see what it could have been now. Like, huh, it's where you had a crystal ball.

Kate Scott: Well, look, it's really interesting you say that. So I, , in 2019 had, , not long finished my Nuffield and my Nuffield report was looking at how do we kind of drive this change from the ground up rather than the top down and, , Hughie, , got in touch with me to have a chat about that.

And that's kind of where my involvement started and, bless Hughie, I think he's still probably only one of the five or so people who actually probably bothered to read my report. But, I was really grateful for the opportunity to be able to be involved in a sector and in a community that I, you know, really love , and feel like, , Southland is certainly my second home.

Rachael Halder: And we've been very lucky to have your time too, Kate, because you wear so many different hats. It helps us with, that primary purpose of not duplicating and of course, bringing in information to learn and hopefully bring it to Southland. So when you first started this journey and then, you know, now here [00:05:00] we are today.

Is there like a couple of things that have surprised you or, maybe ways Thriving went that you didn't think they initially would?

Kate Scott: Yeah, look, I think, probably what surprised me a little bit has been the success that we've been able, to gather. And I think that's because we probably didn't really sit back and imagine where it might get to. It was just the how do we deliver wholly for our farmers and our catchment groups because there was so many, , challenges and roadblocks and , we all kind of felt that we had to do something to help, that journey. The success of it has probably been one of those, amazing surprises. And one of the things that I will, take away with me that it's been really amazing to be part of such a, really, tight knit group and that's probably, the other thing that the reason I've been here for five years is because it's such a great group of people to work with and, that doesn't always happen when you're involved with groups and organizations.

And so I think that's, not a surprise because they're all a great group of people, but that's one of [00:06:00] the really wonderful outcomes that you can take away from being involved with Thriving Southland.

Rachael Halder: Hey, look, from, the ground side of things in the operational, we feel that way about our team too.

And, we know that a lot of our catchment group members, feel the same that they're in it for the right reason and, credit to the board, because you know always lead by example. So we've always felt that from you guys. So kind of the fundamental of Thriving Southland is supporting catchment groups and, how or why do you think they have been successful or what are some of the key things you've seen make a successful catchment group?

Kate Scott: Yeah, look, I'm a really strong advocate for catchment groups. I think they've got a hugely important role to play in terms of not just how we navigate, you know that regulatory change piece that's in front of us but also I think for me, the role that they play in their local communities when we look at how hard you know life gets and how busy everyone gets Having that connection to community and people rallying around [00:07:00] a common cause, which is looking after their communities, is, in my view, the real key to their success.

And, what we see is that they usually start with one or two, really keen individuals who then kind of, Get everyone else to wrap around, them and I think that's, probably one of, the challenges that catchment groups have is how do we keep, um, keep all of our volunteers and our people who are working really hard, not overwhelmed or overworked by the burden that can come with what's being asked of catchment groups.

That, that is a challenge in my view, but I certainly think, the success comes back down, to putting community at the heart of what they do.

Rachael Halder: And yeah, those challenges and questions will probably remain unanswered and or always questioned for a long time to come as, different people get involved, different challenges become presented.

And if this spring has taught us anything, you know, your community is really important in, making it through. Moving into sort of a different little bit of topics, catchment [00:08:00] groups seem to find themselves talking a lot about regulation at the moment. So. What do you think, or where do you think catchment groups sit from a regulatory sort of space?

Kate Scott: Mmm, look, that's a really good question, and I think, I'll try and answer it in two parts for you. The first part is that, Yes, catchment groups have a role to play in the regulatory space in terms of how do they actively engage with their councils to understand, what plan changes, what rules, what directions might be coming.

I think they're a really good gateway to connection between the people that sit in the regulatory buildings and the farmers and the growers on the ground. So that's one aspect. So how do they be that, connector or, joiner between the realities of having to apply regulation, but the practicalities of how it needs to work on the ground.

So I think that is a really important role for catchment groups. I do worry, though, when I start to see [00:09:00] that catchment groups, being seen as being the, either, the enforcer, the compliance people for, you know, communities or around the regulations. I think that's something that really bothers me, that's not their role.

We're talking about a group of people who are here to enable not to actually deliver compliance and enforcement. So that worries me, if we see a shift in that direction. I think the role that catchment groups can play, in the regulatory space moving forward is, when we look at some of these big changes that we're going to have to bring about in terms of, managing our impacts in terms of water quality, whether it's some future iteration of farm plans, I think there is a need to take a catchment based approach and again, I think catchment groups in that scenario become a good vehicle for how do we collectively work together to solve some of these problems and, the role that Thriving Southland has played in terms of bringing science and knowledge, to catchment groups to inform that as a, in my view, a best practice [00:10:00] example of how catchment groups should work, um, alongside regulation, but they shouldn't be, the deliverer of regulation, if that makes sense. It's obviously my personal view, but, I think that's, that's how you get the best outcomes, because we know we're going to have to work together as catchments and subcatchments into the future, to be prosperous, and that is often best done by communities, but we have to kind of work collaboratively, whether we're talking about council, we're talking about iwi, we're talking about farmers, we're talking about community, there's a real need, and I think that's sometimes, the catchment group becomes the vehicle that allows us to come together around that, and it can be An easier place to have a

conversation without, the challenges, of regulation and the conflict that can sometimes inadvertently lead to.

Rachael Halder: And that farmer to farmer learning is so. It is just, it's awesome to be around because you can see people validate things really quickly and they can share their experiences that [00:11:00] I've been through and yeah, regulation is only one of the things .

Kate Scott: To my way of thinking, the regulation is really the backstop.

If we want to make the biggest changes, it's the, how we make those small, um, changes and incremental changes because if we add them all up, they actually result in some big changes and you're completely right that actually, you know, connecting with others who are trying to solve the same challenges not only gives us a little bit of hope that everyone's trying a lot of different things and we might find a good way to do it, but also when we have some of, those failures or those adverse times, we've also got people that we can, depend upon.

And, you just have to look at, the terrible spring that Southland has had and yet, every time I talk to farmers out there, almost every one of them has mentioned the change that they've seen in their communities compared to, if this sort of event happened in the last, 20 years, there wasn't that same degree of people reaching out to check if others were okay and trying to [00:12:00] help out and, I'm confident that catchment groups have had a real part in supporting that, that building of community, and that, how we come together.

And, I think, that's a kind of an unintended upside, of what comes, when we can enable this sort of approach.

Rachael Halder: Yep. And wet weather and extreme events and adverse kind of, are, something that everybody has to deal with. And, it doesn't matter what kind of thing you're farming, or what you've done in the past everybody's kind of on the same playing field, which like you said, is a great place to bring people together. Although for a really average kind of reason.

Kate Scott: 100%.

Rachael Halder: Yeah. So just kind of maybe picking up on a little point there. How important is it that catchment groups stay independent?

Kate Scott: Yeah, look, I think catchment groups need to be independent because there has to be the space for them to be able to delve into their own issues and challenges.

I think, if you actually bring them into a position that's compromised, then the credibility and [00:13:00] the gains that they're making may come into question. And I think,, keeping them, as standalone or independent, in my view, is the only way that they're actually going to function fully into the future otherwise, they might be seen as being an arm of council or a subcommittee of something else and that creates this potential for mistrust or misalignment and purpose, which I just think will undermine the successes that can otherwise be achieved. And the second part of that is, I think, catchment groups need to be self determining they need to lead for themselves because every one of them will have a different perspective. And so we can't take over and tell them what to do. And we've been really clear about that from a Thriving Southland perspective right from the beginning that our role is to enable and, facilitate,, that connection to knowledge, um, rather than being the ones telling them what to do.

And I think personally, when I look across the Catchment Group landscape, that's a really big part of Thriving Southlands success.

Rachael Halder: [00:14:00] Yep. And we are really proud to say that. And so that's, for everybody who doesn't know Thriving Southland very much sits beside catchment groups and, we're there to help when catchment groups want and yeah, connect as I liked that saying connection to knowledge, trying to, figure out, who are the people who know the stuff and I guess changing to maybe a little bit of a side bit that you do for Thriving Kate is you sit on our project panel. So Thriving Southland has an independent project panel that reviews and evaluates all of the projects that come in to Thriving for them to fund. So catchment groups submit their applications for a project and this project panel of four, including Kate, looks over them to decide if they fit into the sort of the criteria.

And I guess in your time in this panel, what are your sort of key thoughts or key takeaways from all the projects that you've seen come across the desk?

Kate Scott: Yeah, I have to say that's been one of the fun parts of our job [00:15:00] on the project panel because we kind of get to delve quite deeply into what each of the community groups are looking to do.

And, we always have some really robust conversations around, whether the projects are aligned to the funding objectives, which, are set out quite clearly. Um, and I guess, there's the novel projects that stand out when you look at, one of the groups who were wanting to look at novel ways to utilize, pivot irrigators, for was it mobile feeding, opportunities.

Rachael Halder: So that, that wintering shelter.

Kate Scott: Yeah. So, you know, that's, that's the novel end of the spectrum, but it's also really great to see, the, outside of the box thinking, and then, we come to some of our really big projects like, Mataura catchments, one and looking at, the likes of the Balfour project.

They're all projects that stand out as having not only added huge value to their local catchment groups, but actually adding huge value to, Southland when we start to actually look at how do we manage, land use change? [00:16:00] How do we evaluate, what we can or can't do and the impact of those mitigations that we might be able to deploy within our farms. And so there is such a spectrum, and those are the things that probably stand out, for me, that the robustness of the conversations at that table are fantastic. And, some people might think it's a from the outside a pretty straightforward process you just fill in a form and off you go. But, those projects that have been through, our group, we often will go back and ask for further information and that's probably a bit of a frustration at times for everyone. But that's because we also feel like we, have a duty to be really responsible for the funding that's going out so that we can hand on heart show that it's creating impact.

That's not just you know, community impact, but also region wide impact. And, I think we've done a pretty good job of that. If I, uh, I'm going to give ourselves a pat on the back for something that would definitely be it.

Rachael Halder: I think it's a deserved pat on the back, Kate. And what like we as Thriving are really proud of that project panel because it helps [00:17:00] that like you said, making sure that the money is spent wisely and valuably, but equally so those groups, when they have the idea and they have the motivation that they're able to submit an application that is relatively simple,

we think, but, they need a bit of information if we're going to give them some money. And, you guys are really quick to respond and, you know, ask questions that are actually just challenging them in ways that maybe they haven't thought about or things that you guys know that they haven't looked at and they can get a response really quickly, which means these projects are happening within a really short time frame, which is a little bit of a rare gem sometimes in the funding world.

Kate Scott: I think without that, we certainly wouldn't have had the successes that we've had. And, I think otherwise funding is so hard to access. And, you look at the moment, all community groups and organizations are struggling to find funding for stuff. And so I think we've been really fortunate to have been able to commit our funds to the on the ground science knowledge and tools.

And, you just have to look at, some of, the field days or, [00:18:00] the follow up extension um, events that come at the back end of almost every project, because that's a requirement that we want to see how, the knowledge that's been gained is going to be shared widely., You just have to look at the attendance at some of those events, there is so much interest from a really broad range, of our sector.

And that's not just our farmers on the ground, but it's also our rural professionals and our bankers and our, regional council people that have been really interested in it. So we've had, a really great sense of buy in, I think, across the whole, industry bodies have played a , big role in it.

So, it's that sense of collaboration, I think, is a big part that comes out, of all of this.

Rachael Halder: And cross sector engagement, right? Where catchments, it doesn't matter who you are or what you do, your age and stage, your farming practice. Catchment groups are for you. So we love that plug. Uh, and like you said, sharing the word, that's why we're doing a podcast.

So if everyone listens and they can learn to all the good stuff. So yeah, we can't wait to have more groups on sharing the projects. You [00:19:00] mentioned Balfour, like all of those guys are all lined up, ready to go. We just got to wait for them to have some time off the tractor at the moment. But hey, so obviously you get to see and talk to loads of people in all your different roles, Kate, but in your time with Thriving, is there some things that you've learned,

from the organization or from catchment groups or things that you've observed that you're sort of going to take away with you?

Kate Scott: Yeah, I have. Um, obviously, one of the ones that stands out for me is that, having a great idea, just takes a room full, of really like minded people to actually achieve something., so that's one of them., Bring everyone together, and then you kind of just have to believe that there's a way and you just make it happen.

So, that's definitely one of them., I think one of the other learnings or observations that stands out for me is, having to have a little bit of tenacity when it comes to , funding and a lot of patience because, the wheels of government when it comes to funding can move really slowly, which is a hard thing for, a group of farmers who are, let's face it, [00:20:00] action orientated and typically doers.

So, learning to roll with the process, as a good, a good checkpoint to say, well, actually, yes, we can still do it if we actually show perseverance, and commitment and I think, just to acknowledge, especially MPI, because we wouldn't have been able to achieve what we've achieved without their support and, remembering, that all of the people that work in there have been huge supporters for Thriving Southland as well.

I think, it's sometimes easy to overlook that, but, we are thankful for, their support, particularly in the early days when this was a little bit novel, but, you know, we, got there and probably the last thing I would say is, just the value of working, with amazing people.

I'm really fortunate that whilst I'm, going to be stepping out, I'm leaving with this big room full of, connections and, I'm fairly confident, I'm not going to be too far away from what's, happening on the ground in Thriving Southland and, have a great new, stable of, people I would call friends just from being connected so, so fully for so long across, you know, this work.

Rachael Halder: Oh, of [00:21:00] course, Kate, you can't get away from us that easy.

Kate Scott: I don't think I will be.

Rachael Halder: Especially with your new role. We'll be so eager to hear all of the things that you've got to learn. And I'm sure what, you know, Southland will be able to initiate and engage in all of those different projects that Hort NZ is on.

Uh so. Stepping down from the board officially at the AGM and into your new role at Hort NZ, so a bit of a question for you, a little bit curly,, do you believe that Thriving delivers value and moving forward, what are the opportunities that you see for Thriving Southland and the Southland network of catchment groups?

Kate Scott: Yeah, look, if I didn't believe Thriving Southland delivered value, then you know, I wouldn't still be here some five years later. Um, and I think Thriving Southland delivers huge value and for me, I think there's both challenges and opportunities on the horizon. So, we talked about before very briefly that challenge, of a tight funding environment.

And so I think, that's the challenge that we need to navigate is [00:22:00] how do we continue to fund the value that Thriving Southland is bringing to the whole of the Southland region? But when I look at opportunities, I see, ongoing opportunities for Thriving Southland to be that conduit, between the regulation, and the people, on the ground who have to implement, that the regulatory piece and the how do we actually deliver, as I say, science, knowledge, tools, information, and support to actually achieve some of these big things.

And I think Southland, has actually done a pretty good job, as a region when we look at, that shift we've seen around that engagement with catchment groups and, the, things are not perfect by any stretch, but when you look at it compared to many other regions, Southland are actually showing a real willingness to work collaboratively.

And I think that's part of the opportunity and the horizons. How do we keep building on, our strong foundation to further deliver Southland specific science. How do we [00:23:00] continue to connect, all of our stakeholders across Southland? And that's, the facilitation and the connecting role that I think, um, will only become more and more important.

And I think Thriving Southland and the team of people who work at Thriving Southland are definitely the right people to keep delivering, on that if we want

to really, bring about, this change piece. We need champions for change. And I think that's, kind of a lens through which I see the opportunity for Thriving.

Rachael Halder: Hey, it's great to hear Kate. It was always lovely to get that sort of positive affirmation of things. And I guess when you first started out, there was. We kind of say about 18 catchment groups. And now we're at about 37 so, uh, you know, it's awesome to see them go through their own ebbs and flows like everything does in life and all of the great things they've been able to achieve. And yeah, we are really proud of it, but. The kudos all goes to those farmers and those catchment group members on the ground who come up the ideas, who step up and who turn up to the meetings and, you know, make it happen.

So, hey, maybe one last [00:24:00] opportunity. Is there anything else you sort of wanted to say?

Kate Scott: Look, probably the last thing I really would just want to say is just to, you know, thank, all of the catchment groups for their support. Southland is not, as I said, not my first home. I'm based in central Otago. Although I have whakapapa heritage. My grandparents were both from Invercargill. So do have a strong family history there, but really, just want to be able to thank everyone for their support in the time that I've been a part of Thriving Southland.

I am genuinely sad about having to, step away from the day to day, but I will continue to be a really big and really loud supporter for all the great work that, everyone on the ground is doing. And for me, it just, reinforces the feeling that we, or I know that our farmers and our growers are doing amazing work on the ground and so how do we help them to tell, that story of the great work that we're doing so that, we can all keep caring for the environment and for the future of [00:25:00] our farming, and our communities.

So, yeah, just a big thank you from me, to everyone, to the board and to the team at Thriving Southland as well.

Rachael Halder: That's awesome, Kate. And thank you for your time. And, we know you'll be able to keep up to date by being a good listener of Catchment Convos.

I know your support is, you know, second to none and we know that you're always there in our corner, which is so great. And having connections across

New Zealand and across the province is, you know, what makes this network so strong. So thank you again for your time, Kate.

Kate Scott: Thanks for having me, Rachael.

Rachael Halder: And that's a wrap for another episode of Catchment Convos brought to you by Thriving Southland, a big thanks to our guests for being a part of the conversation on today's episode. And for you guys for tuning in, we appreciate your support. Don't forget to like subscribe and follow us wherever you get your podcasts from, so you can stay up to date with all the latest episodes as they're released.

For more information on this episode, check out the show notes or head to the Thriving Southland website, where you can also learn more about the awesome work happening [00:26:00] across the catchment groups here in Southland. And if you've got a project or an idea you want to share, don't be shy, reach out. So until next time, keep up the good work out there on the land, and as always, stay connected and keep driving those changes for a thriving Southland.