rocking on

Simple, effective and fun – meet the painted rock treasure hunt phenomenon.

Looking for a colourful, fun, community-minded, slightly retro alternative to screen time? It's Palmy Rocks – a colourful and creative type of treasure hunt.

Participants paint rocks then hide them in parks around town for others to find. When you find a rock, you can keep it, leave it or hide it in a new place for someone else to find. It encourages people to not only get creative but to get off the sofa and explore the outdoors. Families might spend an hour or two visiting parks and reserves they've never been to before, looking for rocks to collect. Or hiding their own.

Heather Knox has been behind several community initiatives to encourage families to make use of Palmerston North's numerous free outdoor opportunities. She began Palmy Rocks in mid-2016, inspired by a similar initiative in America.

It's gone viral. What started as a small group is now a Facebook page with more than 7600 members. There are now at least 60 other rocks groups throughout New Zealand as well as in Australia and the UK.

Painting collectives include daycares, schools, retirement homes and special needs groups. Businesses have come on-board, offering prizes when finders hand in branded rocks. Many thousands of rocks have been painted using Resene testpots.

Heather has been recognised for her community work including a prestigious International Play Association Right to Play Programme Award last year.

One of the group's more prolific rock painters is Bronwyn Bateman. She started painting rocks with her children and when she joined the Manawatu-based charitable Kind Hearts Movement's Birthday Challenge, she pledged to provide free painted rocks until her 40th birthday mid last year. She received orders from throughout New Zealand – up to 90 in one week.

Says Bronwyn: "So far I have sent rocks all over the country. My furthest travelled rock was a fire truck rock that featured on the top table at the wedding of two firefighters in Rarotonga. Many people comment that they could never afford to purchase an original hand-painted artwork but that is how they view my rocks."

"Painting on rocks has allowed me to loosen up. Rocks are freely available so I can experiment with different techniques and styles without any financial risk. Knowing that the Palmy Rocks are to be released into a public park means I don't have to worry about the result – the aim is to share art and kindness, not achieve gallery standard perfection. Aside from the random requests that I receive each day, I paint whatever I feel like or whatever my children request. I am often led by the shape of the rock in front of me."

Heather agrees with the adaptability aspect: "You can paint what you like on them. We painted yellow rocks for the suicide prevention campaign, gumboot rocks for the rural games, bike rocks for the opening of a bike park, and people have painted superhero rocks for the Keep New Zealand Beautiful litter pick-ups, and cherry blossoms for the spring festival." There have been thousands of rocks painted for all sorts of community events.

The Palmy Rocks group celebrated its first birthday with an exhibition of rock photographs, numbering about 18,000, and last November encouraged people to bring their rocks (nearly 6000 of them) to form a giant koru in The Square in Palmerston North.

Says Heather: "I honestly didn't think it would last this long. There's something about them - the weight of them, the feel of them. There's something happy about them." H

See www.facebook.com/groups/PalmyRocks

pictures Brendan Lodge

Above: Palmy Rocks founder Heather Knox and rock painter Bronwyn Bateman.

Below: A selection of rocks painted with Resene testpots.

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