

Advocacy case study The GIFT initiative

About GIFT

The GIFT initiative (Gulf Innovation Fund Together) was established by [Foundation North](#) between 2016 and 2022, to help restore the mauri (life force) of Tīkapa Moana/Te Moananui-ā-Toi (the Hauraki Gulf). GIFT cultivated a community of changemakers focused on ‘turning the tide’ of environmental degradation in Tīkapa Moana.

Advocacy journey

From its beginning, GIFT encouraged thinking and working differently. Key aspects of this were:

- Placing the vision to [restore mauri](#) at the centre, which opened a doorway into te ao Māori approaches, which became the priority focus of GIFT from Year Three onwards.
- Using a seed, scale, system framework for funding – seeding good ideas, helping to scale what works and getting behind those seeking to achieve system level changes.
- Having an evaluator walk alongside funded groups to help them identify what success looks like, providing a short [evaluative case study](#) for each initiative and collaborative [annual impact and learning reports](#).

GIFT contributed over \$11M to 36 seed projects, 19 scale and 14 system change initiatives. Together these initiatives leveraged another \$5M+ funding.

The [GIFT Year Five](#) report summarises impact and learning from GIFT over the five years.

Types of advocacy engagement and impact

GIFT itself was a form of advocacy, representing a clear funder intention to raise awareness and catalyse significant change for a pressured and declining ecological system. In its focus on bringing together mātauranga Māori and Western knowledge, GIFT was also an advocate for mātauranga Māori and te ao Māori as a source of solutions. GIFT is a literal showcase of different ways to fund and support advocacy. Here are some examples:



Funding advocacy (including alternative practice)

A six-month prototype to engage across the political spectrum to inform decision-making to restore the mauri of the Gulf. This funded the Hauraki Gulf Forum CE to engage with cross party leaders in 2021 with the support of Awhi Consulting. Key learning was that personal connection was important for MPs and that meeting in person is more effective. A multi-layered approach that hits MPs' personal and political party areas of interest is more compelling. Misinformation is rife in political contexts.

Funding development of a [highly scalable national finance scheme](#) for permanent native forestry (Mōhio Research).

Supporting a [Business Case](#) to influence decision makers to allow electric ferries in the inner Hauraki Gulf.

In September 2021, the [Noises Restoration](#) project team submitted a proposal to government for Ōtata (The Noises) to be part of its 'High Protection Area' legislation. This was approved in October 2024 and took 20+ years of collaborative effort. See [here](#) for a discussion of the wider context of this legislation, which is not without controversy.

Within Foundation North itself, GIFT has catalysed significant policy shifts to fund more flexibly, for example to fund individuals and companies. It has also produced the seed, scale, system model of funding which has been influential within philanthropy in Aotearoa.



Growing advocacy capacity

Funding enabled five [Hauraki Gulf sites to be filmed](#) for virtual reality (VR) and shared with schools (Blake Trust), an [NZVR schools outreach programme](#) and [Young Ocean Explorers](#), a website designed to engage children and young people in loving and protecting the sea.

Growing leadership, with over 50 people experiencing the [Indigenous to Earth - Ngā uri ō Papatūānuku mē Rangīnui](#) programme to engage and empower Tāmaki Makaurau leaders with tools to champion projects in Tikapa Moana Te Moananui-ā-Toi / Hauraki Gulf.



Evidence for change

Funding a documentary mini-series called [Seasick - Saving the Hauraki Gulf](#), highlighting the issues and possible solutions to the environmental issues facing Tikapa Moana Te Moananui-ā-Toi. Also supporting the creation of [Troubled Waters](#) (TVNZ) featuring Nick Shears, 2021, highlighting the issues facing the marine ecosystem in the Hauraki Gulf.

GIFT funded innovative projects to prototype how to use [underwater sound to monitor illegal fishing](#); the mapping of [juvenile fish bottlenecks](#); research to help understand the [lives of whales](#) in the Gulf; what [successful waterway restoration at scale](#) looks like and what it takes; and how [seabird safe fishing practices](#) can keep seabirds safe from harm.



Collaboration, convening, mobilising

Funded groups were brought together each year to share progress and learning and consider potential for collaboration.
Supporting Te Tiriti and kaupapa Māori based marine protection via the [Waiheke Marine Project](#), [Te Toki Voyaging Trust](#) and [Protect Aotea](#).



Direct advocacy

As a funder, and as a direct result of its experience with GIFT, Foundation North made three submissions to government, on the Auckland Regional Parks Management Plan, on the Climate Change Commission and on the Government's Response to Sea Change. Links to these can be found in the [GIFT Year Five report](#) (2022, p33).

Learning/insights

GIFT demonstrates that supporting multiple advocacy approaches and consciously building a connected community of changemakers focused on similar goals are critical roles for philanthropy.

GIFT did not set specific outcomes for its funding, other than the holistic and broad goal of restoring mauri. This encouraged people to engage with the term mauri and through this with te ao Māori. GIFT supported this through resourcing collective wānanga for GIFT grantees and partners hosted by Ngāti Whatua on mauri and what it means to restore mauri; and through [educating people on the term mauri](#) and mātauranga Māori.

In particular, GIFT highlights the power of centring the indigenous worldview of Aotearoa and blending this Māori knowledge system with mainstream Western thinking, to get the best of both.

GIFT has also shown that change through advocacy can take decades of hard slog that can be rewarded or set back overnight. The road is often challenging and unpredictable and there are no guarantees, and everything is worth trying.