

Sandra Lee has been closely involved in conservation and Forest and Bird for nine years. She and her husband Michael live on Waiheke Island with their children on a small rural block surrounded by the bush and native birds they hold so dear.

Sandra is also Deputy Chairperson of the Waiheke County Council, a local authority which she is keen to see make a strong commitment to conservation. She has been on the County Council for five years and sees it as having a vital role to play in preserving the distinctive natural and cultural features of Waiheke that make it loved by residents and visitors alike.

Sandra was elected to the Forest and Bird National Executive in 1987. She has since played a central role in guiding the Society to appreciate the role of local authorities. More importantly she has helped us to better appreciate the Maori dimension in conservation and protection of our natural and cultural heritage.

Forest and Bird: Sandra, your upbringing has strongly influenced your attitude to the land. What is your whakapapa and do you take a great interest in Maoritanga?

Lee: I am descended from the Ngai Tahu, Ngati Kahununu and Ngati Toa tribes. My great, great, great, great grandfather Tuhuru was Paramount Chief of the Poutini Ngai Tahu of the West Coast (South Island). I was fortunate as a child because in the house in which I grew up lived my great grandfather, Tame Whakamaui Pihawai, who was born in Tuahiwi Pa in 1874. This wise old kaumatua had a significant influence on my early childhood. So of course my Maoritanga and ancestral lands have always been of absolute importance to me.

Forest and Bird: Sandra, Forest and Bird has always had a close interest in the West Coast. How do you feel about the West Coast and its lakes, rivers, native forests, mountains and seacoast?

Lee: Te Wahi Pounamu (West Coast) is a very tapu, powerful place. The magnitude of our mountains, strength of our rivers and beauty of our forests, so worthy of preservation, serve to remind us of our true scale in the scheme of things. I will always fight to retain our ancestral lands there because they have been bequeathed to us by the tupuna. The responsibility that the land brings takes me home several times a year and probably when I'm older I will return there.



Sandra Lee: Conservation movement must be fair and consistent over Maori issues. Photo: Gary Baigent

Forest and Bird: Has European settlement of Westland been sensitive to those values?

Lee: I think not. It is tragic that little of the huge fortunes made from ripping off of the natural resources, such as our forests, gold and coal, has been reinvested back into the Coast in environmentally sensitive, less destructive alternatives. While our sacred pounamu is being plundered on the Arakura, just a few miles north at Mawhera (Greymouth) my people as owners of the city continue to be prevented from charging market rentals for their land by legislation. Perpetual lease provisions ensure to this day that we cannot ever have use of our land for ourselves. I cannot recall the Pakaha Coasters mobilising to support my people over these sorts of injustices.

The saying "Coasters are an endangered species" is popular with some Pakeha down there — they most certainly will be as long as they refuse to accept the need to diversify economically away from continual natural resource exploitation. After all, after 1000 years of occupation my people had to change, which is why so many of us have had to move to other areas for employment and education.

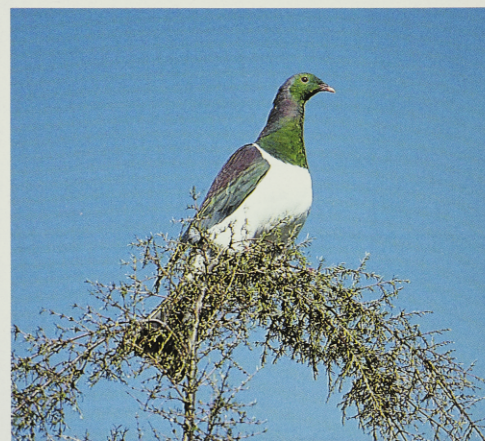
Forest and Bird: Do you feel Maori people and the conservation movement share common interests?

Lee: Yes, Maori people have always been conservationists and many of our National Parks have been given by my people. I think many Maori are heartened by the growing conservation movement in Aotearoa. It signals New Zealanders are now able to accept the unique natural beauty and essence of this land (or what remains of it) without the need to continue to transform it into another England.

Forest and Bird: Can you give any examples where we have helped each other?

Lee: In the years I have been involved in Forest and Bird, and most recently the executive, it has been good to see the gradual development of a partnership between the conservation movement and the Maori people. I think a few examples best illustrate this:-

- On Waiheke Forest and Bird helped the campaign and petition by the tangata whenua to retain communal control and reserve protection for the Maori Affairs block and its important bush remnants. This area adjoined Forest and Bird's Te Matuku reserve.
- Forest and Bird has worked with the Te Hapua people of the far north in their efforts to protect rare flax snails, bush and important urupa (burial sites).
- In the coastal conservation field it has been excellent to see Forest and Bird working alongside Maori communities to restore the Maketu estuary, to oppose harbour reclamation for marinas, to control sewage dumping and protect traditional kai moana areas.
- Probably the issue above all else where we all worked closely together was in opposing the alienation of natural and culturally important public lands to the new State Corporations.



Is it appropriate in the 20th century to allow keri keri harvesting, as some Maoris would wish? Sandra Lee argues that the Maori culture does not need to resort to harvesting threatened species in order to survive.

Forest and Bird: Do you see issues looming where we will need to work more closely together — particularly the younger people who want to develop a closer relationship with the land rather than exploiting it?