

NORTHERN ADVOCATE

Paihia schoolkids helping penguins stay safe

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ALL SET: Paihia School pupil Lily Hagen seems to be waiting for her penguin box's new inhabitants to arrive. PHOTO/SUPPLIED Northern Advocate

By: Peter de Graaf

Fifteen penguin families now have somewhere safe to live, thanks in part to the kids of Paihia School.

The pupils braved last week's wild weather to install the specially made penguin boxes in a known breeding area around the Waitangi shore.

The project was a joint initiative by the Waitangi National Trust, which owns the land, and conservation group Bay Bush Action.

Project coordinator Peter Trimble said students from Paihia School decorated and installed the boxes, which were made by a local business according to a Department of Conservation design.

The aim is to help educate our kids about our own 'Happy Feet' living right here in the Bay and offer the birds a safe haven for nesting," he said.

Waitangi National Trust chief executive Greg McManus said the Treaty Grounds were an ideal place thanks to recent efforts to keep the area pest-free.

Nationally, the little blue penguin (korora) population had declined by 60-70 per cent since the 1960s due to habitat loss, vehicles and predation by stoats, dogs and cats, Mr Trimble said.

It was hoped the penguin-box initiative would boost numbers and offer a chance for future eco-tourism and education opportunities such as viewing platforms allowing visitors to see the birds waddle to their dens at dusk.

Bay Bush Action was encouraging people with coastal properties to build their own penguin boxes, monitor their dogs and cats, and carry out pest control to help keep the species alive.

The Paihia pupils' efforts follow a similar project by Opuia schoolchildren to install penguin boxes under the Opuia Cruising Club. To get the penguin box plans, go to www.doc.govt.nz and search for 'You can help little penguins'.