

November 2025

Sika Herd of Special Interest

Draft Herd Management Plan



**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

Cover: Kaimanawa Forest Park. *Photo: Department of Conservation*

Sika Herd of Special Interest Draft Herd Management Plan

Crown copyright © November 2025

This document is available at www.doc.govt.nz/sika-hosi-consultation

ISBN: Will be allocated upon approval of the Plan

Published by:

Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai
PB Box 10420, Wellington 6140
New Zealand



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence. In essence, you are free to copy, distribute and adapt the work, as long as you attribute the work to the Crown and abide by the other licence terms. To view a copy of this licence, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0.

Please note that no departmental or governmental emblem, logo or Coat of Arms may be used in any way that infringes any provision of the Flags, Emblems, and Names Protection Act 1981. Use the wording 'Department of Conservation' in your attribution, not the Department of Conservation logo.

Contents

Foreword	3
1 Introduction	4
2 Values and key context.....	8
3 Objectives and strategies	13
4 Compliance, review and enforcement	17
Appendices	18

Foreword

Welcome to the *Sika Herd of Special Interest Draft Herd Management Plan*.

This is the first draft herd management plan prepared in accordance with the Game Animal Council Act 2013 to be publicly notified for submissions. It relates only to the management of sika and the designation of a herd of special interest within the Sika Area of Kaimanawa Forest Park, Kaweka Forest Park and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area.

The Plan seeks to recognise the unique values of these areas and the special place sika have come to have within them. In doing so, the Plan attempts to balance the critically important task of managing these wild spaces so that natural and historic resources are protected, facilitating public recreation and enjoyment of these resources subject to that protection, while considering the day-to-day realities of conservation and wild animal management.

The Plan also acknowledges the connection that Treaty partners and iwi Māori have to these areas and seeks to recognise the significance of the Kaimanawa Mountains and Kaweka Range to many New Zealanders.

This Plan represents the culmination of years of effort by a number of individuals and organisations, including the Central North Island Sika Foundation and the New Zealand Game Animal Council.

I expect there to be a range of benefits from managing sika for hunting purposes. These will be set out in a future Gazette notice should I ultimately decide to designate a Sika Herd of Special Interest. However, it is helpful to briefly comment on expected benefits at this stage in the process.

Of particular importance are the benefits of improved ecological outcomes for indigenous species and ecosystems through targeted population management, regular monitoring and responsible harvest decision making by the hunting community.

Similarly, I expect there to be a range of benefits for hunters, including a higher quality and more sustainable hunting experience and venison yield, due to there being fewer but healthier animals, and an improvement of sika trophy quality over time. By encouraging and enabling greater participation of the sika hunting community and other interested parties in herd management processes, we hope to promote a sense of herd and environmental stewardship and increase voluntary contributions to conservation activity more broadly.

It is my hope there will also be a range of benefits for iwi, hapū and local communities. These include enabling the active involvement of iwi and hapū in sika management activities, increasing our understanding of the impacts sika can have on taonga (treasured) species and mahinga kai (food-gathering) practices, and taking steps towards protecting and restoring culturally significant resources.

Finally, I anticipate that this new approach to sika management will have meaningful economic, social and wellbeing benefits for a range of communities by increasing hunter tourism, support for community and social initiatives, and partnerships between iwi, community groups, businesses and conservation organisations.

If approved, this Plan will provide direction for management of the Sika Herd of Special Interest over the next 5 years.

This is the starting point, and I now invite submissions on this Plan. The submission period closes on Monday 8 December 2025.



Hon James Meager

Minister for Hunting and Fishing

10 November 2025

1 Introduction

A 'herd of special interest' is a herd of game animals within a defined area of public conservation land that the responsible Minister has, in accordance with the Game Animal Council Act 2013, formally designated to be managed for hunting purposes while ensuring that conservation values continue to be protected.

The *Sika Herd of Special Interest Draft Management Plan* (the Plan) has been prepared in accordance with section 19 of the Game Animal Council Act and only becomes effective if the herd of sika (*Cervus nippon*) in the Kaimanawa and Kaweka Forest Parks and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area is designated as a herd of special interest under section 16 of that Act.

Purpose of this Plan

This Plan directs management of the Sika Herd of Special Interest on behalf of the Minister for Hunting and Fishing. It establishes objectives and strategies for the management of sika in the Sika Herd of Special Interest Area (the Sika Area) to achieve the benefits expected to be gained by managing this herd of deer for hunting purposes.

This Plan applies only to sika existing in the Sika Area, as shown in **Appendix 1**.

This Plan allows for responsive and adaptive management, while also providing clarity on intended outcomes. It does not contain the day-to-day details of operational management. However, the objectives and strategies set the framework for operational management, monitoring and reporting.

Application of the Plan and statutory context

This Plan takes effect from the date stated in the New Zealand Gazette notice formally designating the Sika Herd of Special Interest. It continues to apply until formally amended or replaced by the responsible Minister.

The Sika Area covers parts of Kaimanawa Forest Park, Kaweka Forest Park and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area. The Sika Herd of Special Interest designation and this Plan apply only to the Sika Area and the management of sika within it.

The designation and Plan do not apply to wider conservation management activities provided for by the Conservation Act 1987, Wild Animal Control Act 1977 or relevant statutory planning documents. Those Acts and planning documents continue to apply alongside this Plan. For example, they continue to regulate the hunting of pigs and red deer and non-hunting related concessions and authorisations, and guide conservation and other animal management activity, such as predator control.

The Game Animal Council Act is listed in Schedule 1 of the Conservation Act. This means that the Game Animal Council Act must be so interpreted and administered as to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.¹

A glossary of key terms is provided in **Appendix 2**.

Overriding considerations

This Plan has been prepared to be consistent with the overriding considerations identified in the Game Animal Council Act. For this Plan, the relevant overriding considerations are the:

- welfare and management of public conservation land and resources generally;
- *Conservation General Policy 2005*;²
- *Hawke's Bay Conservation Management Strategy 1994*;³
- *Tongariro/Taupo Conservation Management Strategy 2002*;⁴
- *Kaimanawa Forest Park Management Plan 2007*;⁵

¹ Conservation Act 1987, section 4.

² Department of Conservation. 2005. Conservation General Policy. Wellington: Department of Conservation. doc.govt.nz/general-policy

³ Department of Conservation. 1994. Conservation Management Strategy for Hawke's Bay Conservancy 1994–2004. Napier: Department of Conservation. doc.govt.nz/hawkes-bay-cms

⁴ Department of Conservation. 2002. Tongariro/Taupo Conservation Management Strategy 2002–2012. Turangi: Department of Conservation. doc.govt.nz/tongariro-taupo-cms

⁵ Department of Conservation. 2007. Kaimanawa Forest Park Management Plan. Wellington: Department of Conservation. doc.govt.nz/kaimanawa-management-plan

- *Kaweka Forest Park Conservation Management Plan 1991*,⁶ and
- pest management strategies and plans made under the Biosecurity Act 1993.

Key parties and relationships relevant to this Plan

Minister for Hunting and Fishing

The Game Animal Council Act provides a ministerial power to establish herds of special interest, by way of notice, and to manage herds of special interest.

The Minister for Hunting and Fishing is the relevant Minister for the purposes of the Game Animal Council Act, including for the designation of a herd of special interest and development of a related herd management plan. The Minister for Hunting and Fishing has exercised these powers in the making of this Plan and designation of the Sika Herd of Special Interest.

The Minister for Hunting and Fishing may delegate their herd of special interest management powers under the Game Animal Council Act to the New Zealand Game Animal Council (the Game Animal Council), and the Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai (the Department) may carry out functions on behalf of the Minister for Hunting and Fishing.

Treaty partners

Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Whitikaupeka, Ngāti Tamakōpiri, Ahuriri Hapū, Ngāti Hineuru and Heretaunga Tamatea are the tangata whenua with rangatiratanga or mana whenua (tribal authority) over parts of the area covered by this Plan. They are the Crown's Treaty partners under the Treaty of Waitangi, and this Plan acknowledges the obligation on the Crown to give effect to the principles of the Treaty as set out in section 4 of the Conservation Act. The Department often engages with these Treaty partners through the post-settlement governance entities identified below, as those entities are mandated to represent hapū within their takiwā. The relationship between Treaty partners and the Minister of Conservation is the primary relationship with respect to the management of Kaimanawa Forest Park, Kaweka Forest Park and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area.

Treaty partner areas of interest relevant to this Plan

Ngāti Tūwharetoa

The entirety of Kaimanawa Forest Park and the northwestern parts of Kaweka Forest Park. The Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 establishes Te Piringa agreement between the Crown, through the Minister of Conservation and the Director-General of the Department, and Te Kotahitanga o Ngāti Tūwharetoa (being the post-settlement governance entity established through the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Deed of Settlement).

Ahuriri Hapū

The part of Kaimanawa Forest Park near the Ngaruroro River headwaters, particularly around the Ōamaru River and Te Matia Stream, and large areas of Kaweka Forest Park and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area, including around Don Juan peak, Whittle Road and the length of the main Kaweka Range. The Ahuriri Hapū Claims Settlement Act 2021 establishes Te Kawa o Papa between the Crown, through the Minister of Conservation and the Director-General of the Department, and the Trustees of the Mana Ahuriri Trust (being the Ahuriri Hapū post-settlement governance entity established through the Ahuriri Hapū Deed of Settlement).

Ngāti Hineuru

Kaimanawa Forest Park from the Kaipo and Ōamaru Rivers in the eastern Kaimanawa Mountains, and the northern and eastern parts of the Kaweka Range around Te Pukeohikaura, Te Puia and Mangatutu. The Hineuru Claims Settlement Act 2016 establishes Te Kawenata between the Trustees of Te Kōpere o te iwi o Hineuru Trust (being the post-settlement governance entity established through the Hineuru Deed of Settlement), the Minister of Conservation and the Director-General of the Department.

Heretaunga Tamatea

The area around Kuripapango. Other areas of Kaweka Forest Park within the Heretaunga Tamatea area of interest (such as the Kaikomata and Glenross Ranges) are outside the Sika Area and are not directly relevant

⁶ Department of Conservation. 1991. *Kaweka Forest Park Conservation Management Plan* Napier: Department of Conservation. doc.govt.nz/kaweka-management-plan

to this Plan. The Heretaunga Tamatea Claims Settlement Act 2018 between the Trustees of the Heretaunga Tamatea Settlement Trust (being the post-settlement governance entity established through the Heretaunga Tamatea Deed of Settlement) and the Crown is relevant to the management of this area.

Ngāti Whitikaupeka and Ngāti Tamakōpiri

The southern reaches of Kaimanawa Forest Park and southwestern aspects of Kaweka Forest Park. At the time of writing, Ngāti Whitikaupeka and Ngāti Tamakōpiri are working through a Treaty settlement process with the Crown as part of the collective represented by Mōkai Pātea Waitangi Claims Trust.

Other Treaty partner interests and relationships

In many places, the public conservation land subject to this Plan shares a boundary with land owned or managed by entities affiliated with Treaty partners, including land parcels that are protected by Ngā Whenua Rāhui kawenata. Although this adjacent land is not directly subject to the Sika Herd of Special Interest designation, many of the entities who own or manage that land are keenly interested in this Plan.

New Zealand Game Animal Council

The Game Animal Council is a statutory entity established under the Game Animal Council Act.

This Council has a range of functions in relation to game animals, which include deer, tahr, chamois and wild pigs. These functions include advising and making recommendations to the Minister for Hunting and Fishing, raising awareness of the views of the hunting sector, providing information and education, promoting codes of conduct and operating certification schemes, and liaising with hunters, representatives of tangata whenua and organisations to improve hunting opportunities.

The Minister for Hunting and Fishing may delegate powers to manage a herd of special interest to the Game Animal Council. These powers must be exercised for the effective management of the herd, consistent with the management of public conservation land and resources generally, and in accordance with the Game Animal Council Act. Subject to the terms of any delegations, it is anticipated that the Game Animal Council will work closely with the Central North Island Sika Foundation (the Sika Foundation) and the Department to implement this Plan.

Under the Game Animal Council Act, the Game Animal Council also has a function to assess the costs of managing sika as a herd of special interest (and herds of special interest more broadly) and to make recommendations to the Minister for Hunting and Fishing on ways to recover those costs.

Central North Island Sika Foundation

The Sika Foundation was formed in 2015 to engage with the sika hunting community, the Department, the Game Animal Council, tangata whenua and other stakeholders to explore designating a Sika Herd of Special Interest.

Since its inception, the Sika Foundation has sought to better understand the sika herd and educate hunters and the wider community about management regimes that protect the special nature of both the Central North Island and the sika herd.

The objectives of the Sika Foundation are to:⁷

- actively manage the Central North Island sika herd to provide enhanced levels of protection for the forests and grasslands in which these animals live and improved benefits to hunters;
- advance a management regime that involves a collaborative partnership between recreational sika hunters, the Game Animal Council, the Department, local iwi, interested landowners and other stakeholders;
- achieve and maintain consistent, appropriate harvest levels of healthy sika through improved coordination of recreational sika hunting and other management actions, as required; and
- increase the understanding by recreational sika hunters and the wider community of the sika herd, its value and management through better information and education.

In early 2025, the Sika Foundation proposed that the Minister for Hunting and Fishing initiate a process to consider designating sika as a herd of special interest under the Game Animal Council Act. The Sika Foundation will likely be engaged to undertake many aspects of the day-to-day implementation and delivery of this Plan, including animal management and control, hunter management, and educational initiatives.

⁷ The constitution of the Sika Foundation is available at sikafoundation.co.nz/our-objectives.

Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai

The Department is responsible for administering conservation legislation such as the Conservation Act and Wild Animal Control Act. It has a responsibility to promote conservation of New Zealand's natural and historic heritage resources, foster recreation, and allow tourism. The Department also has a responsibility under section 4 of the Conservation Act to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.

The Department administers the Game Animal Council Act in relation to the Sika Herd of Special Interest. On behalf of the Minister for Hunting and Fishing, the Department leads the statutory process to develop herd management plans and ensure that legislative requirements are met. The Department will support implementation of this Plan in accordance with delegations and directions of the Minister for Hunting and Fishing.

2 Values and key context

Natural heritage and conservation values

Kaimanawa Forest Park (77,348 hectares) was established as a land management unit in 1969, most of which is centred on the Kaimanawa Mountains.

The topography of Kaimanawa Forest Park is characterised by:

- four main mountain ranges running northeast to southwest in the south and southwest;
- a complex multi-directional ridge system in the northeast; and
- gently sloping terrace land in the north.

Elevations range from 560 metres above sea level in the north to 1,727 metres above sea level at the summit of Makorako. In summer, this Park can be very hot and dry, while in winter, inhospitable snow and blizzards are common at higher elevations.

Biodiversity in Kaimanawa Forest Park typically comprises montane and alpine species. It is dominated by beech forest and alpine plant communities and animals that are commonly associated with these. It contains a large area of alpine habitat, while smaller areas of podocarp-broadleaf forest occur in the southwest.

Most of the vegetation in Kaimanawa Forest Park, except in the extreme south, was destroyed by the last eruption of the Taupō Volcano in 186 AD. The forest then fully returned but was later reduced in extent, particularly in the south and most of the larger river valleys, by Māori and European fires. Where fires occurred, there is now a mosaic of red tussock grassland, scrub and smaller pockets of beech forest.

The adjoining Kaweka Forest Park (59,000 hectares), which covers most of the Kaweka Range, was gazetted in 1974. Kaweka Forest Conservation Area (1,146 hectares) adjoins Kaweka Forest Park around Don Juan peak and is integrated with Kaweka Forest Park for management purposes. Therefore, the information below regarding Kaweka Forest Park applies equally to Kaweka Forest Conservation Area.

The topography of Kaweka Forest Park is similar to that of Kaimanawa Forest Park, with the main Kaweka Range a dominant feature, running roughly north to south along the Park's eastern flank. A number of other ranges and high points are also prominent, particularly Te Pukeohikarua and the Black Birch and Kaikomata Ranges. The Park is also characterised by numerous stream and river valleys, most notably the Ngaruroro, Tutaekuri, Ngaawapurua/Harkness, Donald and Makino.

Like Kaimanawa Forest Park, Kaweka Forest Park covers a range of elevations, from 213 metres above sea level where the major rivers leave the Park up to the high point of the Kaweka Range at 1,724 metres above sea level. The Park also experiences a dramatic range of weather conditions, from hot and dry periods in the summer through to freezing snowstorms during the winter months.

The area was widely used by Māori as a hunting ground for kiore and birds in the pre- and early European period. In the 1860s, European farmers introduced sheep to the area, using fire to burn off native grasses, native forest and scrub for pasture. In the early 20th century, the spread of rabbits, erosion and the challenging climate led to grazing on the main range being abandoned.

The Kaweka Range is the driest section of the North Island mountain axis, and plant compositions reflect this. Vegetation varies from indigenous forest to alpine grasslands and scrublands. On the eastern flanks, infestations of wilding pines (particularly *Pinus contorta*) are a significant issue.

In both forest parks, vegetation destruction through volcanic activity, man-made fires and erosion was further exacerbated by the introduction of pigs, goats, possums and deer. However, despite the effects of burning, grazing and wild animals, the forest parks still contain a wide range of ecosystems, some of which are ecologically significant. The forest fauna is typical of alpine and beech forest communities, with a diverse range of bird species reflecting the different types of habitats that are present.

Several rare and threatened species have been recorded, including the pekapeka / long-tailed bat, kiwi-nui / North Island brown kiwi, whio / blue duck, kārearea / New Zealand falcon, North Island kākā, koekoeā / long-tailed cuckoo, mātātā / North Island fernbird, toutouwai / North Island robin and kākārīki / parakeets.

Conservation and introduced species

The introduction of red deer, sika, pigs, possums, horses, goats, hares, rabbits, rats, mice, hedgehogs, cats and mustelids to the Kaimanawa Mountains and Kaweka Range has caused significant ecological change over the last century. A key issue is the management of impacts by deer.

Red deer were introduced to the area in 1901, and the population grew steadily. Sika were then liberated in 1905 near the northeastern end of what is now Kaimanawa Forest Park and eventually outcompeted red deer. The range of sika now covers approximately 9,000 square kilometres of the Central North Island, across various land tenures.

Deer have caused palatable understorey species like puahou / five finger and patē / seven finger to be replaced by unpalatable species such as horopito and crown fern within forest habitats in the forest parks. Deer are also compromising canopy replacement at some sites. Research indicates that regeneration is possible where most of a deer population at a site is removed through intensive management, but this is generally slow, location specific and costly to sustain. Plant growth also depends on light and nutrient availability, so competition from deer-avoided species may slow down the recovery process, leading to long-term changes in forest composition.

Biodiversity declines and changes in community composition can reduce ecological resilience, including resilience to the impacts of climate change.

Deer control is expensive, with eradication and the maintenance of deer-free areas costing significantly more than suppression (population reduction) activities over the same area. Therefore, prioritisation is undertaken, and emphasis is placed on controlling deer to protect priority areas and species. Sika management in the Sika Area is complicated by the distribution of sika and the fact that they often move across boundaries between the Sika Area and adjacent land.

Deer management and control in the forest parks has evolved over time. Between 1998 and 2015, the Department led a programme of aerial deer control to manage numbers within Kaweka Forest Park. Known as the Kaweka Mountain Beech Project, this programme aimed to restore and protect tawhairauriki / mountain beech forests in Kaweka Forest Park from the impacts of deer browsing.⁸ It involved monitoring seedling recruitment, growth and mortality across various plots, and assessing the effectiveness of deer control methods such as fencing, aerial hunting and recreational hunting. The project used adaptive management principles and also sought to enhance recreational hunting experiences. Aerial control of deer was the primary method used to support forest regeneration. As part of the programme, analysis and modelling of vegetation monitoring data predicted that aerial deer control during the vulnerable seedling and sapling phases leads to canopy and gap closures in mountain beech forest at most open sites within 40 years. The use of other, less intensive methods in isolation was shown to be significantly less effective, with far longer recovery times.

In 2022, with funding from the Department and support from the Game Animal Council, the Sika Foundation began a new programme of adaptive deer management and research in the forest parks.⁹ This involved professional ground and aerial deer culling operations by specialist operators using thermal imaging equipment to target hinds, and facilitating access for recreational hunters into the 15,000-hectare Remote Experience Zone in Kaimanawa Forest Park.¹⁰ The programme recognised that hind-focused management reduces the reproductive output of the herd and the associated stress on the environment. Between 2022 and 2025, the programme removed over 1,100 deer, and the results informed future habitat management strategies.

⁸ For further information, see: Duncan R, Ruscoe W, Richardson S, Allen R. 2006. Consequence of deer control for Kaweka mountain beech forest dynamics. Napier: Department of Conservation. Landcare Research Contract Report LC0607/021. doc.govt.nz/documents/conservation/threats-and-impacts/animal-pests/kaweka-deer-control.pdf

⁹ Further information is available on the Sika Foundation's website: sikafoundation.co.nz/adaptive-deer-management-plan-2022-2025.

¹⁰ The Kaimanawa Forest Park Remote Experience Zone is shown on Map 1 of the *Kaimanawa Forest Park Management Plan 2007*: doc.govt.nz/kaimanawa-management-plan.

Hunting and recreation values

Sika herd

The sika herd in the Sika Area is part of the only wild herd of sika in the Southern Hemisphere and draws international and domestic hunters to the Central North Island. Sika have unique markings, produce high-quality antlers and are elusive, all of which make them attractive to hunters.

The sika which are now part of the Herd of Special Interest can be linked back to sika gifted by the Duke of Bedford in England to the New Zealand Government. The gifted animals were received by the Tourist and Publicity Department in 1904 and released on Poronui Station on the northern boundary of what is now Kaimanawa Forest Park in January 1905.

Over time, the sika population adapted well to the local conditions and spread widely. From the 1960s, sika became the subject of a range of studies focused on their dispersal, habitat use and potential for hybridisation with other deer species. Throughout the 1970s to 1990s, sika came to increasingly dominate red deer within the Sika Area as a result of their superior physiology and ability to outcompete other species.

At the same time, the popularity of the sika hunting experience continued to grow. In recognition of the sport-hunting potential of the sika herd, the northern part of Kaimanawa Forest Park and eastern part of Kaweka Forest Park were gazetted as recreational hunting areas under the Wild Animal Control Act in 1982 and 1986, respectively. These recreational hunting areas (or RHAs) were intended as places where recreational hunting is the primary means of controlling deer, with management actions to be guided by wild animal control plans issued by the Director-General of the Department. Although only one Kaimanawa wild animal control plan was made, recreational hunting opportunities in the Kaimanawa and Kaweka Ranges remain highly significant to the hunting community.

During the sika rut, large numbers of hunters descend on the Sika Area, and it is not uncommon for hundreds of vehicles to be parked along key access points into the area.

While accessible locations see significant hunting pressure, the more remote parts of the Sika Area are exposed to comparatively little hunter activity. This is particularly the case outside the rut, with the Kaimanawa Remote Experience Zone and harder-to-reach parts of the Kaweka Range often seeing little recreational hunting pressure. In these areas, limited access opportunities affect the contributions recreational hunter activity can make to sika population management.

The sika hunting experience draws people from throughout the North Island and beyond. Sika hunting trade shows and events, hunter tourism, commercial activity, and related social enterprise all contribute to a vibrant and passionate sika hunting community.

Hunting and managing for hunting purposes

Sika have generally been hunted year round in the Sika Area, but the best time to hunt them is widely considered to be between late February and August, but particularly during the autumn roar (mid-March to the end of April), when emboldened stags (male sika) are vocal to attract hinds (female sika), and during spring, when sika feed on new plant growth.

Stags are hunters' preferred target because of their impressive antlers, which can reach between 11-30 inches long and can have 6–8 points.

This Plan sets objectives and strategies for the management of sika within the Sika Area for hunting purposes in a way that is consistent with the overriding considerations outlined in section 1 and in accordance with the Game Animal Council Act. This involves taking an adaptive management approach, with a particular focus on improving habitat health to increase animal quality and enhance the sika hunting experience. It encourages hunters to act as caretakers for the Sika Area (and the environment more broadly) rather than end-use consumers. A herd of special interest designation is the only management tool that specifically provides for the management of game animals for hunting purposes on public conservation land.

Managing the Sika Herd of Special Interest for hunting purposes involves focusing control efforts on sika hinds, which will have both environmental and hunting benefits. Hinds have smaller home ranges than stags, which means that overabundant female groups can cause intense localised impacts. By contrast, stags spend more of their time in alpine areas, tussock grasslands, farm edges and forestry mosaics outside the Kaimanawa and Kaweka beech forests.

The abundance of stags is managed through hunter harvest, as they are the preferred target of recreational hunters. A male-biased population benefits hunters by ensuring that there are sufficient males available for harvest despite a smaller population overall. It also enhances rut hunting experiences, which are considered to be the pinnacle of sika hunting due to the vocal nature of sika stags.

In a male-biased population, multiple males compete for mating rights with the lower proportion of healthy cycling females. This increased mating competition encourages sexual dimorphism, where traits such as a larger body and antler size become more prominent over time. These larger, more dominant stags are more likely to win the right to breed with cycling hinds, allowing them to pass their genes to the next generation, which leads to intergenerational changes in the sika herd that are desirable to hunters.

Maintaining the sika population at low levels reduces the environmental impacts on flora, leading to an increased availability and diversity of preferential browse plants. This, in turn, improves the health of sika, which increases fawn survival, body size, body fat content and antler growth, leading to an improved quality and quantity of venison and antlers.

Improved habitat health also contributes to an enhanced sika hunting experience. Being immersed in a thriving environment with a diversity of palatable species in the browse tier, hearing kiwi and ruru/moreporks calling at night, observing whio in the rivers, and seeing flocks of kākā and kererū in the canopy all enhance the hunting experience.

The ongoing management of deer populations will also reduce deer-induced impacts on some non-canopy palatable species within the forest parks. Even a low-density sika population is likely to affect the regeneration of highly preferred palatable species in deer-accessible sites, but less-preferred palatable species will benefit from the sika population being maintained well below the maximum sustainable yield. Highly preferred palatable species can be found throughout the forest parks in locations that are inaccessible to deer, such as on stream banks, bluff systems, and stumps and beech buttresses in windfall areas, as well as on other plants as epiphytes.

Adoption of the Sika Herd of Special Interest management approach is intended to encourage collective and concerted action for sika management and the conservation of indigenous flora and fauna in Kaimanawa Forest Park, Kaweka Forest Park and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area generally. It seeks to do this by recognising and providing for a range of values, conservation outcomes, communities and recreational activities, and by building on recent collaborative efforts between the Sika Foundation, the Department and others to improve sika management. This, in turn, is expected to expand the number of people contributing to conservation efforts more broadly.

Monitoring, research and reporting to support management

Monitoring is an important aspect of herd management, as it provides information that allows the effectiveness of management actions to be evaluated and the objectives for managing sika for hunting purposes to be met. A range of methods and tools are available to be used and adapted annually to ensure that the most appropriate method is being implemented to build on the data already collected and within the timeframe in which the information is needed.

Research will allow the effectiveness of management to be improved and support the objectives and strategies for managing sika for hunting purposes being met.

Reporting on herd management activities shows progress in meeting the objectives and strategies. This provides transparency and accountability to Treaty partners, stakeholders and members of the public who are interested in the management of the Sika Herd of Special Interest. Regular reporting will also support an efficient and effective plan review process.

Culture, heritage, community and stewardship values

There are a range of views on sika and how they should be managed. Some see sika as an introduced species and so think that the animals should be removed. Others seek to realise the value of the herd as a part of the contemporary cultural and community context of the Central North Island. Although perspectives on the animals differ, there is a shared desire to see improved management of the Sika Area. This reflects the significant cultural, heritage and stewardship values associated with this area.

Tangata whenua have a long-standing and profound connection with the Sika Area through concepts including tūrangawaewae (a place to stand or place of belonging) and whakapapa (genealogical lineage). These connections can transcend both the physical and spiritual worlds. Many tangata whenua are deeply

concerned about the degraded state of the ngahere (forest) and the threats introduced species pose to taonga species, traditional practices and indigenous biodiversity, as well as being able to meaningfully exercise kaitiakitanga (guardianship) and contribute to improving outcomes.

The Sika Area also has a long history of European influence and activity. A number of significant heritage features from the early European period remain, including the Iron Whare musterer's hut made from vertical slab tōtara and dating back to the 1870s, and the Armed Constabulary Stockade near Tarawera.

More recently, parts of Kaweka and Kaimanawa Forest Parks within the Sika Area have become a focal point for hunters and trampers, with many travelling from around the North Island to enjoy the rugged terrain, unique flora and fauna, and extensive network of backcountry huts and tracks here. The relatively accessible nature of the forest parks, particularly from Littles Clearing and Kuripapango, as well as the Lotkow, Makahu, Clements Mill and Kaimanawa Road ends, contributes to their popularity.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Kaimanawa Remote Experience Zone in the southeast of Kaimanawa Forest Park is relatively difficult to access and prized by a range of park users for its relatively untouched nature and provision of one of only a few wilderness-like experiences in the North Island.

Many of the rivers within the Sika Area are popular with anglers, with the brown trout fishery being a highly sought-after experience. These same rivers and waterways are also popular with paddlers, who enjoy rafting and kayaking in many places within Kaimanawa and Kaweka Forest Parks.

Throughout the same area, a range of community conservation and stewardship initiatives are undertaken by several groups, including the Sika Foundation. These efforts focus on predator trapping to support native bird species – particularly whio, North Island brown kiwi and short-tailed bats. A range of groups are also increasingly interested in and contributing to efforts to maintain recreation infrastructure, particularly the network of huts and bivies located throughout the Sika Area. Given its accessibility, the area is also popular with outdoor recreation, school and other groups. Concessionaire activity within the Sika Area is focused on outdoor recreation and education, research, and infrastructure.

3 Objectives and strategies

This section sets out the approach to be taken for managing the Sika Herd of Special Interest to ensure that the objectives for managing sika for hunting purposes are met.

Objectives

Objective	Description
1	Sika are managed in a manner that allows for the maintenance of forest ecosystem processes, including canopy regeneration, and protects threatened species and their habitats.
2	The sika hunting experience is enhanced while contributing to overall management and regeneration of the Sika Area.
3	Seek to generate in kind support, and revenue through partnerships and sponsorships, to contribute to the cost of delivering this Plan.
4	Engage the hunting community in the management of sika and the Sika Area so the community provide support for local conservation and social initiatives.
5	Relationships between Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Whitikaupeka, Ngāti Tamakōpiri, Mana Ahuriri Trust, Hineuru Iwi Trust, Tamatea Pōkai Whenua, the Department, the Game Animal Council and the Sika Foundation are strengthened, and opportunities for tangata whenua to be involved and participate in the management of sika are increased.
6	Knowledge and understanding of the dynamics between sika and indigenous species and ecosystems are improved.
7	Monitoring enables adaptive management and demonstrates whether the management of sika is achieving the objectives of this Plan.
8	Research supports and enhances the management of sika and the Sika Area.
9	Public reporting provides information on whether the Plan is achieving the Objectives.

Strategies

Strategy	Description
1	Use a range of tools to manage the Sika Herd of Special Interest and improve the hunting experience.
<i>General</i>	
1.1	Set and review annual sika management targets to manage populations in a way that aligns with the objectives and strategies of this Plan.
1.2	Coordinate and manage recreational hunting, herd management hunts, and professional control operations and harvest activity to selectively remove sika in a way that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) prioritises areas for population control; b) protects and enhances the hunting experience during the sika rut; and c) achieves a male-biased population, with a higher proportion of older males.
1.3	Apply other management options if recreational hunting is insufficient to maintain a sika population that achieves the ecological objectives of this Plan.
<i>General recreational hunting</i>	
1.4	Operate a hunting authorisation system for hunting sika within the Sika Area, and require hunters to obtain an authorisation and adhere to its conditions.
1.5	Specify hunting conditions by notice in the Gazette, including conditions relating to the periods and times when sika may be hunted. ¹¹
1.6	Allow open hunting area access to Sika Herd of Special Interest hunting opportunities unless this would pose substantial safety risks, the level of demand is reducing hunter satisfaction or restriction is otherwise required for management purposes.

¹¹ Game Animal Council Act 2013, section 18(2).

Strategy	Description
1.7	Explore opportunities to establish a hunter ballot or booking system in the Kaimanawa Remote Experience Zone during the sika rut period.
1.8	Work with relevant groups and organisations to manage recreational hunting access for short periods outside the sika rut where necessary to support population management activities.
1.9	Encourage hunters to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) target the removal of hinds to reduce the population of breeding females; and b) selectively remove sika to increase the proportion of older males in the herd.
Herd management hunts	
1.10	Provide opportunities for the hunting community and other interested parties to contribute to and participate in herd management hunts.
1.11	Focus herd management hunts on opportunities to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) facilitate access to parts of the Sika Area where access is difficult, recreational hunter activity is limited or sika abundance is particularly high; b) increase awareness in the hunting community of the impacts of sika on these parts of the Sika Area; and c) contribute to animal control activities.
1.12	Seek opportunities to recover venison from sika removed as part of herd management hunts where efficiency and effectiveness are not compromised.
Professional control operations	
1.13	Undertake professional control operations where recreational hunting and herd management hunts are insufficient to maintain a sika population that achieves the objectives of this Plan.
1.14	Seek opportunities to recover venison from sika removed as part of professional control operations where efficiency and effectiveness are not compromised.
2 Undertake monitoring and research to support management and decision making.	
Monitoring	
2.1	Develop and implement a monitoring programme that includes the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Ecological monitoring, which may include, but is not limited to, the following methods and tools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Seedling ratio index ii. Permanent 20 x 20 metre plots iii. Alpine deer browse iv. Faecal pellet counts b) Exploring the use of new monitoring methods, tools and technologies, and seeking the views of tangata whenua, the Tongariro Taupō Conservation Board, the East Coast Hawke's Bay Conservation Board and the Department prior to their use in the Sika Area. c) Monitoring the hunter harvest, including the hunter contribution to control targets and the age and length of jaws from animals harvested to determine the herd age structure, genetic integrity and growth rates. d) Monitoring voluntary and partnership contributions to the key management objectives. e) Monitoring hunter satisfaction with the management of the Sika Herd of Special Interest, including, but not limited to, the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. quality of sika available; and ii. authorisations processes, including the information available to hunters prior to and after their hunting trips.
2.2	Undertake ecological monitoring in accordance with relevant standards used or set by the Department.
2.3	Include the results from all monitoring in an annual report (see strategy 5 below).

Strategy	Description
Research	
2.4	Seek opportunities to undertake or support research relevant to the management of sika and/or their effects within the Sika Area.
2.5	Explore opportunities with tangata whenua to incorporate mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) in management and research activities, and increase understanding of the impact of sika on taonga species.
2.6	Undertake relevant research, which may relate to, but is not limited to, the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) spread, behaviours and effects of sika on indigenous flora, and how this compares with that of other deer species; b) movement patterns and habitat utilisation of sika within the Sika Area; and c) changes in the health and composition of the sika herd over time.
2.7	Address relevant research findings in an annual report.
3 Work closely with iwi and hapū to manage sika.	
3.1	Seek to establish a forum or rūpū (group) with relevant iwi and hapū to enable the sharing of perspectives and enhance opportunities for iwi and hapū to be involved in management of the Sika Herd of Special Interest.
3.2	Seek to create opportunities for iwi and hapū to be actively involved in delivering herd management activities.
3.3	Engage with Treaty partners when developing partnerships with others to ensure that the interests and values of tangata whenua in relation to such partnerships are considered.
3.4	Work with Treaty partners when developing hunter authorisation, education and promotional materials to ensure that these appropriately recognise and provide for their values and cultural information.
4 Foster partnerships and community stewardship.	
Partnerships	
4.1	Seek to develop partnerships and commercial opportunities associated with sika to help meet the costs of implementing this Plan.
4.2	Actively promote the Sika Herd of Special Interest hunting experience to domestic and international markets.
Stewardship	
4.3	Provide educational opportunities for communities, hunters and interested parties about the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) contribution that managing sika for hunting purposes makes to improving forest and herd health; b) impacts of sika on the environment and conservation values, and what the objectives of this Plan are working to achieve; c) selection of sika when hunting to improve conservation values, herd health and recreational outcomes; d) Sika Herd of Special Interest hunting experience; e) visitor requirements and behaviours on public conservation land; and f) requirements for hunting safely.
4.4	Provide a range of opportunities for the hunting community and other interested parties to actively contribute to sika herd management and control activities.
4.5	Work with the local communities in the Central North Island to develop opportunities to participate in activities such as open days, hunter training and education days.
4.6	Work with the professional and recreational hunting communities to facilitate and support social initiatives, such as local foodbanks and charities.
4.7	Seek to provide a range of opportunities for the hunting community and other interested parties to contribute to wider conservation initiatives within the Sika Area, such as predator trapping and control programmes and the maintenance of public recreation infrastructure.

Strategy	Description
4.8	Seek opportunities to work with the owners and managers of private land adjoining Kaweka Forest Park, Kaimanawa Forest Park and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area to improve the management of sika beyond the Sika Area.
5	Undertake annual planning and reporting on management activities.
Annual operational plan	
5.1	<p>Develop an annual operational plan for the activities planned for the coming year to help achieve the objectives. This operational plan should include, but is not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) setting operational areas and annual control targets, including the sex ratio of sika and specific locations within the Sika Area for control; b) outlining methods to achieve targets, such as recreational hunting, herd management hunts and professional control operations; c) providing opportunities for the carcass recovery of venison associated with control operations; d) setting the annual sika hunting process, including the issuing of authorisations and any key dates; e) identifying any other planned work or initiatives; and f) identifying parties or entities responsible for management activities and related timeframes.
Annual report	
5.2	<p>Prepare and publish an annual report detailing the activities undertaken in the previous year, including, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) overall herd management, including the number of sika controlled, the control method(s) used, the areas where control occurred and the control effort; b) results and outcomes of monitoring activities, such as ecological monitoring and hunter participation and satisfaction evaluations; c) key metrics of hunter management, such as the number of authorisations issued and available information on the ages, locations, condition and quality of the sika taken; d) sponsorships and commercial partnerships; e) hunter training, education and community initiatives; f) wider conservation activities supported; and g) opportunities to improve management going forward.
5.3	<p>Include financial reporting in the annual report in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) sika control and other conservation activities; b) overall expenditure and contributions by the Department and/or central government to manage the Sika Herd of Special Interest; and c) monitoring.
5.4	Work with the Department when preparing the annual report prior to its finalisation and public release.
5.5	Present the annual report to Te Kotahitanga o Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Whitikaupeka, Ngāti Tamakōpiri, Mana Ahuriri Trust, Hineuru Iwi Trust, Tamatea Pōkai Whenua, the Tongariro Taupō Conservation Board and the East Coast Hawke's Bay Conservation Board, if requested.

4 Compliance, review and enforcement

Plan compliance and review

This Plan binds the Game Animal Council.

It must be reviewed at intervals of not more than 5 years, in accordance with section 19 of the Game Animal Council Act. Unless otherwise directed by the Minister for Hunting and Fishing, plan reviews are to be initiated early in the fourth year of a 5-year plan cycle.

The review will consider annual reports, monitoring data and results, and relevant research as part of an assessment of whether the Plan's objectives and strategies are delivering the benefits expected to be gained by managing the sika herd for hunting purposes. The review will also address the overriding considerations outlined in section 1.

Depending on the review findings, the Minister for Hunting and Fishing may determine that an amendment to this Plan is not required.

Where the Minister for Hunting and Fishing considers that the review findings warrant amendment of this Plan, any such amendments will be made following the process set out in the Game Animal Council Act. This includes the public notification of an amended Plan and an opportunity for interested parties to make submissions.

Sika Herd of Special Interest compliance and enforcement

Schedule 1 of the Game Animal Council Act sets out the compliance and enforcement framework that applies to the Sika Herd of Special Interest (if designated).

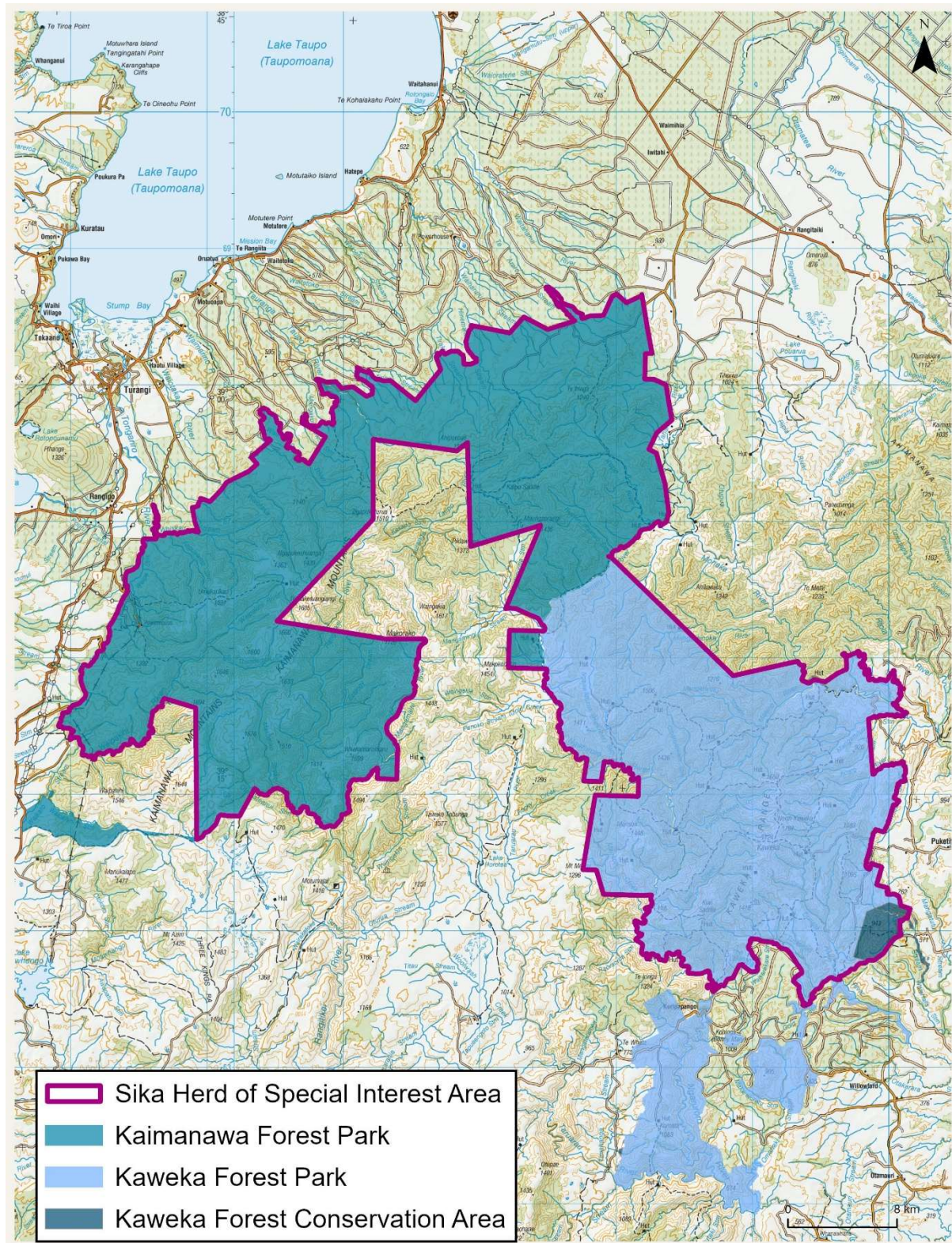
The Director-General of the Department may appoint and remove enforcement officers and honorary enforcement officers. Officers have the power to prevent or stop offending, require personal details, search, stop any activity, and seize any animal, animal product or thing that provides evidence that an offence has been committed.

A person who hunts or kills any animal in a designated area for a herd of special interest without the appropriate authorisation, licence or permit is liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding \$5,000.¹²

¹² Game Animal Council Act 2013, section 30(1).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Maps



Map 1: Sika Herd of Special Interest Area

Appendix 2: Glossary

Authorisation

Collective term for types of approvals (whether permits or otherwise) issued by the Minister for Hunting and Fishing under section 18 of the Game Animal Council Act 2013.

Community

Any individual or group (whether statutory or non-statutory, formal or informal, commercial or non-commercial) with an interest in a particular conservation issue.

Conservation board

An independent body established under section 6L of the Conservation Act 1987. The primary functions and powers of conservation boards are set out in sections 6M and 6N of the Conservation Act and section 30 of the National Parks Act 1980. Their functions include advising the New Zealand Conservation Authority or Director-General of the Department of Conservation on conservation matters of importance in their area. They also have an important conservation advocacy role. The relevant conservation boards for this Plan are the Tongariro Tāupo and East Coast Hawke's Bay Conservation Boards.

Control target

A target number of deer to be removed from the Sika Area via recreational hunting, commercial hunting and professional control operations on an annual basis, as set out in an annual operation plan.

Herd management hunt

Coordinated hunting activity facilitated by an entity empowered to undertake management activities for the Sika Herd of Special Interest, with hunting effort generally being undertaken on a voluntary (non-commercial and non-professional) basis. The main benefits are data collection and hunter education. Herd management hunts can also contribute to managing animal populations in some circumstances.

Herd of special interest

A species of game animal in a specified area of public conservation land that the responsible Minister has, in accordance with the Game Animal Council Act 2013, formally designated to be managed for hunting purposes while ensuring that conservation values continue to be protected.

Indigenous flora

Plants that have established in New Zealand without the assistance of humans, vehicles or aircraft. This includes species that are unique to New Zealand, as well as those that may be found elsewhere in the world.

Minister for Hunting and Fishing

The Minister responsible for the Game Animal Council Act 2013.

Professional control operation

Activities to search for and shoot wild animals as a non-recreational and non-commercial activity specifically to help achieve control targets. Professional control operations generally do not involve recovery of the animals or any parts of the animals. Professional control operations may selectively target sika based on the sex and condition of individual animals.

Recreational hunting

Hunting undertaken by recreationists where there is no commercial gain involved in the activity.

Sika Herd of Special Interest

Sika (*Cervus nippon*) occurring within the Sika Herd of Special Interest Area.

Sika Herd of Special Interest Area (Sika Area)

The area and parts of Kaimanawa Forest Park, Kaweka Forest Park and Kaweka Forest Conservation Area that are subject to the Gazette notice designating the Sika Herd of Special Interest, as shown on the map in Appendix 1.

Sustainable forest canopy

Replacement of the forest canopy within 40 years of natural canopy collapse. Natural canopy collapse refers to the end of the natural life cycle of canopy species (trees) or occasions where environmental factors such as wind, snowstorm damage, or fungal or insect attack cause large areas of canopy species to die.