

The Forest Policy Project – a progress report

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At the annual NZIF conference in August 2015 the project management team presented the results of work from four working parties. There was a lively discussion which gave the project some good ideas and direction.

Document drafted

Since then the project team have met a number of times to oversee the preparation of a first draft. The process involved several iterations of drafting and review within the project team.

The bulk of the drafting was initially undertaken by Andrew McEwen. A great many hours of pro bono work have been put in by working parties and the management team since the project began.

To give readers an idea of what this early document looks like it has 11 sections, numerous sub-sections and totals more than 60 pages. There are some 18 policy statements, covering a wide range of issues affecting the sector, followed by explanations and background information.

Possible policy statement

An example of one possible policy statement and explanation is:

Policy statement

The area of publicly owned indigenous conservation forest in which the primary pests (possums, rats and stoats) are controlled must be increased to the maximum extent possible. This will increase the level of ecosystem services provided by these forests for the public good.

Pest control in indigenous forests

Our wildlife is highly vulnerable to several introduced pests. Most New Zealanders have little real appreciation of the current state of health of our indigenous forests. While much of our identity as New Zealanders, along with the 'clean green' brand, is based on these ecosystems, they have been under devastating attack from introduced pests since the arrival of Europeans. For the previous 60 million years the only land mammals living here had been three species of bats (one is now extinct). No other large landmass on Earth has had such a history.



Many of our plants lack defences against browsing and grazing mammals, nor can they exploit mammals to disperse their seeds as do many continental plants. In this 'heaven for herbivores' with plentiful food supplies, no predators, few diseases or competitors and mild winters, many species of birds did not survive the initial onslaught by pests. The outcome of centuries of ecological upheavals has been one of the world's highest rates of bird extinctions and about 1,000 species are currently listed as threatened.

Possums

Possums are now found almost everywhere in New Zealand – there can be as many as 25 per hectare in preferred habitats. A recent study estimated there are around 30 million causing major devastating damage to the composition and structure of the forest. They destroy bird nests and can kill the adults or young of many bird species.

Rats

Ship rats are equally ubiquitous and are very agile climbers. Being nocturnal, they are not easily seen, and

they will eat both plants and birds all year around. They are most abundant in lower elevation mixed podocarp-broadleaf forests.

Stoats

Stoats are the 'perfect predator'; birds that nest on the ground or in holes on trees have no escape. Up to 60% of kiwi chicks are eaten by stoats. Kākāpō and hihi are now only found on islands or sanctuaries completely free of predators and it is believed they cannot survive where stoats are present.

Effect of all three predators

All three predators eat eggs and young birds and are difficult to control. Stoats are carnivores so do not browse on plants, but rats and possums have a huge effect on plant life. The combination of all three together at the same time is particularly devastating to our biodiversity. At least 25 million native birds are killed every year, many more in heavy seeding 'mast' years. The loss or decline of such species, which are important seed dispersers and pollinators of native plants, will lead to other cascading ecological changes. The continuing damage is a huge and accelerating problem.

DOC efforts

The Department of Conservation (DOC) manages about five million hectares of forest, but at the most only 12.5% of this area has pest control operations carried out. Most forests are thus incapable of providing ecosystem services to anything like their potential level.

To effectively respond, our conservation agencies need far more secure long-term funding that is tailored to meet scientifically determined levels of conservation need. DOC's 'Battle for our Birds' programme covers a significant portion of our most vulnerable forests, but is not securely funded on an annual basis. The scale of these operations must be enlarged to cover as much of the conservation forest estate as possible.

Further staged drafting process

The next step in the policy project is to employ a suitable writer to take the current draft, which is a policy document much too large to circulate widely or publish, into a concisely written and polished non-technical document easily accessible to a wide range of audiences.

The next draft, once completed to the satisfaction of the project team, is planned to be initially circulated late this year to all interested parties within the sector for review and comment. This will be followed by the release of a revised draft more widely within the sector and elsewhere. Decisions on how the policy will be finally presented to a national audience have yet to be settled.

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