Stopping New Zealand from becoming a parking lot

Roseann O’Hare was on holiday with her family in Seoul, South Korea when she suddenly began thinking about the 70’s hit song Big Yellow Taxi.

As they drove through the city to their hotel, Roseann was struck by the sight of one concrete building after another. “It was so different from home,” says the native of New Zealand. “I couldn’t stop thinking of Joni Mitchell’s song with its lyrics, ‘they paved paradise and put up a parking lot.’”

Roseann’s ancestry is Scottish plus indigenous Māori, the first people to arrive in New Zealand from Polynesia. “We think of ourselves as kaitiakitanga, custodians of the land. We nurture the environment, so I didn’t want to see the same thing happen in my country that I saw in Seoul. I didn’t want our beautiful land with its rich soil to become a big parking lot.”

When she got home, Roseann decided to get involved and start educating people for positive change, eventually becoming the Australian and New Zealand Sustainability Lead for Microsoft, where she works as an Account Delivery Executive.

“Watercress in our streams is harder to find because of pollution and we’re starting to see fewer and fewer shellfish,” says Roseann, “so we’re trying to instill in those new to our country a culture of take only what you need. Leave something for others to collect and enjoy.”

Local tribes have petitioned the government to implement what the Māori culture calls rāhui, which restricts access to certain areas so they can regenerate.

To help influence those decision makers, Microsoft’s Sustainability team began a project called He Korero Whenua (Stories of the Land).

“One of the things missing from our environmental data was the voice of the indigenous people,” explains Roseann, “so we began collecting their stories through videos and photos to help officials understand the impact their decisions have on those who use the land.”
Her efforts to educate also extend into helping people become conscious consumers by thinking about how they spend their money and what they spend it on.

“Can I buy this second hand rather than new? Where has it traveled from to get to me? Could I buy it locally instead to reduce carbon emissions? Those are the things people must begin thinking about to help protect our environment.”

To hear more of Roseann’s story – including some amazing things in the works to help people figure out what can be recycled – tune in to the latest Powered By The People podcast hosted by Zach Xu.