

26 November 2008

Hon Tim Groser
Minister of Conservation
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Dear Minister

Congratulations on your appointment as Minister of Conservation. As chairperson of your primary statutory advisor I very much look forward to meeting you and introducing the New Zealand Conservation Authority, its members and its functions.

I will assume that your briefing to date from the Department of Conservation has focussed on pressing conservation issues, amongst which I would be surprised if the Authority featured. Therefore I will provide you a brief introduction here.

New Zealand has had a long history of formal citizen input into the management of protected lands particularly with the current suite of statutory bodies put in place in 1990. They are the New Zealand Conservation Authority and the fourteen regional conservation boards, along with the NZ Fish and Game Council (with which we liaise) and the twelve regional fish and game councils (with which the conservation boards liaise) that have a particular responsibility for sports fish and game birds. Significantly the members of these bodies are drawn from the ordinary citizens of the country.

Having said "ordinary" I wish to commend to you the current Authority membership which was appointed in June this year for a three year term. They are people who are leaders in their fields, with a wide range of experience, interests and skills. I think that you can feel confident that wisdom and insight as well as commitment to the best interests of conservation and the community are evident in the Authority's deliberations, decisions and advice. The Authority is well able to give you sound and independent advice to complement the advice that you receive from the Department of Conservation.

To expand a little, the Authority's members are all appointed by the Minister of Conservation but s/he is directed by the Conservation Act to consult the Minister of Tourism (2 members), the Minister of Maori Affairs (2 members), the Minister of Local Government (1 member), Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu (1 member), Royal Society of New Zealand (1 member), Royal Forest and Bird Society of New Zealand (1 member), and Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand (1 member). In addition four members are appointed after the receipt of nominations from the public. This structure ensures that the Authority membership is representative of the community but at the same time no member represents any person or organisation. Once appointed as an Authority member their duty is to the Authority, the discharge of its functions, and the attainment of the purposes of the Acts under which it operates.

The attachment to this letter identifies some issues that we consider are important and wish to flag with you from the outset.

The Authority next meets in Wellington on 10 and 11 December 2008 and then 8 and 9 April 2009 and invites you to meet with it on any of these days or on either Wednesday evening for dinner. We would like to discuss our key issues with you and hear your conservation priorities for the next three years. Meanwhile I will be in touch with your office to make an appointment to introduce myself personally to you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "W. D. Ross". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped "D" and "R".

Don Ross
Chairperson

NEW ZEALAND CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

Briefing to the incoming Minister of Conservation

26 November 2008

1. Who we are and what we do

The New Zealand Conservation Authority is a statutory advisor to the Minister of Conservation and to the Director-General on national conservation issues and priorities. Among its roles, it forms a bridge by which the wishes of New Zealanders pass into the 10-year management strategies and plans for all of the public conservation lands owned by them. The Authority is the final decision-maker for approval of the high-level 10-year conservation management strategies or CMSs, and for national park management plans (Conservation Act 1987, ss.6B (1) (b) and 17F (p); National Parks Act 1980, s.18 (b) and s.48).

2. Planning for conservation lands

The planning cycle is now in a busy period, following the expiry of CMSs in several conservancies. Most of the remaining CMSs will come up for review in the next three years. Four national park management plans will come up next year.

The CMS consultation process has attracted strong public interest and vigorous debate. A philosophical divide has emerged between, on the one hand, the Department of Conservation's desire to shorten and simplify such planning documents and, on the other, the view of a number of submitters that CMSs must not become so bland that they are ineffective as planning documents. The public and business need a reasonable degree of certainty as to how public conservation lands and waters will be managed. The Authority has statutory responsibility for resolving this conflict.

The Authority also considers that the public consultation process followed through planning processes should be inclusive of both tangata whenua and other New Zealanders and that their voices should be heard and reflected in the planning documents, consistent with the relevant statutory framework.

3. Commercial use of conservation lands

A related topic is the need to uphold the integrity of management planning, in relation to concessions and other authorisations for commercial activities or other specialist interests on public conservation land. Some energy, tourism and recreation activities are naturally in conflict with the protection of biodiversity, the natural landscape, natural quiet and other values for which public conservation land has been set aside. The issuing of major concessions ahead of the planning review process can compromise important over-arching objectives. Planning governs the consideration of concession applications – not the other way around. The Authority has the responsibility (s.6B (1) (c)) to review and report on the effectiveness of the Department of Conservation's administration of general policies, including the relationship between planning and concessions.

4. Status of conservation land

The Authority has a role to advise on the classification of conservation areas of national and international status, and to investigate national park proposals. The Government recently purchased St James Station, and the Authority would appreciate the opportunity to exercise these functions in relation to this new public conservation land.

5. Pest control

(a) Effect of deer browsing

The decline in the feral deer recovery industry has allowed growth in deer numbers on public conservation lands. As a result, some areas which retain their original understorey, such as East Cape, are at risk of irreversible modification. Apart from deer-free areas in Northland and Taranaki and the takahe habitat, there is little deer control on public conservation land and biodiversity is suffering.

(b) Possums and mustelids

Funding limits over the years and increased public opposition to aerial pest control are resulting in significant biodiversity losses and visible canopy collapse in some forests¹.

(c) Climate change

A large percentage of threatened plants live in open habitats, where competition from exotic weeds and animals is likely to increase with warmer temperatures. The control of browsing animals also has a role in enhancing carbon storage.

6. Biosecurity threats

Biosecurity threats are constant and increasing, especially in the marine area. Multiple jurisdictions in all aquatic habitats make management to protect biodiversity more complex and difficult. The proposed New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement has the potential to provide some integration of functions. However, the Authority also supports the development of an Oceans Policy.

7. Freshwater

The Authority supports the development of a national plan for the protection and management of freshwater. Overlapping jurisdictions between the Department of Conservation, the Ministry of Fisheries and regional councils complicate the management of freshwater resources, especially for species such as the threatened long-finned eel, and for pest fish. There is also insufficient national direction to regional councils on how much water can be allocated without damaging the environment, especially for indigenous species and ecosystems.

Don Ross
Chair

¹ E.g. Waitutu in Southland 2004-2008 DOC/Landcare Research study. Without pest control, Waitutu's bird numbers have collapsed. Kaka populations are now 90% male in a sample of 100 birds, because the females and chicks are almost all being killed on the nest. Waitutu's mohua (yellowhead) have almost died out. Forest collapse is evident in parts of the central North Island, in the Kaimai, Kaweka and Ruahine ranges.