

## Putting conservation on the front bench

**B**IODIVERSITY IS the jargon buzz word these days. Its spread through conservation circles has been rapid, paralleling the rise of the word ecology a generation or more ago.

This concerted focus on biodiversity flows from the 1992 Rio "Earth Summit" where the International Convention on Biological Diversity was one of the major outcomes. New Zealand signed the convention at Rio and it came into force the following year. The convention's 42 articles prescribe a charter for the conservation of the world's biological diversity which, if adopted and implemented by the 142 signatory countries, could have immense environmental benefits.

In its green package earlier this year, the National government allocated \$410,000 for the development of New Zealand's Biodiversity Strategy. The Department of Conservation is coordinating preparation of the strategy over the next two years in conjunction with the Ministry for the Environment. At a time when the indigenous life of New Zealand's lands and waters has never been more diminished and threatened, an effective agenda for putting the conservation of biological diversity at the forefront of governmental, corporate, iwi and public priorities has never been more urgent.

The strategy can ensure nature thrives not just in our national parks, but in all other areas of the country. It would recognise that the frontline for nature protection is at our wharves and airports where new environmental pests are entering the country, and would recognise that those who live here, plus visitors from overseas, wish to see native wildlife flourishing in and close to settled areas.

Nature-friendly cities would be developed so our children can see kereru and tui feeding in kowhai trees in their street. The pioneering efforts of some farmers to protect their indigenous forest pockets, and to rid their farms of magpies, ferrets and possums would be celebrated and encouraged. Home gardeners, supported by their local council, would check the superb Good Plant Guide produced by the Northland Regional Council when buying plants to ensure none have the potential to become environmental weeds.

For the biodiversity strategy to be effective it will need to be promulgated as a national policy statement under the Resource Management Act. This would give guidance and direction to local authorities on issues such as habitat destruction, threatened species protection and restoration priorities. The worth of the biodiversity strategy will depend on the extent and quality of public input into its development. The kereru, kiwi, blue penguin and red moki cannot speak for themselves – it is up to Forest and Bird, its members and like-minded people to advocate their cause.

**"The concept of biodiversity must not become corrupted to encompass alien species harmful to our natural ecology. To do so would be contrary to the convention and contrary to the spirit and intent of our own conservation laws."**

The material wealth of modern New Zealand society has been achieved by displacing nature from much of the country. We have a moral duty to ensure nature can co-exist with us on these ecologically amazing southern islands.

There must be no confusion about the coverage of a biodiversity strategy. Deerstalkers, duck hunters, anglers and at least one misguided academic have already argued that introduced plants and animals should now be embraced as part of New Zealand's biodiversity. This is dangerous territory. As the Kaimanawa horse debate demonstrates, every introduced species has its fan club.

DoC has even been tempted into exploring this off-the-wall notion.

A recent DoC brochure on the strategy divides New Zealand's biodiversity into two components – indigenous and exotic. The latter, we are informed, includes introduced species valued for recreational hunting and fishing. What nonsense. Those who wish to champion deer, trout or mallard ducks must find other forums. Deer and New Zealand's native forests are not natural partners.

The text of the Convention on Biological Diversity is emphatic on this point. It promotes "the conservation of ecosystems and natural habitats and the maintenance and recovery of viable populations of

species in their natural surroundings". In other words the conservation of native plants and animals and their habitats and ecosystems. It also requires signatory parties to "prevent the introduction of, control or eradicate those alien species which threaten ecosystems, habitats or species".

Attention is given to "ex-situ" conservation such as zoo breeding programmes for endangered animals, botanic gardens or seed banks and to the conservation of genetic diversity in domestic and cultivated species. But this should not threaten indigenous biodiversity.

Nowhere does the convention allow the concept of biodiversity conservation to be twisted to encompass the conservation of feral or wild populations of introduced species. Possums are part of Australia's biodiversity and thar are part of the Himalaya's biodiversity. Neither are part of New Zealand's.

The World Conservation Union's guide to the convention identifies New Zealand as a country suffering from severe problems of plant and animal introductions. Don't we know it. The concept of biodiversity must not become corrupted in New Zealand to include alien species harmful to our natural ecology. To do so would be contrary to the convention and contrary to the spirit and intent of our own conservation laws. It might seem obvious, but it bears repeating: if we don't look after this country's unique native species, ecosystems and landscapes there is no-one else who will.

To have your say on the development of the biodiversity strategy, register your interest with the Biodiversity Strategy Coordinator, Department of Conservation, PO Box 10-420, Wellington (fax 04 471 1082). You could start by asking DoC to abandon its erroneous concept of exotic biodiversity. Copies of the convention are available from Forest and Bird, PO Box 631, Wellington, for \$4.

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