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Department of Conservation  
Identifying Public Expectations for  
the Management of Iconic  
Species, Places and Local  
Treasures

Research Report

Prepared for  
The Department of Conservation

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# Executive Summary

## Background

The overall objective of this project was to identify whether people believe there are some highly valued species and places, and if so, then what they expect the Department of Conservation (the Department, DOC) to do with regards to managing these. More specifically, this project sought to identify what the public believes is special and/or iconic with regards to places (natural features) and species, why they consider these to be iconic and what they want the Department to do with regards to protecting these within the context of optimising the conservation effort.

## Research approach

This was a qualitative project consisting of 15 focus groups. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for the project due to the highly complex nature of the concepts and phenomena being explored – and also because of the type of results that were being sought. While it was not part of the recruitment criteria, the groups included people with a range of different education backgrounds, employment types (including people either not currently working, not working outside of the home or retired) and household structure (single people, people with no children, families with children of different ages and extended families). The groups were also run in a range of different locations across New Zealand.

## Summary of key findings

The overall finding from this project is that there is widespread awareness that there are many endangered species (including flora, fauna and habitats) in New Zealand – and that the Department of Conservation will have to prioritise its activities with regards to actively protecting these. This is seen to be a result of not only perceived resource constraints but also a result of the number of species that they believe are (likely) to be endangered. They are therefore aware that there are species that are not being actively protected by the Department. Furthermore this project found that there is a general understanding that there are species that will likely and indeed in some cases definitely become extinct. This is seen to be a result of the activities of people, both past (including the introduction of non-native), and present (through our impact on the environment), the level (perceived by many as relatively low) of resources that are available to the Department, the extent of the decline that in some cases has already

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occurred with regards to specific species, and also the difficulty that is involved in protection and recovery. Participants have a high degree of confidence and place a great deal of trust in the Department of Conservation and, overall, are comfortable to defer any decision-making with regards to prioritising conservation activities to the Department as long as that confidence and trust is maintained. Indeed many feel that the Department is the only organisation with the information and expertise to make such decisions.

For the purpose of this summary of key findings, the discussion below is presented based on the four core project research questions, with more detail provided in the main body of the report.

**Do people have an adequate attachment to, or value New Zealand's natural heritage enough to allow them to say what natural features or species should be given priority by the Department (alongside any other priorities determined by other processes)?**

Participants have an attachment to, and place value on New Zealand's natural heritage. There was a high degree of consistency in terms of the *meaning* of natural heritage from the participants' perspective, regardless of age, ethnicity and geographic location. This research found that participants had a shared and common appreciation of the unique nature of this country and the places, spaces, species and flora and fauna found here. Most of the examples of New Zealand's natural heritage that were identified were the same across all fifteen focus groups – and the natural features in particular were not limited to the geographic location of individual groups. North Islanders identified iconic natural features in the South Island and South Islanders identified iconic natural features in the North Island. The species, and flora and fauna identified, such as kiwi, kea, tuatara, giant land snails, weta, tui, kauri, rimu, fern and pohutukawa were consistent across all people taking part in this research.

Despite the value placed on New Zealand's natural features however, participants were not able to (and did not want to) say which natural features or species should be given priority by the Department. Participants have a high level of awareness overall, that not all natural features and species can be actively protected by the Department for the reasons outlined above. For these reasons, alongside the high degree of credibility the Department has, people were of the view that these (prioritisation) decisions need to be made by the Department of Conservation based on their expertise and also on a sound scientific rationale which they believe the Department will already be doing.

Participants were able to identify the *broad types of criteria* they think the Department should take into account:

- The role within an ecosystem of species, flora or fauna in terms of the number of other species (and whether these too are endangered) that depend on its ongoing presence/survival

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- The chance of success in terms of ensuring that a species does not become extinct – and relative to the cost of that protection compared with the cost of protecting other species
  - The degree to which a species can be protected ‘alongside’ other endangered species that are also being actively protected within a specific habitat
  - How unique the species is – both in New Zealand and internationally, and
  - The impact on or role in New Zealanders’ national identity (in terms of specific species being iconic to New Zealanders at a national level).

However, the core finding here was that there is an expectation and desire that the Department make these decisions on their behalf.

#### **What do the public generally expect the Department to do in achieving effective conservation management?**

Participants were of the view that the Department is *not able* to achieve effective conservation management – but rather, that the Department is achieving *the best conservation management that it can* in the context in which it operates, both financially and also with respect to the task that it faces in regards to endangered species. Participants have a clear understanding that not all places, species, flora and fauna can be protected – and that there needs to be trade-offs based around a set of criteria which will optimise conservation outcomes. Participants’ expectation is that the Department will make (and is making) decisions and that it prioritises its activities on the basis of expertise, sound scientific evidence and the overall ‘value’ (including from a national ‘identity’ perspective) of places, species, flora and fauna to New Zealand.

#### **Does the public generally understand the implications of different conservation management actions?**

Participants understand the implications of different conservation management actions at a broad level and when it is explained to them – although this is not something that is a high involvement consideration for them on a day-to-day basis. Participants understand the rationale behind the types of decisions the Department makes, but most importantly they trust that the Department will have considered the implications of the different conservation management actions that they undertake. As long as there is trust in the Department, they will be satisfied that the decisions that are being made are the right ones.

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**Do New Zealanders generally expect to be informed about some priority conservation management activities more than others on the basis that they consider these to be a priority to the public or to them i.e. iconic?**

People said, at least initially, that the Department should engage more with the public to gain public support and assistance with regards to the protection of endangered species. However they then amended this to stating that the Department should only do this if the net impact (for endangered species) is greater than if the Department utilised the resources (that would be utilised in engaging the public) in direct protection programmes. In this case public engagement is a 'nice to have' but not a 'must have' – they would rather the Department actively protected species than communicate what they are doing, or try and engage the public in species protection that would have a lesser conservation outcome than what the Department can achieve itself.

### **Participant differences**

That wide range of group participants, the fact that they were run in a number of different areas within New Zealand and the very high degree of consistency in the key results (both within groups between participants and also across the 15 focus groups) means that the results can be generalised to the wider New Zealand general public with a high degree of confidence. There were no identifiable differences between the key segments of people taking part in this research – either in terms of their understanding of natural heritage, identifying what they believe is iconic (and why) and in their attitudes towards the Department.

In particular, the view of wider New Zealanders was in alignment with the views of tangata whenua, in that, *significant importance and value was placed by all*, on New Zealand's natural heritage (and not by one 'segment' more than any other). The participants across this project had a shared or common appreciation of what makes the New Zealand natural environment unique.

The only small difference between Māori and non-Māori was regarding access to kaimoana (but only among a few and this was more from an historical perspective). Tangata whenua did not feel however that this factor should influence prioritisation and protection activities.

Three members of the final focus group run for this project stated the below.

*“I think conservation is impossible. I think it’s just the Department of Conservation delaying the inevitable, maintaining it, trying to maintain it so I think it’s impossible to conserve everything. That would be an ideal world but obviously it’s very difficult ... that’s the bottom line I think. Retaining what’s left and trying the best you can?”*

In response to the above person, another person then said:

*“Can I say something without being rude? If everyone had that idea where would the country be one day ... we would have nothing one day”*

A third person then joined in:

*“There is this idea of delaying the inevitable – I could not disagree with that more. Is conservation of everything possible? Well definitely not ... you are exactly right (person one) when you say you can’t conserve everything exactly the way it is now ... the inevitable will be the death of the species (humankind)”*

Person two then succinctly stated:

*“Surely then we have to determine what is valuable and what is not valuable”*

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# Project Background and Objectives

The overall objective of this project was to identify whether people believe there are some highly valued species and places, and if so, then what they expect the Department of Conservation (the Department, DOC) to do with regards to managing these. More specifically, this project sought to identify what the public believes is special and/or iconic with regards to places (natural features) and species, why they consider these to be iconic and what they want the Department to do with regards to protecting these within the context of optimising the conservation effort.

The core questions addressed by this project were:

1. Do people have an adequate attachment to, or value New Zealand's natural heritage enough to allow them to say what natural features or species should be given priority by the Department (alongside any other priorities determined by other processes)?
2. What do the public generally expect the Department to do in achieving effective conservation management?
3. Does the public generally understand the implications of different conservation management actions?
4. Do New Zealanders generally expect to be informed about some priority conservation management activities more than others on the basis that they consider these to be a priority to the public or to them i.e. iconic?

# Research Approach

This was a qualitative project consisting of 15 focus groups as follows:

Group	Participants
Group 1	Young people, aged 16-19 years, Auckland
Group 2	Young people, aged 16-19 years, Christchurch
Group 3	Māori, mixed age 25-64, Tauranga/Bay of Plenty
Group 4	Māori, mixed age 25-64, Auckland
Group 5	Māori, aged under 18-24, Auckland
Group 6	Seniors, aged 65+, Auckland
Group 7	Seniors, aged 65+, Nelson
Group 8	Mixed demographics/general public (age, gender, ethnicity), Auckland
Group 9	Mixed demographics/general public (age, gender, ethnicity), Auckland Region
Group 10	Mixed demographics/general public (age, gender, ethnicity), Wellington
Group 11	Mixed demographics/general public (age, gender, ethnicity), Wellington Region
Group 12	Māori, mixed age 25-64, Christchurch Region
Group 13	Mixed demographics/general public (age, gender, ethnicity), Christchurch
Group 14	Mixed demographics/general public (age, gender, ethnicity), Nelson
Group 15	Mixed demographics/general public (age, gender, ethnicity), Tauranga

A total of 135 people took part in this project. Groups were conducted between Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June and Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

As the project was qualitative in nature and subject to budgetary limitations sampling was not based on demographic and/or behavioural criteria with regards to quotas. The wide range of group participants, the fact that the groups were run in a number of different areas within New Zealand and the very high degree of consistency in the key results (both within and across focus groups) means that the results can



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be generalised to the wider New Zealand general public with a high degree of confidence. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for the project due to the highly complex nature of the concepts and phenomena being explored – and also because of the type of results that were being sought. The main limitation with regards to the qualitative approach taken is that the results cannot be generalised to the wide population in a statistical manner.

## Recruitment of participants

Project invitations were sent out (in tranches) to members of the Fly Buys panel (of over 200,000 New Zealanders) who had previously expressed an interest in taking part in research. Participants were offered a \$100 'token of gratitude' to participate in a focus group as is normal for 'general public' research. Invitations were sent out in tranches so that the focus groups were not over-recruited.

Most of the people taking part had not previously taken part in a focus group. Other than the specific participant criteria outlined in the table above (age, ethnicity and geographic location), the only other specific criteria applied during the recruitment process was to exclude any person who identified themselves as having 'no interest at all' in the environment or environmental issues. Participants in the general groups were selected in order to represent a mix of age and gender – and note that these groups also had some ethnicity mix. Other groups were also mixed in terms of gender.

Overall, participants across the 15 focus groups represented a very good cross-section of New Zealand society. While it was not part of the recruitment criteria, the groups included people with a range of different education backgrounds, employment types (including people either not currently working, not working outside of the home or retired) and household structure (single people, people with no children, families with children of different ages and extended families).

## The research process

Participants were not told who this project was being carried out on behalf of (i.e. the Department of Conservation), only that the topic was broadly to do with the natural environment. The key topic(s) of interest were not introduced to participants at the commencement of the groups – rather, participants were taken through a process which included questions around awareness and understanding of the role and function of the Department of Conservation, understanding how people know about, or get information about the Department and their perceptions of how well the Department of Conservation does its job. Participants were then asked questions around their understanding of natural heritage and what makes something iconic (i.e. iconic in the context of natural heritage and the natural environment).

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From the early part of each group, rather than participants having to be prompted in any detail, the discussion became, to a large extent, self-generating in terms of topics. A key theme here, which impacted on the way in which issues were self-generated within each group, was to do with participants' responses to the question regarding how well the Department is doing. Across all groups, participants said (unprompted) that the Department was doing *as good a job as it could* given the context in which it operates. This context in this respect included the financial context (limited resources) and the environmental context (the size of the Department's job). For this reason, all subsequent topics, including the fact that the Department 'must' need to make decisions based around certain criteria and the fact that not every place, species, flora and fauna can be protected flowed naturally from the initial set of questions.

Throughout the remainder of the groups, only broad prompts were used to steer participants through the flow of conversation. Participants were not provided with any of the criteria the Department uses to make decisions about how they allocate resources. Rather, participants were asked how they thought the Department might make decisions, and they were then asked to identify the criteria that they would apply if they were in the Department's position. In this respect, the key criteria identified by participants were completely unprompted (i.e. there was no prior prompting of these criteria by the group facilitator). Furthermore, when participants were asked to identify the criteria they would apply, each focus group was split into three smaller groups and asked to discuss it among themselves, write it down and then present it back to the wider group. This meant that across the 15 focus groups, there were 45 smaller groups considering these issues. This meant that the process was extremely robust in that 45 *separate* groups considered the issues rather than the topic being discussed openly within each group of 8-10 people – thereby eliminating any 'group-think' issues.

Throughout the group process, as much as possible, self-completion was used before any group-wide discussion took place. For example, people were asked to individually write down what they knew about the Department, their understanding of natural heritage and what they considered to be iconic. The results of this project can be accepted therefore with a high degree of confidence given the robust process that was followed and the consistency of responses across participants within and across groups.

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# Research Findings

## How well do the public understand the role, functions and specific activities of the Department of Conservation?

Everyone taking part in this research had at least *some understanding* of the role and function of the Department of Conservation, although levels of understanding varied from the very basic (a minority of people and often to do with the Department's role in 'looking after' bushland and 'parks') through to the more comprehensive with mentions of specific activities and projects. This latter segment of people (also a minority) often had an interest in a specific area of conservation such as the marine environment or specific species (often birds) and/or a higher involvement interest in conservation and the natural environment in general. The majority of people however were somewhere in between these 'understandings', with a generally good high-level understanding of what the Department does. People that tended towards the higher awareness end of this larger, middle segment were also more likely to be more actively involved in outdoor activities such as tramping, camping and hunting, and for this reason had more exposure to the Department's activities and sometimes also to the Department's people.

***“What I know about the Department is that they invest a lot of time into what I basically call New Zealand, so everything from flora and fauna, through to the actual countryside and even marine as well”***

***“I was thinking don't they run or organise things like the kiwi houses, like the one up in Whangarei?”***

Awareness of the Department's roles and activities did not vary significantly by the different segments of the public taking part in this research (such as age and ethnicity), but did tend to vary *slightly* depending on the extent of their exposure to the natural environment as mentioned above, and also by their proximity to, or the accessibility of the natural environment to them.

The two key roles of the Department identified by the participants were:

1. The Department's role in enabling recreational access to the DOC estate through the provision and maintenance of tracks and various types of accommodation, and
2. The Department's role in the conservation and protection of New Zealand species (including flora and fauna) through monitoring, active protection such as breeding programmes, and also pest

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management. In terms of pest management, most people were familiar with the types of pests impacting on New Zealand's natural environment, with the most commonly mentioned pests being possums, rats and stoats. There were fewer mentions of other types of threats such as goats, deer and rabbits.

Overall most people were far more aware of the Department's role in land-based habitats rather than in marine habitats, and particularly in the saltwater environment.

One of the most significant areas of confusion for the Auckland participants was the Department's role in managing and maintaining parkland – in this respect there was considerable confusion over which land was Department land and which was Council land. Many Auckland participants mentioned the Department's role in managing and maintaining regional parks for example, including the Waitakere Ranges.

Despite relatively limited mentions of specific projects, the participants had a good level of understanding of the broad types of work that the Department is involved in, and across all groups there was unanimous agreement that the Department's role is of great significance and importance to New Zealand, New Zealanders and to future generations. The Department was also seen as playing a key role in New Zealand's reputation as a clean, green country, and in particular with respect to its role in ensuring New Zealand continues to be a desirable destination for international tourists. In terms of being clean and green, there was a general view that New Zealand is not as clean and green as it used to be but that relative to other countries we are doing well.

**“I gather that they are not just preserving it for New Zealanders. It's for wider tourism as well so that people can come from around the world and see our natural environment”**

Many people talked about the importance of New Zealand's natural environment from an economic 'export' perspective – with regards to tourism and less directly with regards to New Zealand being able to produce and export primary products that have a positive environmental image and reputation. Some people also identified the role of a species in 'producing' this economic benefit, as a criteria that should be considered. To a lesser extent direct economic benefit was also mentioned from the likes of maintaining fisheries.

Somewhat contrary to the above, some people also mentioned the situation where conservation can also be/is a barrier to economic activity through the limiting or total exclusion of certain economic activities in some areas because of certain conservation related factors. In these instances there are seen to be

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trade-offs that need to be taken into account with regards to the different types of 'benefits' and/or 'costs' that may be associated with the specific economic and conservation activities.

## How do the public 'know of' or hear about the Department?

The two main ways in which the participants know of, or hear about the Department of Conservation were through:

1. The media, and
2. Through seeing DOC signage and occasionally DOC people when out in the natural environment (tramping, camping, walking, hunting). Many of these people mentioned seeing (and valuing) information provided on DOC tracks including educational information about the area, specific trees or flora and fauna, and species.

With respect to the media, there was a general impression that the Department is not *often* in the media but when they are, the exposure can be a mix of positive and negative.

***“The good thing about the Department is that unlike a lot of other government departments at the moment which are getting very bad press, they get a mixture of good and bad, so they also tell the public about the good news stories as well as the bad that are happening”***

There were few *specific examples* provided here of negative exposure however and one in particular was from some time ago. There were also some (minor) mentions of the Department's role in more controversial topics such as the 1080 debate and in the monorail proposal.

People across all groups did mention however (unprompted) that they had heard of or were aware of the Department having had funding cuts. This awareness of funding-related issues had implications later in each focus group session when the question of the Department having to make decisions or choices was discussed. In this respect, a prior perception of funding-related issues meant that the participants were more accepting (or at least resigned to the fact) of the resource constrained context in which the Department operates and the implications of this in terms of what the Department is realistically able to achieve i.e. the fact that the Department *does* need to make choices did not come as a surprise to the majority, if not all, of the people taking part in this research. However they also believe that such decisions and choices were also being made prior to any reduction in funding. Furthermore they believe that such decisions would always have to be made because of the wider environmental context with

regards to the difficulty of pest management, the ongoing impact of people on the environment, the number of species that are endangered and the difficulty of protection as an activity.

***“I think that New Zealanders think of themselves as being environmentally aware so that when something about the Department turns up in the media, it tends to stick, it may not be there every night but when it does appear it tends to stick”***

There was agreement that the Department are also in the media when the news is good. There were few specific mentions of positive or good news stories, other than some related to the protection of kiwi, although there was a strong view that much of the work the Department is involved in does in fact involve ‘good news’ stories, which are just not told.

***“For me what stands out most in terms of visibility, you go for a tramp and the huts are always great and the tracks are always great, but in terms of public visibility I think it’s the projects that they’re doing. The conservation part of the Department ... we hear about it from the media because it’s a feel good type of thing ... you’re saving kiwis or breeding kakapo or whatever”***

***“It’s when something big happens, like a chick is born and then it’s in the media, but most people are aware that there’s a lot more going on than just what we see”***

Some people across the focus groups had visited a Department local office or the DOC website – but these were almost exclusively limited to information being sought about huts and tracks. Only a few people across the entire project accessed the website to search for information on specific endangered species (because of a personal interest), and some parents of primary and intermediate aged children had accessed the website as part of a school project. While not the topic of this research, there was a very low level of awareness of the information (other than about tracks and huts) available on the DOC website.

When asked why they had not accessed information about the Department’s programmes and activities, the general feedback was that they had not had any need to, or had never thought about doing so. Most people taking part in this research acknowledged that while this discussion had encouraged them to consciously consider some of the issues facing the Department and the New Zealand environment, this had not previously been something that they had given a great deal of thought to. In this respect, most people were of the view that because they don’t *often* hear about major issues impacting on the natural environment or facing DOC, that things must be working OK (this is despite an awareness of funding issues and the fact that there are endangered species in New Zealand). Note that there had been a new item on Seven Sharp in the early part of this project regarding the beech mast issue and the impact a

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predator plague will have on birds – very few of the people in the subsequent eleven focus groups recalled having seen it.

***“Not unless I had a reason to do it [search out information about the Department projects/activities]”***

***“Not unless something sparked your interest”***

Some people also recalled there having previously been DOC spokespeople in the media and/or the Department having been actively involved in children’s programmes such as What Now – but that this type of ‘exposure’ no longer takes place.

Overall, there was a view (initially at least) that the Department are an organisation that are quietly working behind the scenes and that they are different to other government departments in that they are not perceived to have a direct relationship with the public, to a large extent. Participants see themselves as interacting more proactively and directly with other government departments (and that those other government departments have more of an impact on their daily lives – paying taxes, the education system, the health system etc.). This is not to say that the Department is not seen as having an impact but rather that the public ‘take for granted’ the fact that the Department are out there doing what they need to do – and are doing the best that they can.

***“As a department, they’re more of a department of doers as opposed to, you know, having to be in peoples’ faces. You sort of think they’re busy doing what they need to be doing”***

***“You get the feeling that they’re always in the background, just doing it, because you see their signs everywhere”***

The level of interest the participants had in the Department’s role and activities changed significantly over the course of each focus group however, once people started to become more aware of, and engaged in the types of decisions the Department needs to make, along with the issues facing New Zealand’s natural environment and endangered species.

## **How effective is the Department from the public’s perspective?**

The key theme here was that the Department is doing the best job it can, given the resource constraints along with the environmental issues it faces. There was almost universal acknowledgement that the Department is not (and could not) protect everything that needs to be protected in New Zealand if no further native species were to become extinct. This was not a criticism on the part of the participants of

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the Department in any way. Rather people were realistic in terms of their expectations of the Department and what it can achieve, while at the same time expressing a view that better conservation outcomes are crucial.

As mentioned earlier, many people raised issues around current (perceived) under-funding of conservation activities and the resulting need for the Department to engage in fund-raising activities (either through sponsorship, which some were aware of, or from the general public). This was not explored in detail however as the focus of this project was on what the Department could do and the decisions they should be making in the current context in which it operates.

***“They’re doing alright given the circumstances they’re presented with, but I think the time is right for them to now look at a different business model and try and create a greater awareness, greater public knowledge and attract funds and work with partnerships to be able to resolve some of the issues that they feel are too big for them to currently deal with”***

***“With our natural environment, there’s no way that one government department, no matter how well resourced is going to manage that”***

***“It’s understandable but there can be more done I think, not by them, but by legislators to enable them, the Department, to do a proper job. At the moment they’re being given enough material to make half a shirt”***

***“Stuff just doesn’t get done”***

***“One of the major problems we have is that we don’t have a big enough population to provide funding to save everything so you are always going to be limited to the amount of money you have got”***

There was a strong perception that the staff who work for the Department, especially at the ‘grass roots’ level, do so because they are passionate about the environment and experts in what they do. For this reason, the participants have significant trust in the work being undertaken by the Department and the decisions that the Department makes. This was particularly significant in the context of the later discussion in each focus group regarding decision/prioritisation criteria, with people making assumptions that the Department will already have and use robust internal processes which allow them to make sound scientifically-based decisions about where to allocate their resources, particularly in the context of conservation and preservation of New Zealand’s natural heritage.

***“I have a huge amount of trust that they are doing what they need to do out there, so why I don’t go and check on species and all that stuff is that I have the trust that they are doing what they can and as well as they can”***

***“In as far as what the public knows about the majority of the work that they’re doing, I think the majority of New Zealanders would be quite happy, but that’s only in the limited knowledge that each of us have”***



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***“They’re doing alright with what limited resources they have, and obviously they’re ticking over OK and they’re actually making the right decisions”***

***“I actually think the Department do what they can with what they’ve got, so I don’t hold them directly responsible. You know pretty much everyone in New Zealand is responsible with what we do”***

All of the people taking part in this research were comfortable to defer to the Department’s expertise in decisions regarding the natural environment and where resources should be allocated. As mentioned above however, throughout the course of each focus group, people became more engaged and involved with the issues being discussed, particularly with respect to the (what they saw as very difficult) decisions that need to be made. However, with respect to the Department’s specific internal systems and processes for making those decisions, the general consensus was that the public does not need to know the detail. By detail here, people were referring to the specific complex scientific criteria on which the Department bases decisions and any associated modelling they may do as part of that process.

There was also a general view that the Department is supported in their endeavours by a range of other environmental organisations (all assumed to have a common purpose) and also by volunteers across New Zealand.

**“I imagine all round the country there are relationships with the Department”**

Participants were of the view that the Department is *not able* to achieve effective total or even comprehensive conservation management – but rather, that the Department is achieving *the best possible conservation management that it can* in the context in which it operates. Participants had a clear understanding that not all places, species, flora and fauna can be protected – and that there needs to be trade-offs based around criteria which will optimise conservation outcomes. The participants’ expectation is that the Department will make decisions and prioritise their activities on the basis of their expertise, sound scientific evidence and the overall ‘value’ (including from a national ‘identity’ perspective) of places, species, flora and fauna to New Zealand.

## What is natural heritage and how well is this term understood?

The participants' understanding of New Zealand's natural heritage was consistent overall and was seen as encompassing all things native to New Zealand, including flora and fauna, species and the natural features that create New Zealand's 'landscape'. Some people felt that the definition of natural heritage could be widened to include New Zealand's cultural and built heritage (for example, Waitangi was seen by many people as a core component of New Zealand's natural heritage). Most people however, had a clear and consistent interpretation of natural heritage. For many people, all aspects of New Zealand's natural environment and the native 'creatures' that live and the native things that grow here are all a part of New Zealand's natural heritage.

***“The things that grow naturally, but then if I'm thinking New Zealand, then its all things native and that's what makes us different, we don't want our country to head downhill because then it's not really going to set us apart from other countries”***

***“I think anything that involves our history in New Zealand”***

***“The land, the trees, the birds, the seafood, the kaimoana, so natural heritage, that's what I think about, and when I think about that I'm so grateful for the role that the Department plays in keeping that nice and pristine for us”***

***“Unspoiled areas”***

New Zealand was seen by many people as having a unique and less damaged natural heritage than many other countries, as a result of:

- A relatively late settlement by people compared to other countries
- Its geographical distance from other countries and their natural environments
- The New Zealand natural environment being less impacted on by industry than is the case in many other countries, and
- New Zealand being more active in the protection of its natural environment (through the Department and other organisations) than many other countries.

***“It's the right of access to places ... in New Zealand if it's conservation estate, it's our estate, we can go there, we don't have to ask anyone's permission, we don't have to justify ourselves, we don't have to do any of that ... the bush, the mountains, the sea”***

***“It's what New Zealanders pride themselves on”***

***“The species or animals that we have ... the tuataras, the birds, the dolphins”***

***“I think it goes beyond the conservation estate, that is a part of it, but it's every piece of bush or mountain or hill that isn't part of the conservation estate as well”***

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***“It’s that unique combination that shaped us from a whole lot of forces, bringing it together”***

Participants do have a strong attachment to, and place a high level of importance and value on New Zealand’s natural heritage. There was consistency in terms of the *meaning* of natural heritage, regardless of age, ethnicity and geographic location. This research has found that the participants have a shared and common appreciation of the unique nature of this country and the places, spaces, species and flora and fauna found here. Most of the examples of New Zealand’s natural heritage that were identified were the same across all fifteen focus groups – and the natural features in particular were not limited to the geographic location of individual focus groups. North Islanders identified iconic natural features in the South Island and South Islanders identified iconic natural features in the North Island. The species, and flora and fauna identified, such as kiwi, kea, tuatara, giant land snails, weta, tui, kauri, rimu, fern, pohutukawa, were consistent across all people taking part in this research.

Despite the value placed on New Zealand’s natural features however, the participants were not able to (and did not want to) say which natural features or species should be given priority by the Department. Participants have a high level of awareness overall, that not all natural features and species can be protected by the Department. For this reason, alongside the high degree of credibility the Department has, people were of the view that these decisions need to be made by the Department of Conservation based on their expertise and a sound scientific rationale.

## **What makes something iconic?**

People felt that for something to be iconic it must be:

- Intergenerational
- Unique to a group of people, and
- Something through which those people share some part of their identity, for example, through a shared relationship or experience.

Many people gave examples of seeing images of New Zealand when travelling overseas or as part of television programmes, and immediately recognising those images as New Zealand – and as iconic for that reason.

***“Only found here”***

***“The connections that people make”***

***“It makes you think of New Zealand when you see it”***

***“It’s unique”***

***“It’s the only country in the world where you can go from fjords, to mountains to deserts, to green pastures to bush all within a couple of hours drive”***

***“Iconic things attach us”***

***“Icons – you feel proud of something”***

***“Being here before we came – and will be here when we are gone”***

***“It implies continuity – what has been here and what will still be here when we are gone”***

When asked for examples of iconic aspects of New Zealand’s natural heritage most people *initially* mentioned *places* rather than specific species and flora and fauna. The list of places mentioned as iconic in all groups included places and features right across New Zealand and was not limited to each groups’ specific geographic location.

Full lists of what is iconic however included kiwi and other species such as tuatara, kea, kakapo, along with plants and trees including kauri, fern, rimu and pohutukawa. There were fewer mentions of the species in the marine environment, other than dolphins and crayfish.

***“The ones [species] that you think of when you think of New Zealand”***

***“We’ve got very iconic plants here as well, the fern, kauri, rimu, pohutukawa”***

Most people considered the kiwi to be *very iconic*, particularly because of the extent to which it is seen and recognised (as a symbol if not in reality) both in this country and overseas.

***“The kiwi is iconic, it’s what we’re called overseas, it’s what we’ve got on our currency, it’s the symbol our peacekeepers wear on their packs”***

## To what extent are some iconic aspects of our natural heritage more or less significant or important – and why (or why not)?

Overall, most people were of the view that no *one* aspect of our natural heritage is more important or more significant than another – and that some features (especially flora and fauna), which might appear to be less important or less interesting than other features (especially species) may in fact have long-term implications for specific habitats, and wider eco-systems.

As mentioned above, although there was universal agreement across the groups that the kiwi is very iconic, in the context of this discussion, most people were reluctant to say that the kiwi is any more important or any more significant than species of weta for example. This was not only because they felt that they did not have enough information to make such a decision, but that they do not, and would not (even with the necessary scientific information) want to have to make such a decision. A key finding here is that most people shied away from the responsibility of determining what is more or less significant, environmentally and ecologically, to New Zealand. There was acknowledgement however that there are some species that have ‘the bambi factor’ and others that do not – and that this more emotive view can and does have an impact on how people *feel* about different species.

***“People would look at [species becoming extinct] and rate the importance of them. If the kiwi was becoming extinct, people would be up in arms, but if its some spotted purple flower ...”***

Despite this, most people across the groups took a very rational approach to consideration of these issues.

***“No I don’t think you can call one more important than the other, but the public perception because of the media coverage and the natural knowledge that we have ...the kiwi is sexy, whereas the giant land snails and the weta ...”***

People acknowledged their *lack of knowledge* of the implications of protecting or not protecting different flora, fauna and species. For this reason they said they would have to defer to the Department, with the assumption that the Department does have the knowledge, expertise and relevant information by which decisions like this need to be made.

Overall, there was agreement that the significance (for prioritisation purposes) of one area, species or type of flora or fauna over another will depend on a wide range of factors including:

- The wider impact on eco-systems in New Zealand of those areas, species, flora and fauna

- The longer-term impact on the New Zealand environment
- The extent to which they are endangered – note that when the issue of endangered species was discussed, many people questioned the definition of ‘endangered’ (how endangered, what time-frame before they become extinct, how many are required for a minimum sustainable population etc.), and
- Any other scientific evidence that would support decision-making.

### **How aware are the public that there are native species (and also flora and fauna) in New Zealand that are endangered?**

There was a high level of awareness that there are endangered habitats, and species (including flora and fauna) in New Zealand. There was also a general acceptance that there are probably some species, and flora and fauna that are already extinct (although there wasn’t a high level of awareness of what those species and flora and fauna might be) and others that will likely become extinct in the relatively near future.

***“Far too many”***

***“Thousands?”***

***“I think every now and again we see something is dying and you think in your head it’s going to go extinct but then a lot of people, we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it. They look at someone like DOC and think they have it under control” because we don’t want to think that one of our species is going to die so we just sort of go ‘DOC’s got it’, we’ll be alright. That’s what they are there for, they are going to do the job, I think the majority of people just trust them to sort it but they can’t when you look at the numbers”***

People were asked how many endangered species there might be in New Zealand currently and the general consensus was that there are ‘probably’ hundreds. For this reason, when they were told that there were approximately 800 threatened species this was not met with significant surprise. While 800 was higher than people expected, it was not considered unrealistic (or outrageous), particularly in the context of peoples’ *assumption* that ‘species’ here would encompass all manner of insects and other small ‘creatures’ they may never have seen or have heard of.

***“I’ve been around a lot, you kind of figure it out for yourself and it’s kind of a losing battle so you’ve mentally prepared yourself, I think I’ve mentally prepared myself so that’s why I’m not jumping up and down about these facts”***

Most people were aware that there are not as many kiwi in New Zealand as there once were and (given the recent media attention) many people also mentioned the Maui Dolphin. Overall, there was a general resignation among people that some species have already gone, some are in decline and some will be at risk of extinction in the (relatively near) future. Furthermore they believe that 'we' through the Department can only do the best we/the Department can. People spoke about feeling sad about this but at the same time grateful that New Zealand still has the native species it does and how well New Zealand is doing relative to other countries with regards to our natural heritage and environment in general.

***“When the settlers first came to New Zealand they were complaining about the noise of the kiwis at night and the noise of the whales in the harbour ... who among us wouldn't kill to hear that now? Imagine being able to say the blimmin kiwis in the backyard wouldn't shut up?”***

***“You just feel sad [about species becoming extinct], there's nobody to blame”***

***“Once something's gone, it's gone, it doesn't come back”***

The core finding here is that participants are aware that there are endangered species in New Zealand and that, overall, New Zealand is not viewed as some sort of 'environmental utopia'. Furthermore, in this context, people are also aware that the Department of Conservation is not able to actively protect all endangered species. What people do believe is that the Department is doing the best job that it can although this is not and will never be enough to prevent the extinction of further native species.

## **What criteria do the public think the Department of Conservation is using to determine priorities?**

People were of the view that the Department would have a sound scientific basis for making the decisions that they do, and while those decisions may mean that some species and flora and fauna are 'sacrificed' for others, those decisions will be robust and well supported by evidence. This view is based entirely around a perception that the Department are experts and know what they are doing, rather than anything they may have read or that has been reported in the media.

***“Presumably they're informed by science”***

***“They're scientists, they're formulaic”***

***“They're not doing anything abnormally bizarre out there ... we don't hear of anything and the reporters would be all over it if they were”***

***“I do imagine that they build some sort of plan, that is driven by policy as well as research as well as some consultation”***

***“When you’ve got limited resources you sit around a table like this, and you’ll say Ok there are the things we can deal with because this is the funding we’ve got ... it’s sad but they can’t protect everything”***

While the participants made the assumption that there would be robust systems in place, they are not interested in knowing what those scientific processes might entail - they don’t want or need to know the detail.

## **What criteria would the public use to determine priorities?**

When asked what criteria *they* would use to determine priorities given the current context in which the Department operates, most people were initially overwhelmed by the prospect of having to select the criteria that should be used to set priorities.

***“Whichever way we go, something loses ... there’s no right decision”***

***“It’s a catch 22 situation and I honestly don’t think there will ever be a right decision ... it’s like if we want to put more money into schools and teaching, do we take it away from the police?”***

Note here that people were *not asked* what specific species, flora or fauna should be actively protected (or prioritised for protection) even though this was the initial tendency of some participants. Rather, they were asked what the criteria should be with respect to identifying where resources should be allocated and what priorities should be set.

The criteria identified were:

- The role within an ecosystem of species, flora or fauna in terms of the number of other species (and whether these too are endangered) that depend on its ongoing presence/survival
- The chance of success in terms of ensuring that a species does not become extinct – and relative to the cost of that protection compared with the cost of protecting other species
- The degree to which a species can be protected ‘alongside’ other endangered species that are also being actively protected within a specific habitat
- How unique the species is – both in New Zealand and internationally, and



- The impact on or role in New Zealander's national identity (in terms of specific species being iconic to New Zealanders at a national level).

***"I don't want to belong to a generation that loses the kiwi, I don't"***

***"Focus on the stuff that we're already doing well in and concentrate on that rather than trying to spread ourselves too thin"***

***"You can't say species A is more important than species B and therefore you are going to invest more in conserving species A ... so you have to bring criteria into it such as success rates"***

***"Instead of protecting a bird that lives in the swamp, protect the swamp, don't drain it, kill the rats, protect the flaxes, rip out the pine trees and the willows and that way you will suddenly find, that like Zealandia, you've got spill over, they're turning up everywhere"***

***"You look at the consequences of protecting one species over another, if you lose one species, is that going to have an effect on the greater eco-system?"***

***"[You need to consider] if a smaller, seemingly insignificant species is that much more important than the others around it?"***

***"So one of my criteria that I feel very strongly about is what the importance is of taking that species or flora or fauna out of the eco-system"***

***"As far as I am concerned if you take one species out and don't protect it, is that ecosystem in that area going to fall down so that to me is quite a strong criteria"***

***"So the importance is the first one we came up with in terms of integration. The next very obvious one is sustainability versus cost balance. So how sustainable a project is versus how much money it costs and then there is also the outcome over time"***

***"So yeah where does a single species fit into the big picture ... what are the knock on effects of isolating one thing ... if we lose this what effect will that have on its environment?"***

***"Do you focus on a single species when what is needed for them to survive and have a robust population is for there to be a whole habitat, a whole environment that's healthy and that does not only support one species but all other endangered and threatened species in that area as well"***

***"By focusing on the Maui dolphin... are we actually losing sight of some other species that might be easier to regenerate?"***

***"My question is how do you decide between some low hanging fruit and the value of what that equates to and what we are saving, preserving, building or one item ... the one thing that you could put all your resources into. What's the impact on that? What's the bigger picture - you just have to weigh it up because how do you choose?"***

***"Is what we are saving viable and is what we are not saving less viable?"***

***"Instead of just saying I'm going to focus on the kiwi I'm going to focus on a whole region that not only encompasses kiwi but also eels in the stream... where I can get more for the value of the dollars I am investing as opposed to an individual species?"***

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It was generally felt that protection would likely be more effective in 'island' habitats – either off-shore or on-shore (land islands). The Wellington groups in particular mentioned the flow-on effects of Zealandia on neighbouring areas.

***“Invest it more into land islands or off-shore islands to increase populations with everyday New Zealanders having limited access, but increasing the populations for the future”***

There was strong support for this approach, with many people prepared to trade-off having species, flora and fauna protected across all habitats that they currently live in (or near) in order to optimise the chance of survival by having more intensely protected and managed 'islands' or sanctuaries that have a greater chance of success.

## **Protecting the local vs. the national**

People felt that while some places and spaces are important at a national level (to most or all New Zealanders), and while there are also others that are likely 'locally important' (to smaller numbers of New Zealanders), that the protection of endangered species should be prioritised ahead of the management and protection of spaces and places. However there was also quite a lot of confusion amongst participants as to what the Department's role is in terms of 'spaces and places' – other than facilitating recreational access to (and accommodation on) conservation estate. Put simply, they do not see spaces and places as a whole as being threatened and hence needing protection. Rather it is the habitats and eco-systems that they believe are likely under threat (within places and spaces throughout New Zealand) and hence needing protection.

With regards to local versus national treasures and prioritisation they could not identify which local versus national treasures are either under threat nor more important than one another in the same way that they could not and would not prioritise one species over another. The main criteria for deciding 'where' to protect was once again informed by the criteria of their relative environmental importance and impact along with the other criteria that were identified for species, flora and fauna protection.

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## How does the public view some actual decisions being made by the Department?

The focus groups were presented with a series of case study examples of the types of decisions the Department has made and asked whether or not these decisions fitted with the criteria they identified earlier. The main case study examples that were used were to do with:

1. The rate of decline of kiwi and the fact that not all kiwi populations are part of conservation programmes
2. The Hackett eco-system and the fact that protection of this eco-system has stopped in favour of protecting a larger area on the North bank of the Haast River
3. Paparoa eco-system and the fact that goat control has been rationalised here in order to protect higher priority locations, and
4. The fact that there are more 800 threatened taxa and that the Department will have implemented 159 threatened species prescriptions in 2014-15.

### Kiwi

People in the focus groups were asked how many kiwi they thought there were in New Zealand – most said they had no idea, and where guesses were made, actual perceived numbers varied from hundreds into the tens of thousands. Most people were surprised to hear that, in 2008 there were approximately 72,600 kiwi, which was more than most had been expecting.

***“I thought there was like hundreds”***

***“At a guess I’d say 40,000”***

***“Well how come on TV they make out like there’s hardly any left?”***

***“Go to Stewart Island and you’ll see them walking around”***

What many people were surprised about however was the rate of decline. However only a minority of people thought that kiwi populations were under control and their decline had stopped.

***“I’m astonished they’re still in decline, I thought we were on the way up”***

***“I didn’t know we had so many, but I didn’t know they were still declining”***

Once aware of this, alongside the fact that not all kiwi populations are part of conservation programmes, there was a general view (initially at least) that all kiwi should be protected. However, after further

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discussion, the majority of people came to their own conclusion that this may not be possible. In the context also of the criteria identified earlier, most people came to the conclusion that kiwi should be protected but that the focus should not be on protecting every kiwi population at a local level i.e. in every area that they currently live in. Rather, they stated that the focus should be on protecting habitats that will protect kiwi but that will also benefit other species – and that those habitats should be those that will provide the most significant positive conservation outcomes relative to the resources needed to achieve these. There was also a view however, that as much as possible, the Department should work with and support other organisations and people who also work with kiwi. Overall therefore, despite disappointment that kiwi are in decline, participants understood the decisions being made, and made the assumption that the Department know what they are doing and will *never risk* the eventual extinction of all kiwi.

### **Hackett eco-system**

There was support for the decision to focus on larger eco-systems at the expense of smaller ones. Once again the participants came to the conclusion that protection of a larger eco-system is more likely to protect the greatest number of species and flora and fauna, and will have flow-on effects to the wider area.

***“One big ecosystem is worth 10 small ones”***

### **Paparoa eco-system**

The same view was held with regards to the Paparoa eco-system in that the participants accepted the Department’s decision that there are other eco-systems of more value/where greater positive conservation outcomes could be achieved for the resources required. In this respect they did not question why another might be of more value but rather they accepted that there would be a scientific rationale for this decision. Note that one participant in an Auckland focus group was familiar with this area and said that there has been an increase in local people getting involved in goat control in the area as a result of the Department’s shift in focus to other areas.

### **800 threatened taxa**

The fact that there are more 800 threatened taxa in New Zealand did not surprise people (although this was more than most people anticipated). As mentioned earlier, most people assumed that there are many threatened species in New Zealand, most of which they will have never heard about. There was some surprise initially that of this more than 800, ‘only’ 159 are currently part of threatened species

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prescriptions i.e. are in active management programmes. However, once again people were of the view that the Department will have undertaken a robust scientific process to determine which endangered species or taxa should be prioritised – and that this is all that they can ‘help’ with available resources. A key finding here is that the participants are comfortable with the Department having made these decisions and that they (the general public) cannot as a result of a lack of information and expertise (and do not want to, due to the ‘nature’ of the decisions to be made) contribute to any specific decision-making. This does not mean that they have a lack of attachment to specific species or even a lack of interest in these issues. Rather it means that they trust the Department’s decision making processes. During the discussion of different ‘levels’ of endangerment, for example, nationally critical, nationally endangered and nationally threatened, people assumed that the Department would take this into consideration in any decisions. They also saw this as fitting with the criteria they themselves identified earlier in the discussion.

Overall, in terms of the Department’s decision-making in the examples provided, there was understanding and acceptance of, and support for these.

### **To what extent do the public expect and want to be communicated with, by the Department?**

People’s reaction to news about such things as kiwi numbers in decline and the number of threatened species in New Zealand (despite general awareness that this was likely to have been the case) was that the Department should be informing the public about the issues it is facing – and these facts. However, after further consideration most people reached the conclusion that spending money telling the public about ‘what’s going wrong’/going on rather than spending that same amount of money on conservation activities would not be a sensible approach for the Department to take. Furthermore, the majority of people were unsure about what they could actually do to help. Obviously on a smaller local scale there was recognition that the public could (and indeed should) become more involved in volunteering and (where applicable) carrying out small-scale conservation activities on their own land such as weed and pest control. However overall the majority of people did not feel that they would be able to make any significant positive contribution to the conservation effort in regard to endangered species.

***“But on that note, I’d much rather they spend one million dollars on saving a species than on paying for advertising”***

***“If it costs DOC a lot of money to tell us, that money is being taken away from protecting these things, all they have to do is put it on their website and if we want to know about it we go there and read it”***

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The approach that many of the participants identified as a possible better longer-term communications strategy was through education activities in schools. Their thoughts around this were that it would enable the adults of the future to have a lesser negative environmental impact (including on endangered species and their habitats) than will likely otherwise be the case. They also felt that such activities would likely create stronger future support for conservation in general (including possibly better funding) as well as having the potential for some positive impact on present household behaviour through the influence of children in the home.

In terms of more in-depth information being provided on the DOC website regarding endangered species, their 'status' and what conservation programmes are being undertaken and the impact of these, there was support for this. However, the general view was that this information should be available 'for those that want to access it' via the website but that there is no need to actively promote the same information to the wider public. People did see the value however in more information via the media about DOC achievements (the good news stories).

As mentioned earlier in this report, the participants do not want to know the detail about the specific processes that DOC goes through when making some of the decisions required with regards to endangered species, flora and fauna.

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