

# Newman Weekly

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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

## Saving the Kiwi

The green agenda in this country has already been won. Not the radical agenda of green politics, which has embraced socialism as its new cause, but a sensible and moderate approach to conservation and environmental protection.

That is why the warnings of the Department of Conservation (DOC) that the kiwi is headed for extinction, fills New Zealanders with such a sense of dismay. We do not want to be the generation who sat on their hands while the kiwi dies out.

Scientists have estimated that 12 million kiwi used to live in New Zealand. By 1920 kiwi populations had dropped to around 5 million birds. But today it is estimated that only 50,000 to 70,000 remain.

With the population disappearing at a rate of 6 percent a year, at the current rate, kiwi could be extinct on the mainland in about fifteen years.

Most kiwis live in forest areas that are controlled by DOC. While countries generally aspire to having around 10 percent of their landmass under conservation management, here in New Zealand, almost a half of all of our land area is under the stewardship of DOC. That not only includes land and resources historically owned by the Crown along with more recent acquisitions, but also private land "acquired" through the Resource Management Act.

Owen McShane of the Centre for Resource Management Studies (a guest contributor in this week's Forum) has done an outstanding job of identifying problems associated with New Zealand's resource management systems. A study he commissioned, "The Role of the Department of Conservation and the Need for Change" by John Third provides an excellent analysis of why DOC, under the present structure and function, can never succeed in fulfilling its conservation objectives. It may be viewed

on the Centre for Resource Management website ([www.rmastudies.org.nz](http://www.rmastudies.org.nz)).

Effectively, DOC has monopoly control over New Zealand's native wildlife conservation efforts. That means that private landowners who want to play their part in protecting our endangered species more often than not, face major hurdles.

Roger Beattie and his wife are a case in point. Back in 1994 they erected a predator proof fence around 20 hectares of native forest on their Banks Peninsula farm. They wanted to establish a breeding programme for the eastern buff weka, which, while it had become extinct on the mainland, was so abundant on the Chatham Islands, that DOC was culling and killing hundreds of birds on an annual basis.

Roger has outlined his saga for NZCPD readers ([www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com)). While he was successful in the end, it was only because of his extraordinary perseverance. Sadly, individuals up and down the country who have tried to establish private conservation ventures have had similar experiences and walked away. It wouldn't be so bad, if DOC was successfully halting the decline of our endangered species, but the problem is that they are not.

In his paper about DOC, John Third puts it this way: "DOC management failures are legendary, ranging from the Cave Creek platform collapse, to the death of rare and endangered Kakapo because the Department was so focussed on PR that they allowed dirty gumboots from pig farms to transfer infectious bacterium to Kakapo enclosures in Fiordland. Other examples include releasing cage reared blue ducks into the wild in mid winter. This is a time when food stocks are at their lowest. This low level of available food had been further reduced where 1080 poison runoff had wiped out the invertebrate biota in the streams where their food is derived. Not surprisingly all

perished, weighed down as they were with radio transmitters”.

Even Robert and Robyn Webb, who have operated their highly acclaimed Whangarei Native Bird Recovery Centre for 11 years, have had constant battles with DOC. Yet, they have established an excellent track record, having hatched and released 120 kiwi chicks, banded and released 650 wood pigeons, nursed back to health literally tens of thousands of injured birds, and, using ‘Snoopy’ their 13-year-old one-legged kiwi (which DOC originally ordered to be destroyed), have educated more than 5,000 children a year about the kiwi and other native birds. The Centre’s latest kiwi egg can be seen in its incubator on the web. If you are lucky with your timing, you might even see it hatching! To view "egg cam" goto [www.zartaj.co.nz/birdrecovery/kiwicam.htm](http://www.zartaj.co.nz/birdrecovery/kiwicam.htm).

More and more people are recognising that DOC with its mix of roles and too much land to look after, is failing in its duty to protect our endangered species. While it will take major changes to turn the situation around, the following three would make a good start.

Firstly, the DOC estate should be reduced so it consists only of land of high conservation value. The problem is that during the restructuring of the eighties, DOC became the repository for left over Crown land. That has resulted in the bizarre

situation where full conservation values are applied equally by the department to abandoned rubbish dumps and pristine national parks!

Secondly, DOC’s role should be operational only, focussed on pro-actively managing the conservation estate and protecting our native species. If their advocacy responsibilities are removed, DOC could then apply itself to finding better solutions to some of the major conservation

challenges it faces such as finding more environmentally friendly ways of controlling possums than using the massive drops of 1080 poison, which according to the Parliamentary Commissioner

for the Environment, make New Zealand the largest user of 1080 in the world (notes on this and other conservation topics can be found in the excellent book by Peter Hartley, “Conservation Strategies for New Zealand”).

And thirdly, the government needs to recognise that DOC on its own cannot save the kiwi and other endangered species. It will take the energy, commitment and effort of hundreds of thousands of private landowners up and down the country, encouraged to play their part in a massive national conservation effort - eradicating pests, predator proofing their properties, planting native trees and other wildlife food sources, and obtaining and releasing endangered species for breeding purposes – to save them from extinction.

*“The government needs to recognise that DOC on its own cannot save the kiwi and other endangered species....”*

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