

ARE WE LEAVING LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONALISM BEHIND IN THE RUSH TO COMMUNITY-INSPIRED CONSERVATION?

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ABSTRACT

Conservation is a complex business. Until recently, NZ's centrally governed and co-ordinated conservation model offered reasonable assurance of success and quality. In this world-leading model, the State took principal responsibility for conservation. The approach drew together professionals from the social and biological sciences, educationalists, and related disciplines. NZ was an audacious trail-blazer. Today the disabling financial restraints imposed on public-sector spending by market fundamentalism are driving NZ towards a new conservation model—a less effective Department of Conservation reliant on NGOs and community groups to take up shortfalls in capacity.

This new approach socialises conservation in some desirable ways, but predisposes it to loss of professionalism and leadership. Few community groups or national NGOs possess the mandates, resources or skills necessary. By way of example we will describe some poor conservation outcomes resulting from lay approaches. We discuss why professionalism and sound leadership are essential in this now dispersed conservation enterprise. We argue that DOC has the preeminent duty to provide leadership and set standards, but we question their current ability or readiness to do so. We suggest ways we might improve professionalism and leadership within the non-government sector.

In this presentation, we would like to address some concerns we have about the structure and functioning of our conservation landscape as more and more local communities commit themselves to caring for New Zealand's natural heritage. Our concerns relate specifically to the loss of leadership and professionalism. We consider these crucial to long-term viability and genuine effectiveness in the collective conservation effort.

We're raising these issues for several reasons. First, we are not convinced that leadership and professionalism are being discussed, much less recognised as critical. Second, our combined 80 person-years of experience in applied ecology tell us that there are very serious consequences for threatened biota in deviating from sound ecological principles and practices. We know for instance that restoration of threatened species and ecosystem function is particularly sensitive to shortfalls in work quality and direction. Third, we understand from our community connections the fragile, vulnerable, often ephemeral nature of voluntary effort. There are dangers ahead for citizen-led organisations in a working environment where strategy and

standards are left largely to local discretion. Poor results can lead to loss of enthusiasm and credibility, likely leading to higher rates of loss for our unique biota.

Our aim here is to provoke discussion. We can't address all the issues in the time available, nor do we have all the answers. We invite you to disagree with those we offer. It is prudent that we be alert to the risks. That is our purpose here.

In 1987, the newly formed Department of Conservation brought all the public sector's green dots together in one purpose-built agency. This consolidated for the State a near-monopoly on nature conservation. DOC's founding duties were to give unequivocal, unconditional, expert voice to conservation arguments in national debates on resource use. That mandate was to be unencumbered by the resource-development imperatives of DOC's two main parent agencies.

The State had already been the biggest player for more than a century but for the latter part of that period it had crippled conservation through *ad hoc* institutional arrangements. In 1987 then, we embraced a centrally co-ordinated, State-funded model for nature conservation which – for all its troubles and disappointments – was perhaps the most effective voice for nature anywhere in the world.

Our centralised approach intended DOC to be conservation's major player and heavy-lifter. It offered conservation an unprecedented degree of co-ordination and a coherent voice nationwide. At the same time, conservation thinking acquired mainstream legitimacy. The earlier *ad hoc* arrangements had failed abysmally in all those respects.

The new model also recognised that conservation is a highly expert business requiring the right mix of professional and sub-professional occupations to manage its arcane complexities and inevitable contingencies. As Stephen J Gould observed, biology and ecology are the sciences of unpredictability – the *difficult* sciences, quite distinct from the material certainties of chemistry and physics.

DOC concentrated science and management specialists under one roof, thus ensuring that strategy, research and conservation practice could call on a full and proper inventory of social and biological disciplines. That this inventory also included external researchers and their institutions is a very strong reflection of conservation's escalating need for systematic inquiry and well-reasoned support.

Our centralised model benefited from powerful expressions of collegiality in DOC's practitioner ranks. No matter what Ministers and managers may think they control, it is largely through the collegial interaction of occupational specialists that professional standards and ethics for State-sponsored conservation are developed, communicated and defended.

This remarkable concentration of capacity and expertise – still the largest in the country – is equipped with the social mandates and statutory authorities to lead, interpret and conduct the business of conserving our natural heritage.

This centralised approach has yielded quite extraordinary dividends. Benefiting from a continuity in resourcing and effort which no community group can match, the model has delivered audacious advances in conservation work and science.

Of course, the State does not have a monopoly on conservation thinking. Far from it. Nor should we expect it to do all the work. Socialising conservation – that is, broadening and deepening its reach in New Zealand society - is necessary to change public attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, our task has become so alarmingly pressing that a great deal more intellect and labour is needed. Socialising the effort also recognises the community's right to connect with nature through working to conserve it. So DOC's recent decisions to mobilise community minds and muscle more concertedly are if anything a little late in coming.

We do not have time here to discuss other pressures to strengthen community participation. We'll simply mention that market fundamentalism's prejudicial restraints on public-sector spending and function are important catalysts and that they continue to limit DOC's ability to operate as effectively as conservation need requires.

Whatever the pressures, the rise and rise of community-based conservation is conveying us towards an inherently unco-ordinated approach to managing our natural heritage. Whether you see this approach as augmenting the State's investments or making up for its deficiencies, conservation is expected to pass increasingly into the hands of independent NGOs, citizen-led organisations and commercial ventures operating according to their particular agendas, needs and circumstances. If meaningful forms of co-ordination are not sustained, this could result in a return to the *ad hoc*cracy of the bad old days.

This is not a criticism of community-led conservation. That effort embeds conservation thinking in local communities in ways the State cannot. It attends to priorities below the State's budgetary upwardly mobile cut-off points, it keeps conservation grounded in workplace realities, protects it from political whim and refreshes its thinking.

But it also introduces novel forms of frailty and fragmentation to conservation, giving rise to notions of organisational sovereignty and making co-ordination much more difficult. Here are some of those factors.

- We pursue our chosen causes according to our own perceptions of need
- We tend to follow agendas structured more according to community desires than ecological priorities
- Our sweat on the ground is likely to engender a protective sense of ownership of our causes.
- We have to compete with our own kind in an increasingly congested marketplace for resources, profile and public favour
- We create our own moral jurisdictions and conservation mandates, and defend them in order to survive.

Let's look briefly at some examples of how – without expert leadership and professional guidance - self-determined effort may not use that community mind and muscle to greatest effect.

Take yellow-eyed penguins, a species close to both our interests. The manner in which the rehabilitation of sick and injured birds seizes public attention creates awkward expectations for trusts that prefer to focus on healthy reproductively active birds. Because effort goes to where the emotion is, not to where the biological need is greatest, the penguins cared for so solicitously in hard-working rescue centres receive more attention than do the super-breeders on whose productivity the mainland population depends.

Revegetation. We see the same suite of quick-growing species being planted in our conservation landscapes, commonly because they are easy to propagate, they grow quickly and volunteers need to see tangible results.

Trapping can be similarly prone to serving volunteer interest. Body-counts do not win wars. Killing lots of stoats is a seductive goal but numbers do not necessarily equate to improved breeding success for threatened species. The higher catch-rates of dispersing young in autumn feel good but the true biological benefits accrue from the more demanding, less obviously rewarding pursuit of relatively few ultra-wary pregnant females in spring.

Community conservation works best in urban catchments and not in remote areas where New Zealand's threatened biodiversity really needs the muscle. The abundance of volunteers in biologically depauperate urban environments predisposes community effort to nice-to-do projects.

No doubt we can all think of further examples.

How can leadership and professionalism avoid these problems? In our experience, they are essential for co-ordination, quality control and effectiveness.

Nationally, leadership is crucial to ensure that there is an acknowledged keeper of a strategic overview and of the process for building sector-wide consensus on where we're all going and how to get there. It provides an authoritative voice for the collective effort. Informed leadership is also essential within each community group to guide voluntary effort in ways that achieve ecologically sound conservation outcomes.

Leadership at both levels can ensure that hard-won community resources are not misdirected into work of little consequence. It can broker alliances between like-minded organisations. And through national leadership the community has a respected point of reference for mentoring, technical guidance and problem-resolution. In short, national and regional leadership is essential to guide community-led conservation towards the best use of its highly dedicated workforce.

Professionalism brings expert knowledge, direction and rigour to conservation work. It sets and upholds standards. It offers the tools we need to address complex problems correctly and to good effect. It moves us beyond short-term perspectives to conservation's longer time scales.

It takes leadership from professional ecologists for instance to keep us focused on the critical importance of sustaining the yellow-eyed penguin super-breeders in wild populations.

Anyone can set a stoat trap. But controlling a stoat population to densities at which a threatened bird population can increase requires knowledge of dynamics in two populations whose breeding and survival strategies are very different. It also requires understanding of local environmental factors and interactions with other species.

Anyone can plant native trees but it takes a skilled plant ecologist to look back decades or centuries to determine the structure and functioning of the original plant community, and to look ahead as many decades to plan a management strategy to restore that community.

For genuinely effective conservation outcomes, we consider that leadership is more critical in the widely dispersed, highly heterogeneous, often headstrong voluntary sector than it is when dealing with paid staff who have to do what they're told.

In our opinion, no NGO, voluntary group or coalition of community interests is likely to possess the resources, experience, skills or mandates to lead conservation or champion professionalism in New Zealand conservation. Nor do any possess the authority or wherewithal to co-ordinate across conservation's rapidly expanding horizons.

Those duties are best exercised by ecologists in our professional sectors. Given the disparate character of the sector and the costs incurred in dealing with profit-driven research institutions, the duties fall largely and logically to DOC where they sit comfortably with explicit public-service imperatives.

So how might this work?

We see that the maturing of New Zealand's new conservation partnership between State and community will require negotiation over these very duties in the first instance. It will require some maturing on our own part to do that.

Here are some thoughts about that.

We suggest that leadership from DOC will involve more than simply exciting and nurturing community interest. It means investing more of its ecological expertise in selecting and supporting those community initiatives of real conservation worth. Being discerning in this way is a tough call but given the mounting scale of the ecological crisis in this country, merely increasing social participation in conservation is not effective use of DOC's specialists, community funding or other outreach resources. Given that our funding catchments are so narrow and finite, unselective support will result in investments in organisations doomed to fail.

Committing its ecological specialists to outreach activities will require DOC's to look inwards. We know the organisation is working hard to reintegrate its conservation and community workforces and to reconnect its science and technical expertise with decision-making. But its internal arrangements serve managerial needs pre-eminently as an article of New Management faith, so that its expert occupations do not have adequate authority over their own work, much less over anyone else's. The difficulties of outreach are compounded by DOC's

rigorous prioritising of nature conservation work. The community's priorities often lie elsewhere. And it goes without saying that constant restructuring denies its external partnerships the stability and mutual trust which grows through long continuity of contact with familiar, experienced faces.

DOC must become much more familiar with the limitations and workaday realities of community groups. As the onerous requirements of the DOC Community Fund suggest, it is out of touch and, indeed, in danger of alienating its best friends. Likewise, the narrow funding catchments and the average age of volunteers on which citizen groups rely mean that DOC must be brutally realistic about what they can be expected to do.

In return, we community groups must learn not to expect too much of DOC. We need to become more familiar with its capacities and ways of working. The latter are often related to long-standing state-sector conventions and constitutional obligations to the Minister. DOC cannot change these things, no matter how much the new face of conservation may argue otherwise.

We must certainly learn to become less reliant on State funding. Not only are DOC's means severely limited by government policy but it is duty-bound to invest taxpayers' money prudently. And of course, as a large, complex organisation charged with serving multiple social and environmental interests, it does not possess the agility of our own purpose-built enterprises.

More particularly, we must learn to respect ecological experts as leaders and mentors, regardless of their affiliation. That may mean submitting – in a constructive way – to their well-meaning evaluation of our work.