



Submission on the next implementation plan for New Zealand's Biodiversity Strategy

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To the Department of Conservation

Submitter details

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Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment was established under the Environment Act 1986. As an independent Officer of Parliament, the Commissioner has broad powers to investigate environmental concerns and is wholly independent of the government of the day. The current Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment is Simon Upton.

Key points

- The draft implementation plan includes a number of worthy initiatives – particularly in terms of prioritisation, monitoring and reporting. While I support these actions, a lack of detail in the discussion document makes it difficult to provide feedback that is as helpful as I would like it to be. It occurs to me that this consultation may have generated more useful feedback if it focused on specifics (e.g. the process to be used to prioritise conservation programmes) rather than generalities (e.g. the merits of prioritisation itself).
- While prioritisation and monitoring and reporting are undoubtedly vital, they will not – in and of themselves – lead to New Zealand's biodiversity targets being met. A number of these targets are highly ambitious. For example, consider the goal that by 2030, “there is no loss of the extent or condition of indigenous land, wetland, freshwater ecosystems, and marine and coastal habitats which have been identified as having high biodiversity value”. Achieving targets such as this will require the key underlying drivers of our biodiversity crisis to be addressed – land use change and introduced pests, in particular. Remarkably, none of the thirteen actions proposed in the discussion document focus directly on either issue.

- Achieving these sorts of targets will also require considerable amounts of money for weed and pest control, for breeding programmes, and to fund the sorts of financial incentives that – in the absence of regulation – will be necessary to stop habitat loss on private land. Given that Budget 2025 included little additional funding for Vote Conservation, it is hard to see where this money will come from. The discussion document places a lot of emphasis on private investment, but it remains to be seen how much money can be raised here. In my view, the idea that New Zealand’s biodiversity targets can be met through the addition of private money alone is unrealistic.

Introduction

This is an important consultation. The thirteen proposed actions will form the basis of the implementation plan for New Zealand's biodiversity targets, agreed to in the context of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. This is intended to succeed the first implementation plan created under the previous government. It is worth noting that, as of June 2024, only 10% of the actions in that plan had been implemented.

Several of the targets in the new implementation plan are highly ambitious. Consider, for example, the target that by 2030, “there is no loss of the extent or condition of indigenous land, wetland, freshwater ecosystems, and marine and coastal habitats which have been identified as having high biodiversity value”, or that by 2030, “the state of indigenous species known to be at risk of extinction stabilises or improves”. Not only are these targets ambitious, but they are predicated on being clear about what is meant by high value, as well knowing which species are at risk of extinction and that it is possible to help them.

Targets such as these will not be achieved under existing policy settings. Rather, success will hinge critically on the effectiveness of the actions set out in the implementation plan.

In that context, I support several of the actions proposed in the discussion document, as set out below. However, I must say up front that I find it highly unlikely that these actions will achieve the targets discussed above. Many of them are necessary, but in their totality they are insufficient. On public land, providing adequate resources to effectively implement the actions is always likely to be a challenge and this plan – while positive – is unlikely to bridge the gap. On private land, the plan overlooks the importance of resource management reform, particularly in terms of how changes in private property rights might influence conservation outcomes. Given the Government’s signalling in this area, the reform looks likely to take the country in the opposite direction from these targets. I will return to these points later.

Please note that I haven’t submitted on the Predator Free 2050 strategy review consultation that is being undertaken in parallel with this consultation. While this aspirational goal is useful for inspiring community and philanthropic action, I consider it secondary to the issue of prioritisation. The questions of which pest species we target and where depend very much on what we are trying to achieve in terms of biodiversity outcomes and how much we are prepared to invest.

Support for some of the actions proposed in the draft implementation plan

I support improved monitoring and reporting, and action 7, in particular, to “agree and implement an achievable set of priority indicators for monitoring progress on national targets, monitoring the effectiveness of interventions, and meeting statutory and international reporting requirements”. This action aligns well with a series of recommendations I made on environmental monitoring, including in my 2019 report *Focusing Aotearoa New Zealand’s environmental reporting system*.

I am aware that the Department of Conservation (DOC) and Ministry for the Environment (MfE) have already done a considerable amount of thinking in this area. Critically though, this work needs to move from the conceptual to the operational. New Zealand needs a monitoring system that regularly collects and reports (in one place) data on key biodiversity trends on an ongoing basis. More broadly, biodiversity monitoring and reporting should be part of a federated data system that has the capacity for broader integration and greater accessibility.

I also support action 13, to “establish cross-agency emerging risks capability for domestic biosecurity to horizon scan, share intelligence and support decision-makers in prioritising emerging risk management”. As the discussion document acknowledges, this action builds on a recommendation I made in my 2021 report *Space Invaders: A review of how New Zealand manages weeds that threaten native ecosystems*. While my recommendation was made in the context of weeds, emerging biosecurity risks do not stop there. It is equally applicable to risks across the biodiversity system.

Several baby steps have been made since the publication of my weeds report, including some scientific research and efforts to integrate some information on pests and develop a weeds alert tool. But much more needs to be done. As I suggested to the Environment and Primary Production select committees in 2022, a simple, low-cost place to start would be to assemble a small team of experts. Those experts could come from the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), DOC, the research community and regional councils, to meet quarterly and draw on international, regional council, DOC, and MPI monitoring and surveillance data. But once again, a much-improved national information system is an essential tool to support such collaborative activity.

I also support the actions relating to prioritisation, in particular:

- **Action 1:** to “develop a national picture of our most important biodiversity values and quantify the costs to protect and restore priority species and habitats”, and
- **Action 2:** to “tackle biodiversity loss by agreeing on priority programmes to protect and restore high-priority degraded habitats, recover native species, and develop nature-based solutions for biodiversity and climate change”.

Prioritisation is a critical but inherently challenging task that has been worked on for many years with limited success. It is partly a technical exercise, but inevitably also one that involves value judgements. As a result, prioritisation will never be straightforward, particularly when certain ecosystems and/or species that some deem to be valuable do not make the final cut of a nationally focused optimisation process.

In 2012, the Auditor-General reviewed DOC's performance in terms of prioritising and partnering to manage biodiversity.¹ At the time the Auditor-General noted that there were inherent risks in stopping work on some projects to focus on others, and called for DOC to work with others in a more coordinated and integrated way. A follow-up report in 2016 found limited progress had been made on the 2012 recommendations.²

I am aware of DOC's development and recent implementation of a new bio-planning tool ([BioInvest](#)) that incorporates some past prioritisation information. DOC's investment tool understandably focuses primarily on biodiversity on public land or selected species. A large number of habitats that will meet the definition of high-priority degraded habitats are not located on Crown land. It is unclear how the proposed actions intend to ensure improved biodiversity outcomes for habitats that are poorly represented in the Crown estate. To what extent will they complement or clash with the prioritisation processes undertaken by regional councils?

In addition, the consultation is silent as to what role, if any, Significant Natural Areas (SNAs) created under the National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity (NPS-IB) might play. The NPS-IB is currently suspended, having hardly got out of the starting blocks. Yet the tool was created after years of consultation and multi-stakeholder engagement aimed at creating a way to protect and enhance our indigenous biodiversity on private land.

I say this only to highlight the very challenging nature of "agreeing on priority programmes to address biodiversity loss". I will look forward to hearing more about how DOC proposes to pursue this. Who will be involved and how will the final decisions be made? In the meantime, I think it is worth considering whether this consultation might have been better used to get feedback on the process (or even the priorities themselves) rather than whether prioritisation makes sense.

With those aspects noted, let me turn my attention to several areas of the implementation plan where I think improvements could be made.

Likely effectiveness of the actions proposed

Given the scale of New Zealand's biodiversity challenge, I am unconvinced that some of the actions proposed in the discussion document will make much material difference to biodiversity outcomes in this country. Consider the following:

- **Action 6:** to "increase the protection of biodiversity on private and Māori land by improving the accessibility and coordination of government support and incentives". The core of this proposal is to improve the accessibility of existing support schemes – for example, the QEII National Trust, Ngā Whenua Rāhui, and the Nature Heritage Fund. This would be an excellent idea if a lack of awareness about existing support schemes was a significant barrier to biodiversity protection on private land. My understanding, however, is the opposite: landowner demand for these schemes exceeds available funding. The QEII National Trust provides one example. Earlier this year, it announced it was unable to process new covenants unless funding to replace

¹ Office of the Auditor-General, 2012. DOC: Prioritising and partnering to manage biodiversity.

² Office of the Auditor-General, 2016. Progress in responding to the Auditor-General's recommendations.

its (expiring) Jobs for Nature allocation was made available.³ More recently, as part of the 2025 Budget, the Government announced it was closing the Nature Heritage Fund.

- **Action 11:** to “develop a cross-sector plan to address the most important capability gaps in the biodiversity system”. Again, this would be a good idea if a lack of appropriately trained people was holding back conservation work. As far as I am aware, however, it is not. While the discussion document refers to “appropriate people and skills”, it is silent on what that means or which people or skills may be in short supply.
- **Action 5:** to “increase private investment in biodiversity by supporting business sector demand and system integrity, including private sector nature-based financial disclosures, reporting and investment”. I have little doubt that a lack of information makes it difficult for investors to factor the biodiversity side effects of economic activity into their investment decisions. The question I have – given the importance of biodiversity found on private land – is whether the voluntary solution proposed in the discussion document will be enough to achieve the targets in this plan.

My main concern with each of the above actions is that at best they will be insufficient to achieve the targets. At worst they risk diverting attention and resources away from those actions that could really make a difference to biodiversity outcomes in New Zealand.

I suspect few would disagree with the idea that land use change (and its downstream impacts in freshwater, coastal and marine environments) and the introduction of foreign animals are at the heart of New Zealand’s biodiversity challenge. Despite that, and with the exception of action 2 “identify priority programmes” mentioned above, the discussion document somehow manages to skirt around these issues.

In the case of introduced animals, that may partly reflect the fact that the Predator Free 2050 strategy is being consulted on separately. If so, the question remains as to why the approach adopted there is not being integrated into the implementation plan itself. Even if it were, it is questionable what impact Predator Free 2050 would have on browsing pressure given the lack of focus on pigs, goats and deer.

The lack of any explicit actions relating to land use change is harder to explain. While it is easy to think of land use change in New Zealand as a purely historic phenomenon, there is little doubt it is ongoing. Data published by Stats NZ indicates that indigenous land cover decreased by 12,869 hectares between 2012 and 2018, presumably mostly as a result of decisions made by private landowners about how they use their land.⁴ The Government’s recent stalling of the mapping and protection of Significant Natural Areas was based on the idea that landowners should be incentivised – not compelled – to protect biodiversity on private land. This messaging has been reinforced by the signals around resource management reform and the Regulatory Standards Bill: that private landowners have the right to do what they want on their land and anything restraining them should result in compensation.

If this is indeed the Government’s position, then achieving the targets in this plan would appear to be impossible given the importance of private land to the nation’s biodiversity and the absence of incentives. To achieve them would require a step change in funding, in order to compensate landowners for not destroying significant biodiversity on their land.

³ Walker, R. 2025. QEII covenants set to dry up without funding boost.

<https://www.waikatotimes.co.nz/environment/360569755/qeii-covenants-set-dry-without-funding-boost>

⁴ Stats NZ, 2021. Indigenous land cover. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/indicators/indigenous-land-cover/>

The Government is making no financial provision to make any compensation. And no evidence has been adduced that a voluntary private market will generate anywhere near the resources needed to provide compensation.

This consultation represented a golden opportunity for the Government to spell out how such a system might work in practice: who pays, what sorts of biodiversity are eligible, etc. It is disappointing not to see any mention whatsoever of the NPS-IB review or wider resource management reform in this discussion document or indeed how the Government sees these policy areas interacting.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that none of the actions proposed in the discussion document relate to what – in my view – are the two most important objectives in the Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy: that ecosystems and species are protected, restored, resilient and connected from mountain tops to ocean depths, and that natural resources are managed sustainably. Taken at face value, this seems to suggest that the department believes that no additional work is required to achieve these goals.

Changes to conservation funding/investment

Several of the actions proposed in the discussion document focus on diversifying the funding sources on which conservation work relies. Two additional funding sources are proposed: private investment and revenues resulting from tourism on public conservation lands.

This seems like a sensible idea. There is certainly no shortage of worthy conservation projects that would benefit from additional funding.

However, much will depend on the extent to which existing taxpayer funding is withdrawn as new funding sources become available. The discussion document is unclear on this. In his introduction, the Minister suggests that conservation spend will increase overall, with new revenue “strengthen[ing] conservation efforts”. Elsewhere in the document, references are made to “reducing the reliance on direct funding from rates and taxes” and “broadening the funding base”. If anything, decisions made for Budget 2025 seem more consistent with the latter. My understanding is that DOC is likely to use any new revenue to meet inflationary pressures.

It is certainly not my role to advise the Government on how much funding it should direct to any particular area, or how that money should be raised. But the final version of the implementation plan would benefit from greater clarity on this point. Is the underlying rationale for leveraging a more diverse range of funding sources to increase conservation spend overall, to reduce the reliance on taxpayer and ratepayer funds, or to provide a more stable source of funding overall? I have more to say on the latter below.

Finally, let me offer a few observations on the merits of the alternative funding streams being proposed and put forward a third alternative.

Beginning with private capital. The discussion document proposes “developing a biodiversity prospectus to attract and direct external investment into biodiversity priorities” (action 3). I am sceptical about the magnitude of the funds that can realistically be mobilised here. I would be happy to be proved wrong, but it strikes me that there is a good reason why conservation work (both in New Zealand and overseas) has historically relied so heavily on public money. Namely that the public good characteristics of better

biodiversity outcomes make it very difficult to generate a reliable revenue stream from investments in them. I am aware of a limited set of instances where successful business models have arisen – the wildlife sanctuaries that charge for admission (e.g. Zealandia and the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary) being perhaps the best example. But I am yet to see an example of a business case that monetises the much wider set of external benefits that conservation work generates – things like biodiversity spillovers and water purification. Relying on private investment also means tailoring action to what investors want to fund. Some might be aligned to our national biodiversity priorities, but many won't be. This makes delivering on the Government's priorities difficult, especially if the areas of private investment change year to year.

The discussion document also proposes that additional revenue generated from visitor and concession charging on public conservation land could be directed to conservation activities. I support this sort of approach, having previously recommended that greater use of charging could be used to manage demand – commercial and otherwise – at our most popular natural attractions.⁵ With that said, it is important to highlight the risks of an excessive reliance on user pays for funding conservation work. As we saw during the Global Financial Crisis and Covid-19, tourism demand comes and goes. Exposing our most critical multi-year or multi-decade conservation programmes to the vagaries of the global tourism market is highly risky.

Given that the Government is interested in alternative revenue streams, let me propose a third: polluter pays. A number of the economic activities being undertaken in New Zealand have direct negative side effects for biodiversity. Wilding conifer dispersal from commercial forests immediately comes to mind. So does by-catch from commercial fishing. At present, the sectors involved are not financially responsible for the external effects they create – the costs instead fall to taxpayers and the public more widely. If the Government is serious about generating more money for conservation, why do we shield the businesses that contribute to the problem in the first place?

Finally, I'd like to reinforce my point about environmental information. The previous plan was replaced midway through its implementation, and it is difficult to tell how much progress it made – if any. To prevent this plan meeting the same fate, it should include the means to track progress. This will require an investment in information.



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Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata

⁵ PCE, 2021. Not 100% – but four steps closer to sustainable tourism. <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/not-100-but-four-steps-closer-to-sustainable-tourism/>