



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 21 January 2026

People Power on the Spit

Mangawhai Commemorates 35 Years Since the Historic "Big Dig"

MANGAWHAI, NZ – February 11, 2026, marks the 35th anniversary of the Mangawhai 'Big Dig', a legendary act of community grit that rescued a dying waterway from environmental collapse. In February 1991, locals famously bypassed bureaucratic paralysis to perform a feat of engineering that remains the cornerstone of Mangawhai's identity.

The Crisis

The decline began in 1978 when a violent storm tore a 450-metre breach through the southern end of Mangawhai's iconic sandspit. This catastrophic break diverted tidal flow, causing the harbour entrance to choke.

Cyclone Bola delivered the final blow in 1988; within two years, the harbour mouth was completely closed, while the southern gap had become a shallow, treacherous hazard. With its circulation cut off, the once vibrant harbour lagoon became a "stagnant graveyard." Faced with institutional inertia, a band of locals - the **"Big Dig Rebels"** - refused to let their waterway die. Choosing direct action over red tape, they took to the sands to breathe life back into the harbour.

The 1991 Rescue Operation

- **The Dawn Convoy:** At 6:00 AM on February 11, 1991, a convoy of over 40 heavy machines - bulldozers, excavators, and scrapers - descended upon the sandspit to carve a new path for the tide.
- **Four Days of Determination:** Working around the clock and tides, hundreds of locals successfully carved a 30-metre-wide channel and reopened the harbour entrance, restoring the vital tidal flow required to flush the lagoon.
- **The Closure:** In the following weeks, the operation evolved into a massive engineering feat to close the rogue southern breach. Locals were joined by 20

personnel from the Papakura Military Camp - who were training in Mangawhai at the time and volunteered their support - to hand-fill and place 5,000 sandbags. This formed the stable foundation upon which heavy machinery constructed the initial sand bund wall.

- **Restoring Protection:** Simultaneously, a burgeoning partnership began to form; Northland Regional Council provided machinery and rock, enabling Mangawhai locals to rebuild the critical Rock Groyne at the harbour mouth to protect the reopened entrance.

Triumph of Community Spirit

Led by the grit of **Gary Berghan, Noel Cullen, Torchy Jeffery, Jim Wintle, Richard Bull** and others working behind the scenes, the Big Dig remains a symbol of defiance. It was a total town effort: while the "Rebels" worked without legal consents - facing the threat of arrest and ruinous fines - virtually every other household formed the operation's backbone. From driving machinery to contributing to a community-led legal defence fund, it was a landmark victory of "people power" over red tape.

A Lasting Legacy

The momentum from the Big Dig led to the formation of **Mangawhai Harbour Restoration Society (MHRS)**. To transition from a "rebel" action to a permanent solution, pre-imminent coastal engineer **Andre LaBonte** offered his help. Working alongside global expert **Professor Bob Dean**, LaBonte developed the scientific and engineering roadmap that made the restoration sustainable and legally compliant - transforming a community protest into a world-class environmental project.

MHRS now serves as the primary guardian of the harbour's delicate equilibrium. "We pay tribute to the tenacious Rebels," says **Peter Wethey, Chair of MHRS**. "Everything we enjoy today exists because this community refused to take 'no' for an answer. That rescue mission has now matured into a sophisticated partnership of stewardship and kaitiakitanga."

Today, MHRS works closely with **Te Uri o Hau, local and regional councils, DOC and Mangawhai Matters**. Their focus is guided by rigorous scientific monitoring; recent landmark drone surveys revealed a staggering loss of more than **420,000 tonnes of sand** from the spit in just six years. This "coastal starvation" - equivalent to **26,000 dump trucks** worth of sand - has left the spit critically thin, with experts warning of a high prospect of another breach within 15 years.

"By protecting the sandspit, ensuring vital tidal flow and managing mangrove encroachment for a healthy harbour, we preserve a thriving waterway for boaties, fishers and families, while providing a sanctuary for the endangered tara iti (fairy tern) and other at-risk wildlife," says Peter.

Commemorative Events

On 21 February, MHRS is hosting an invite-only 35th Anniversary event at Mangawhai Museum to honour the original Rebels. Public opportunities to engage with this history include:

- **Mangawhai Museum:** View the Big Dig documentary and the "Storm Zone" exhibition.
- **Literature:** 'They Dared the Impossible' by historian Beverley C. Ross is available at the Museum.
- **Mangawhai Art Gallery:** "On The Same Tide" exhibition (7–19 February), a curated collection of local artwork celebrating the beauty of the ocean, vitality of the harbour and rhythms of the land.

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MEDIA CONTACTS

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NOTES TO EDITORS Interview Opportunities:

- **Peter Wethey:** Chair, MHRS (On the harbour's future and ongoing restoration).
- **Richard Bull (MNZM):** Original Big Dig Rebel (On the frontline action and legal risks).
- **Beverley Ross:** Local historian and author (On the historical significance).

Visual Assets:

- Archival 1991 photos of the Big Dig available upon request.
- **Photo Ops:** Interviews can be staged at the Sandspit, by the estuary, on the 'Spirit of Mangawhai II' Dredger, or at the Feb 21 event.