

This year marks the 125th anniversary of our national parks and 25 years since the Department of Conservation was born. Mike White investigates why there is so much controversy about DoC's radically changing focus and so much concern about the future of our wild places.

In December last year, more than 100 university scientists stuck their head above their supposed ivory tower parapets and wrote to the Minister and Director-General of Conservation.

Their letter was partly spurred by a conference many were attending in Auckland that week of 1300 conservation biologists from 75 countries. But more generally it was penned because of their dismay about continuing cuts to the Department of Conservation's budget and staff.

It was the culmination of a year of upheaval for DoC as its role of caring for our native species and remote regions appeared to be supplanted by its new maxim "Conservation for Prosperity". Its very name seemed to be subjugated and subverted by a drive for economic enrichment.

"What will we say when our international colleagues ask about conservation in New Zealand?" the scientists wrote.

"We have many good things to tell them because conservationists are, by necessity, a dedicated and determined group of people. But we cannot say that this commitment is reflected by our government and we will doubtless relay our fears for the future of New Zealand conservation."

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MIKE WHITE IS A NORTH & SOUTH SENIOR WRITER.



A trampler on the Routeburn Track in Fiordland National Park.

Does the Department of Conservation Need Saving?

While acknowledging the tough economic times, the scientists – with alphabets of degrees after their names – stressed conservation should be seen as an asset and invested in. “Recessions come and go: extinction is forever.”

Two weeks later in her own rarefied tower of the Beehive, Conservation Minister Kate Wilkinson responded to the scientists’ letter with curt assessment. “I think they should actually get some facts.

“[They] have a different view from me. I think they’re being unrealistic and I think they have some misinformation as to the effect of any reduction in budget and the impact of that on scientists.”

Much of the scientists’ concern stemmed from an ongoing cut of \$13.5 million from DoC’s annual budget (its current operating budget is about \$338 million, or \$391 million including capital expenditure) from 2009.

In addition, from July this year its budget will be further reduced by its share of the \$1 billion the government is demanding all departments save. It’s still unknown how much of this DoC will have to pay, but it will be many millions and include \$3 million of superannuation payments DoC is now expected to come up with. (Documents from the Auditor-General and Local Government and Environment Committee state DoC will have to find additional savings of six per cent annually from 2012 – more than \$25 million.)

But perhaps more of a lightning rod for those concerned about DoC was the latest round of staff cuts – 96 jobs gone – on top of 90 in the previous five years.

While the government increased funding and staff in its minerals and petroleum unit, boosted the transport budget to 10 times that of conservation, and increased health spending to \$14 billion, DoC was losing about five per cent of its staff, with the prospect of further significant cuts. Wilkinson and DoC director-general Al Morrison maintained no frontline positions were being cut, but those losing their jobs were their support staff, as well as lawyers, administrators, policy staff and mappers.

For many, the scientists’ letter distilled increasing anxiety that conservation wasn’t important and our wildlife and forests and mountains and precious national parks were at risk.

Given that DoC manages 8.5 million hectares of land – one third of the country – and \$5 billion of assets; given this land underpins the \$10 billion overseas tourism indus-



MIKE HEYDON/GETTY IMAGES

try, and is one of our largest foreign exchange earners and employers; given we have nearly 3000 threatened species of which fewer than 250 have any programme to protect them – it has astounded many that DoC has been hit so harshly.

Wilkinson’s own cabinet ranking – 17 out of 20, the lowest ranked of any returning minister following November’s election – further suggested to critics the low priority conservation has for the current government. But the minister tersely insists she has been a strong advocate for her portfolio and claims conservation has improved under her watch.

“You’ve got to be aware there’ll never be enough money spent on conservation and there’s always more we could do... We’re not a country that’s made of money. You’ve

probably noticed that we’ve been through some fairly challenging economic times and there are efficiencies that can be made in conservation, as in other departments, that won’t affect frontline services and won’t affect the outputs.”

And that’s the view from the Beehive. Everyone’s got to tighten their belts; cuts are actually “efficiencies”; there are more kakapo now than there used to be; more people are getting “buzzed up” about conservation; more businesses are sponsoring endangered birds. What’s the fuss?

The fuss is manifold, according to Bryce Johnson, Fish & Game New Zealand’s chief executive. But essentially it’s about how DoC has shifted from its fundamental role of protect-



MIKE HEYDON/GETTY IMAGES

A little brown kiwi is checked and released by DoC vet Kate McInnes at Wairarapa’s Pukaha Mt Bruce. Even with corporate sponsorship from BNZ, kiwi numbers are falling rapidly with chicks having only a five per cent chance of survival in areas without pest control.

ing our precious environment and species to a business unit of the government charged with making money.

“This government has a very strong focus on economic growth and they’ll use anything they can as the raw material to do that and I think they’ve identified DoC as an entity that can contribute to that and they’re gradually, cunningly positioning DoC to become more commercial – as an income earner for the country. And I would argue at the expense of its functions.”

It’s not just government moves to expand mining on conservation land that Johnson is talking about. Or its enthusiasm for the

irrigation and dairy industries that threaten the state of New Zealand’s waterways. It’s things like the creation of DoC’s commercial business unit, which focuses on getting corporate deals on conservation land. It’s DoC’s increasing silence and absence when controversial development projects come up. It’s things like the new DoC tagline – Conservation for Prosperity – that underpins all its work and now appears under all correspondence. For Johnson, DoC’s new focus is light years away from what it was established to do and he points to the 1987 Conservation Act that remains its guiding document.

The act states DoC’s aim is to promote the conservation of New Zealand’s natural and historic resources. Its functions are clearly outlined as managing, protecting, preserving and advocating for these resources. It’s about education, promotion and conservation. It states tourism should be allowed and recreation fostered as long as it’s consistent with conservation. There’s nothing about working with business, nothing about profit, development or prosperity.

Now compare that with DoC’s current prosperity mantra, says Johnson.

DoC’s own definition talks of conservation’s value by having rivers that turn turbines for power and provide fresh water for running industries; trees that prevent erosion that could otherwise damage farms and businesses; providing fertile soil to grow grass and trees that sustain our agriculture and timber industries; keeping our sea clean so we can harvest fish; enabling insects to thrive and assist our agricultural and horticultural industries; protecting the environment to ensure the tourism industry flourishes.

Of course there is talk of conservation’s contribution to good health, but mostly it’s about wealth.

Johnson, who has suggested a Save DoC campaign along the lines of it being another threatened species, says this new commercial approach makes him feel “pretty sick”.

While Wilkinson describes the new focus as a “maturing” of DoC, Johnson says this is “nothing more than spinning to fit the government’s economic growth agenda. DoC’s got a very explicit function – to look after the natural resources of New Zealand – and that ought to be their primary function. And I don’t think the public realise what’s happening and how DoC’s being manipulated.

“Instead of trying to live up to the 100% Pure New Zealand brand, the government is watering it down for economic gain. And right now it’s a lie.”

It was always like this. Right from the time DoC was created in April 1987 from the Wildlife Service, Lands and Survey Department and Forest Service, there have been cries it’s been hamstrung by insufficient funding and that the country’s wildlife and wild places were suffering.

If you look back, DoC’s first decade was a chapter of repeated restructurings, budget cuts and staff layoffs.

In April 1995, when 14 people died after

a DoC viewing platform collapsed at Cave Creek, a commission of inquiry concluded the accident arose from “systemic failure against the background of an underfunded and under-resourced department”.

Russell Marshall was the first conservation minister and says the department has been seriously constrained from day one. “It was given big roles to do and didn’t have either the human resources or money to fulfil them. And nothing’s changed – I don’t see there’s been any significant improvement and sometimes, there’s been a deterioration.”

Despite this being the greenest generation ever, with high public awareness of the environment – partly reflected in the Green Party’s largest-ever vote in November’s election – Marshall says successive governments have considered conservation as an optional extra.

“Conservation ought to move into the compulsory mainstream activity. I think the days when politicians of any party can ignore its importance ought to have gone and if they haven’t, it’s time they did. I know we’re in difficult economic times but we spent a lot of money on the Rugby World Cup last year – there are other ways in which the money gets spent.”

Murray Williams was another who was there at the start. The scientist joined the Wildlife Service in 1965 and says when DoC was formed there was “a thank god feeling – at last some sense.” But over time that initial enthusiasm waned – or more accurately was strangled, he says.

After Cave Creek, innovation was overwhelmed by stultifying bureaucracy and standard operating procedures. “All of a sudden this whole culture of can-do, will-do became are-we-allowed-to-do?”

Increasingly DoC became a political football and staff disaffection grew, says Williams, who left the department in 2005 to lecture in ecology at Victoria University.

“And now this Conservation for Prosperity – it’s aimed at extracting economic revenue for the day, whereas the Conservation Act was about maintaining and improving conservation for tomorrow. It’s a shift from a preservationist philosophy to one of sustainable extraction. And I’m not sure New Zealanders are ready for that.”

DoC management will undoubtedly challenge Williams as a disgruntled ex-employee who’s out of touch and has lapsed into fondly remember-

ing the old days. But you sense what Williams is getting at if you compare DoC’s own guiding documents from today and 10 years ago.

In 2001, DoC’s vision was: “New Zealand’s natural and historic heritage is protected; people enjoy it and are involved with the department in its conservation.” A decade later the vision is the snappier but utterly unquantifiable: “New Zealand is the greatest living space on Earth.”

In 2001, the department’s mission was: “To conserve New Zealand’s natural and historic heritage for all to enjoy, now and in the future.”

By 2011, DoC had replaced this with: “Purpose: Conservation leadership for a prosperous New Zealand. Outcome Statement: New Zealanders gain environmental, social and economic benefits from healthy functioning ecosystems, from recreation opportunities and from living our history.”

While 2001’s Statement of Intent has seven key aims about protecting biodiversity, promoting appropriate recreation and encouraging community participation, the most recent version begins with a foreword by Minister Wilkinson whose very first sentence refers to providing “business opportunities that are consistent with conservation”.

Her second paragraph talks of the environment being, “the natural capital that fuels our primary production-based economy and determines our prosperity”. And by page 37 this has been fleshed out into such tasks as: “Working with the Ministry of Economic Development to identify mineral prospects to ensure that conservation values and mineral values on public conservation lands and waters are balanced to give maximum possible benefits to New Zealanders.”

To critics, the manifestation of this altered focus is DoC’s new commercial business unit.

Established two years ago its aims include getting more money for DoC from business. The logic is simple – DoC can’t do everything to protect our environment, businesses increasingly want to be seen as environmentally responsible and given that the government is cutting funding, DoC either has to reduce its work or find alternative funding.

Thus, last year’s sponsorship of our endangered native blue duck, the whio, by Genesis Energy was seen as a corporate-conservation triumph – the power company giving DoC \$2.5 million over five years to help protect the bird on our \$10 bill.

A point some forget is that DoC has always dealt with private businesses on our most



NEW ZEALAND HERALD / ANDREW CHAPMAN

Two orca surface in Auckland Harbour. As well as managing 8.5 million hectares of land, DoC is responsible for 33 marine reserves and six marine mammal sanctuaries, totalling over 3.1 million hectares.

precious land. Right from its formation it had two ski-fields in the middle of the country’s oldest national park, Tongariro, and there are currently more than 4500 concessions for businesses on DoC land. Given this, it surprises many that DoC makes a paltry \$13.5 million from these concessions annually – despite the businesses owing almost their entire existence to the land they operate on.



THEO ALLOIS / CORBIS

A boardwalk in Tongariro National Park.



EDDI BUEHNKE / CORBIS

Fiordland National Park.

Even mining companies last year paid less than \$1 million in fees for access to DoC land and compensation for damage.

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment Jan Wright says the figure seems very low and approvals for mining are ad hoc. Wright, who is currently investigating commercial use of conservation land, is concerned DoC hasn't been hard-nosed enough in doing deals.

As well as concessions, DoC makes about \$10 million from its visitor centres, hut fees and campsites. Another \$3 million a year comes from sponsors like Genesis, Rio Tinto Alcan with kakapo, Mitre 10 with takahe and BNZ with kiwi.

The commercial unit's director, Dave Wilks, says DoC intends to work better with businesses and be more business-like itself. "We want to maximise the amount of conservation we can do and the way to do that is by getting more money in."

To this end, while nearly 100 other DoC staff lost their jobs last year, Wilks' team of six will soon be augmented by 11 new staff working in regional conservancies, focusing on business and commercial relationships.

He'd like more businesses operating on

conservation land and acknowledges DoC can be savvier in negotiating deals, but argues that with tourism struggling, it's not a great time to be hiking concession fees.

While many see this as DoC cosying up or selling out to big business, Wilks argues it's an evolution and sketches a yin-yang symbol on a whiteboard to show how the relationship will ideally work.

It's fair to surmise that eastern iconography doesn't wash with the thermal-layered, pack-toting, Gore-Tex kinds who cherish DoC's land and don't want their experience sullied by corporate intrusion. But Wilks isn't moved. "This either/or perception is something we have to move through. We all live in New Zealand and whether we work for a corporate or not, we have an interest in the place we live in. And in the businesses we work with there are people just as passionate as people in DoC about the conservation we're trying to achieve.

"I'm not spending a huge amount of my time trying to lobby people to say, 'Hey, trust me. I'm a really good guy.' I'm better off to spend my time ensuring I can give outcomes for conservation that I can point to and say, 'That's what we did for the blue duck.'"

Yes but, says Kevin Hackwell, Forest & Bird's advocacy manager. Yes, the idea of businesses sponsoring birds is fair and could bring benefits. But not if it becomes a way of plugging gaps in DoC's budget left by government cuts.

"We spend less on managing a third of New Zealand than what's spent on managing a city the size of Hamilton. We ought to be funding it to at least do the basics properly. But the idea that we're having to go out and find these deals to do some of the basics is really wrong. We're talking about species' survival – this is fundamental stuff. There's no reason why we shouldn't be putting icing on the cake but the cake itself should be funded properly. And that's my worry, that we're now paying for the flour and milk and butter.

"The worry is the pressures are such that we'll see decisions made and deals done which start compromising the conservation estate. We don't want a situation where you're walking along the Mercedes Benz track and arriving at the Japan Airlines hut."

Hackwell was involved with the environmental movement in the days before DoC, when protests against logging native forests

were beginning. And he says it's taken all this time for people to realise how important preserving conservation land is.

"It's that pioneering thing that it's us against the bush and it's seen as having no value in its own right unless it was turned into farmland or exploited for minerals – rather than valued for what it is.

"And there's a sense that DoC's now disengaging from the core reasons we have a Department of Conservation. It's not a maturing – that's nonsense. Those same core values are as valuable today as they were in 1987, as they were in 1887 when we first set up Tongariro National Park."

And New Zealanders do feel a real stake in our conservation land – it's what we're proud of, it's part of our national identity, he says.

A 2011 DoC survey quoted in its annual report shows 85 per cent of people considered conservation important or very important to them; 78 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that money spent on conservation was a good investment in the prosperity and wellbeing of all New Zealanders; and 78 per cent ranked conservation equal or more important than other issues like health, edu-

CONSERVATION HOT SPOTS

EACH YEAR:

- About **1.65 million** New Zealanders (37 per cent) visit a conservation area.
- **780,000** New Zealanders and **720,000** overseas tourists visit a national park.
- **600,000** people visit DoC's Huka Falls walkway and **450,000** travel to Milford Sound. Other popular sites include Franz Josef glacier (**138,000**), Cape Reinga (**136,000**) and giant kauri Tane Mahuta (**110,000**).
- **300,000** people spend at least one night at a DoC campsite.
- **75,000** people walk the Tongariro Crossing.

cation and law and order.

Given conservation's crucial role in our economy – from underpinning our tourism industry to providing clean water – and how important it is to New Zealanders, Hackwell is nonplussed we've cut its budget rather than invested in it like any other successful business. Despite its enormous economic and social contribution, DoC receives less than 0.5 per cent of New Zealand's total government expenditure.

Hackwell rubbishes Kate Wilkinson's claims that cuts will have no detrimental effect on conservation. "She's a weak minister and you really get the sense she's doing what other people are telling her to do. There's no evidence she's sticking up for conservation. If she is, she's doing it very quietly – and unsuccessfully."

Moreover, he says DoC's decision not to oppose a large new coalmine on the Denniston Plateau, classed as a nationally significant ecosystem, shows how the department has fallen in step with the government's development agenda.

"It shouldn't be left to organisations that have to go out and fundraise to do that. There should be a government department



A DoC donation box at Punakaiki's Pancake Rocks – a sign of DoC now having to look elsewhere for funding.

that advocates for conservation and protection of our biodiversity.”

(DoC says it has a good relationship with mining company Bathurst and would rather “engage” with it than go to court, to ensure conservation’s interests are considered.)

“It’s that whole attitude that conservation gets in the way of economic development therefore you get rid of conservation,” says Hackwell. “But it’s cutting off your nose to spite your face because the future of New Zealand is in the clean green image.”

Takahe, kakapo, kiwi. Pictures of endangered and declining birds ring the lobby of DoC’s national office in Wellington – as if staff needed reminding about the urgency and importance of their work as they filter in.

Upstairs, DoC’s director-general, Al Morrison, stops the conversation and says he wants to go back and explain where all the changes came from and what they’re all about. In 2005, a review of DoC found it wasn’t halting the decline in species, so they tried to work out what it would cost to succeed.

“We stopped counting when we got to the health budget,” says Morrison, “and said, ‘This is ridiculous, we’re never going to get this money, we need to think differently.’”

From that point DoC developed a strategy based on involving other groups in conservation – communities, councils, iwi, business. At the same time, Morrison says, businesses were becoming aware they needed to do something about their environmental footprint. So DoC unashamedly latched onto that and offered them a chance to do something for the environment. Hence, things like the Genesis deal for whio, says Morrison.

“It’s not greenwashing, it’s real conservation work that we’ve never been able to do

and it doesn’t give [Genesis] the right to go and do something else on conservation land. What’s bad about that?”

To those who fret about cuts to DoC’s budget, Morrison says, get real. “The country’s going through a tough time, business is going through a tough time, the public sector’s going through a tough time, New Zealanders are going through a tough time – and DoC isn’t immune from it. You can’t just stand up and say, ‘Everybody’s got to be part of the solution, except DoC.’”

The cuts it’s already suffered and the ones still to come have forced DoC to look at its priorities, what’s absolutely urgent and where it can spend money so the most people benefit. “We’re going to have to spend less on some things.”

That said, Morrison hopes this won’t detrimentally affect DoC’s work, though he admits it’s too early to tell. And there might have to be more job cuts. “We’ve got to now find ways of living within our budget. What that means in the end, I don’t know.”

What he does know is that conservation can’t be done just by the government, and all New Zealanders have to take part in preserving our environment.

Morrison didn’t reply to the scientists’ open letter expressing alarm about job losses and DoC’s inadequate funding, arguing they misinterpreted the reforms.

“I perfectly understand people are concerned about what’s happening. As soon as you get the sort of strategic change we’re doing, they get scared that the good stuff DoC stands for is all going down. And so they’ll argue for the status quo. But we’re not going to deal with the problem by the status quo or throwing a bit more money at DoC.

“There’s a natural reluctance to encompass the radical or transformational change we’re going through. But when you’re not even halting the decline of biodiversity,

you’ve got to do something radical. When you’re managing the assets for [one of the] biggest exchange-earning industries in New Zealand [tourism] and you want to grow that in a recessionary environment, you have to be radical.”

But how radical can you get without breaching your role that’s clearly outlined in your founding document, the Conservation Act?

Morrison admits they’re testing its limits and interpretation but believes DoC’s current approach “builds on it, it doesn’t shift from it. We’ve maintained that absolutely core driving force of the value of nature for its own worth, while being able to develop that other side.

“My responsibility is not just to maintain conservation but get more done. And I think we’ve done that and it would be nice to see some recognition of it,” he says, with a flicker of pique.

So will we ever get to the stage of having naming rights on our renowned great walks and unique wilderness? “I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about it,” says Morrison. “We’re not going to dissolve into crassness.”

But one man’s crassness is another’s cash saviour. “Is our brand and the good name of DoC up for sale? The answer’s no. I’m not sure we’re going to see golden arches over the Heaphy.”

Takahe, kakapo, kiwi. Black stilt, black robin, Chatham Island taiko, Chatham petrel, parea, Forbes’ parakeet, New Zealand fairy tern, orange-fronted parakeet.

Colin Miskelly lists a few of our threatened species. The point is, explains Miskelly, Te Papa’s curator of terrestrial vertebrates, all these birds would be extinct if it wasn’t for the efforts of wildlife and conservation staff – all would have gone the way of Stead’s bush wren, our last bird to disappear, in 1972.

Miskelly worked for DoC for 19 years, as a scientist, manager and analyst. He left about 18 months ago, well aware cuts were coming and his job was likely to go – of his team of 20, only about six positions remain. And it’s this enormous loss of knowledge and experience that’s his greatest concern with the latest cuts.

“The spin that’s been given is that it’s the people behind the scenes, not the frontline staff, that are being affected. It’s not the uniforms and the people driving the Hiluxes.



NEW ZEALAND HERALD / RICHARD ROBINSON

Sirocco the kakapo with DoC Kakapo Recovery ranger Jo Ledington. After years of intense management and considerable funding, there are now 127 kakapo on pest-free offshore islands.

But it’s the people who’ve been there, done that, the mentors and trainers, the go-to people when you’ve got a problem – they’re the ones going. And of all the time I’ve worked for DoC there’s no restructuring that’s going to hurt it to the level this one will.”

While DoC has stressed no scientist jobs are going, it’s slightly disingenuous. Many of those made redundant had a title of technical support staff but were scientists with doctorates and enormous ecological knowledge, who provided advice on things like endangered species and pest control, but whose role was officially deemed technical. “So if you take these people out, all the administration – it won’t go away, it just gets shunted down the line to the area staff who’ll have to do it and spend less time in the field.”

Miskelly, like so many others interviewed for this story, describes morale within DoC as “rock bottom”.

“At the moment there are a lot of people who’ve lost heart. There is so much more that could be achieved for conservation in New Zealand if DoC was adequately resourced – and at the moment, funding is going down not up.”

It’s a refrain not dissimilar to Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment Jan Wright, who stresses controlling possums, stoats and rats is our biggest conservation challenge. Wright, who last year publicly supported continued 1080 use, was astounded pest control was carried out on only one-eighth of DoC land.

“All I can say is there’s not enough money being spent on pest control because you’ve got this vast area of conservation estate not being looked after well enough. Even without the cuts, there wasn’t enough being spent on pest control. [DoC insists budget reductions haven’t resulted in less pest control.]

“I worry that we’re going to have a lot of our species just on offshore islands, almost like zoos – worse than zoos really because people can’t go and visit them – and on the mainland we’ve got a lot of so-called conservation land but it’s just going backwards.”

DoC’s limited ability to deal with pests was recently highlighted by the reappearance of stoats on Kapiti Island, a previously pest-free conservation flagship, home to kiwi, takahe, saddleback and stitchbird. When stoats were found, there wasn’t any extra money forthcoming for the emer-

gency, so other DoC work, including pest control elsewhere, had to be dropped or deferred.

Such was the need, businesses, conservation groups and the public donated \$50,000 to help DoC eradicate the stoats.

Then there are species like kiwi, now down to about 70,000, which Miskelly says will disappear from 95 per cent of their range without more pest control – and this is a species that already receives large amounts of corporate funding.

“The reality is that when you go out to the community and seek their support for conservation they want to support things that are big and cuddly and well known. So trying to get community buy-in for protecting the Open Bay Island leech – it’s just not going to happen because who gives a stuff about a leech.

“The discretionary funds DoC has are so small that there will be a lot of species that have been identified as needing conservation help that just won’t get it. That’s the gamble we’re taking by reducing DoC’s funding – that we’ll end up managing national parks that are empty cathedrals, devoid of native wildlife.”