



Why bold leadership needs boring foundations

Forest & Bird Centennial Conference: 100 years of conservation

Te Papa, Wellington, 29 July 2023

Tēnei te mihi ki ngā tōtara o te ao hei tiaki i te taiao, kei te whawhai tonu.

I begin by acknowledging the countless Forest & Bird leaders and members – the tōtara of our environmental movement – who have been and are still fighting for the environment. We are all indebted to you.

It is a great privilege to be asked to speak at this centennial conference. Wellington is not my home – that's Ngāruawāhia and it takes something quite out of the ordinary to keep me here on a Saturday. Your organisation is indeed quite out of the ordinary so here I am.

Your history is in many ways the history of environmentalism in New Zealand. You have been a needed thorn in the side of governments from the beginning. The beginning began, as is so often the case, with a deeply concerned individual who decided not to sit back and put up with governments failing to deliver.

In the 1890s some offshore islands including Kāpiti were set aside as sanctuaries for native birds. But little was done to protect the birds that were supposed to live there.¹

Captain Ernest (Val) Sanderson, a businessman who lived in Paekākāriki, was greatly perturbed when he visited the Kāpiti Island reserve in 1922. He had some years earlier written to the Department of Internal Affairs requesting proper care: the extermination of feral cats and goats on the island, the extermination of rabbits on an adjacent island, and the fencing of Māori land. On his 1922 visit he found the forest bare, 5,000 sheep and goats roaming free, and in three days only saw one kererū and three tūi.²

A former Prime Minister, Sir Thomas Mackenzie, encouraged Sanderson to found a society to campaign for the protection of native birds. With the help of advertisements and articles in the press, Sanderson held a successful public meeting in Wellington on 28 March 1923, chaired by Mackenzie. At that meeting the New Zealand Native Bird Protection Society was formed.

The initial president was Mackenzie; the three vice presidents were a newspaper proprietor, Sir George Fenwick, an educationalist Joseph Pentland Firth, and a farmer and conservationist, Herbert Guthrie-Smith (the author of *Tutira: the story of a New Zealand sheep station*). Their backgrounds helped shape the way Forest & Bird has gone about its business ever since. At every stage of the society's history it has successfully weaved together four strands:

¹ Dalmer, N., 1983. Birds, forests and natural features of New Zealand. Levin: N.E. Dalmer.

² Dalmer, 1983.

- lobbying and advocacy
- communication to the wider public
- education and outreach to young people
- networking to bring together scientists and locals to share personal experiences of environmental change.

The society was there during the 1950s when significant extensions to national parks and reserves were made, most notably for Forest & Bird's advocacy, the Waipoua Kauri Forest Sanctuary.

The society was there in the very early 1960s when John Salmon published *Heritage destroyed: The crisis in scenery preservation in New Zealand* and took aim at the environmental vandalism of government agencies damming and drilling the length of the country. His book was hugely influential for me – I can still see the faded cover of the copy in my school library from which I developed a deep sense of loss at never having seen the Wairakei Geyser Valley or Orakei Korako in their hey days.

The society was there in the early 1970s for the Manapouri campaign and again in the 1980s when Alan Mark, Alan Edmonds, John Morton, Gerry McSweeney and many others battled to secure West Coast parks, including Te Wāhipounamu, the South West New Zealand Heritage Park. And it was there again to oppose the damming of the Mōkihinui River and see the catchment instead become a part of the Kahurangi National Park.

It's the outreach to people that is for me your special skill. Forest & Bird has never lost contact with *people* and *places*. Whether you have been campaigning to protect rivers, the high country, marine life or the dawn chorus, Forest & Bird has always been informed by both experts and local people.

Let me say a quick word about the importance of both. I expect I don't need to make the case for expert knowledge. As a former Canadian Minister for the Environment once said to me: "having the science on your side doesn't guarantee you'll win a debate" – (and just look at climate for the proof of that!) – "but I've never won a really important debate without it." Forest & Bird has long understood the importance of mobilising expertise to support its campaigns.

But when it comes to local knowledge, I think the case needs to be made afresh. Because if there has been a change in environmentalism since my youth it has been the professionalisation of environmental advocacy. It's a global phenomenon and has been assisted by a wave of big philanthropic money. It's a good thing. But I worry that as environmental advocacy has become more professionalised it has lost touch with people. Particularly *local* people.

That is reflected in the language of official policy and legislation. There is a tendency to become abstract, cerebral, and intellectual. I was very impressed by the quality and specificity of your submission on the 1,000 pages of law proposed to replace the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA). I worry that this is another case of abstract law reform that will not necessarily be meaningful to local people in local places.

It is fashionable to blame the RMA for all manner of things. Its processes are certainly unwieldy and expensive, but those problems don't explain why we've not made environmental progress. We haven't made environmental progress because those given powers under the Act to make changes have not always used them. The new bills, for all their length, won't change that.

Our submissions shared many points in common. For example, Forest & Bird welcomed the protection of places of national importance but, amongst other things, called for either no exemption or, at the very least, a tighter exemptions regime. I supported you. Exemptions have disappeared. But guess what. They have been rebranded as 'eligible activities'.

What are these 'eligible activities'? Well, there are 19 of them. One is particularly broad: "activities that will provide nationally significant benefits" with the only rider being that their benefits must outweigh any adverse effects. The minister has sweeping power to make rules that allow these activities and I have no doubt that one will come along with some very interesting views about why a place of national importance isn't quite as important as we thought. You'll be back in the trenches.

Let me give you another example of legislation that isn't making it easier to tackle day-to-day problems: the Biosecurity Act 1993. I had to come to grips with the Act recently when I reviewed the threat that weeds pose to our native ecosystems. It's an incredibly complicated Act. And it is built around managing abstract things called 'unwanted organisms'. But it says very little about what unwanted organisms should be prioritised for action.

Part 5 of the Act deals with the management of unwanted organisms that are *already* in New Zealand. Much of Biosecurity New Zealand's effort is, as you will know, expended on keeping things out. But Part 5 is about stuff that has got through the border – intentionally or otherwise – and is now at loose in the country and 'unwanted'. The stated purpose of this part of the Act – the eradication or effective management of harmful organisms – is premised on preventing, reducing or eliminating the adverse effects of these organisms on a wide range of outcomes, including economic wellbeing, the environment and our enjoyment of it.

Outcomes as broad as this can often be in conflict. No guidance is provided on what to prioritise or what to do. And nowhere does the Act require any specific attention being paid to unwanted plants, animals, insects or pathogens – all of which can qualify as being 'unwanted'.

Now the Act does require the minister to provide leadership by preparing and delivering something called 'national policy direction'. But remarkably there is no legislated minimum content for the national policy direction the minister is required to provide. There is no requirement to make mention of weeds or four-legged pests or anything else for that matter. There has only ever been one 'direction' issued, back in 2015, and it covers all unwanted organisms already in New Zealand. It is all about how to administer resources rather than real, live unwanted things. It is perhaps unsurprising then that no national pest management plan has ever been prepared for a terrestrial exotic plant.

Now if you want to know what I proposed, you'll need to read the full report – it's entitled *Space invaders*, which is a reference to the fact that all land use change and most weed control efforts just end up creating new 'weed shaped holes', which then get invaded.³ But more relevant to my message today is something else in the report and that's the very practical and effective *local* role Forest & Bird has played in helping to control some of the weeds that are wreaking havoc in our wild lands *despite* the Biosecurity Act.

Chapter eight of the report tells the story of the Project De-Vine Environmental Trust, which has been successfully waging war against plants like old man's beard and banana passion vine in the Motueka – Golden Bay area butting up against Abel Tasman National Park. The name 'unwanted organism' is a wet bus ticket description for these triffid-like stranglers.

Now the trust only exists because Forest & Bird nurtured it in the early days. A group of concerned but committed locals set themselves up as the Rockland Road Weedbusters under the umbrella of the Golden Bay branch of Forest & Bird. It was Forest & Bird that helped the group get funding from the Department of Conservation and looked after the admin so that the local people could focus on attacking the weeds on the ground.

³ See <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/space-invaders-managing-weeds-that-threaten-native-ecosystems>.

The trust is now well and truly self-sustaining and has been using really sophisticated GIS-based systems to track progress and manage follow-up. You can read more about it in my report and on the trust's website.⁴ But the point I want to make here is that the reason something positive happened is that Forest & Bird did what it has so often done well and that is, brought experience and expertise together alongside local people and local knowledge.

Now I've nearly finished, and you'll be starting to wonder when I'm ever going to get to the title of my talk in the programme: *Why bold leadership needs boring foundations*. The boring foundations bit is what I mean by 'experience and expertise'. I'm referring to the need for painstakingly gathered information to support the case for change. This can't be magicked up out of nowhere.

As you may know, I have presented Parliament with four linked reports about the woeful tale of environmental monitoring, information and research in New Zealand. It's not that nothing is happening. But it is fragmented, full of gaps and lacking a strategic overview. High quality environmental information is just fundamental to your cause – and to mine. In my view, it is a public good that everyone should be able to access without having to spend a fortune trying to fill the gaps or rely on hard-pressed researchers to find in their spare time.

Go back to the Canadian Environment Minister's comment that he'd never won a really important debate without good information. I am quite sure you can lose a debate without good information. And it is happening every year in the annual budget round. Environment or conservation ministers can bid for resources to tackle some of our long-run environmental challenges, but they frequently lack the information to clinch the case.

The title of one of my recent reports sums up the question that an environment minister has to be able to answer in making the case for more resources: *Do we know if we're making a difference?*⁵ We need to be able to show that resources *will* make a difference. And the flip side of that is being able to demonstrate the colossal future liabilities that are mounting if we don't act.

I have recently had a bit to say about the expenditure that has been poured into wilding conifers in recent years. We were told \$100 million would be spent over four years. Modelling by Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research in 2020 estimated that at least \$400 million would be needed to remove all known wilding conifer infestations if action was taken immediately and costs were not deferred into the future. Separately, Ministry for Primary Industries officials estimated that over \$200 million would be required from this year to 2030 to control 95% of known infestations. That would get the problem down to a level that will then have to be maintained forever. As you will all know, once naturalised, weeds are with us forever.

In the first two years, over \$70 million was spent. It now appears that going forward only \$10 million a year is going to be available. So is inevitable that some of that \$70 million will be written off because we can't even maintain what we've started let alone deal to the rest of the problem.

And that's without even knowing what it would cost to put together a coherent, affordable strategy to deal with some of those stranglers I mentioned. I understand that we've thrown the towel in on Chilean flame creeper on Rakiura/Stewart Island. I'm unaware of any evidence that shows that controlling wilding conifers would yield better biodiversity dividends than managing other nasties.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to dealing to wilding conifers. But we'll never make good decisions about priorities if we haven't gathered good information about the state of the environment, about the pressures its under, the trends we're on, and whether we're making a difference.

⁴ See <https://pdvet.org.nz>.

⁵ See <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/environmental-reporting-research-and-investment>.

I have been banging this drum for four years now and so far, virtually nothing has happened. We managed to borrow \$2 billion to 'fund' a reduction in the fuel excise tax on account of cost-of-living worries. And we have literally nothing to show for it. By contrast just \$11.55 million was found earlier this year to make a start on improved state of the environment monitoring and reporting.

I know why – and so do you. No one will wake up tomorrow morning and announce a crisis because some data was lacking, or some research wasn't funded. That's what I mean about this stuff being 'boring'. But meanwhile, these knowledge deficits are matched by ballooning ecological deficits and they will just get more and more expensive. Until they finally become so visible and so concerning that we declare a 'crisis' or an 'emergency'.

This is no way to manage our environmental heritage. You've kept your part of the bargain for a century, linking local people and local knowledge with 'experience and expertise'. But you can only do so much. The best support a government could give Forest & Bird now is to commit to building the knowledge base we need to take good care of these islands.

Excellent, publicly funded environmental information linked up to your local knowledge, local people and kaitiaki, would enable you to make an even more compelling case to mobilise public and private action on behalf of the environment.

I'll say it again: evidence doesn't win arguments. But it's hard to win the arguments that matter without it.

Thank you for everything that you do and enjoy this centennial celebration.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.