

## Sandra Lee: Fresh Perspectives on Conservation

Ten years ago, Sandra Lee was a member of Forest and Bird's national executive; now she is Minister of Conservation. Her concern then, that Forest and Bird should recognise the Treaty of Waitangi in its constitution, is matched today with a real concern that Maori should have an appropriate role in conservation.

Politically, Sandra Lee is leader of a Maori sovereignty party, Mana Motuhake; but she allies herself with New Labour and the Democrats in the political Alliance, itself an element in the coalition Government. Elected to Parliament in 1993 as Mana Motuhake member for Auckland Central, she is now an Alliance list MP and deputy leader of the Alliance. Her senior ranking as number seven in the Cabinet reflects both the status of conservation in the coalition Government and her further duties as Minister of Local Government, and as an Associate Minister of Maori Affairs.

Sandra Lee has a reputation for successfully combining a political career with a personal commitment to conservation.

She was a founding member of what is now the Hauraki Islands branch of Forest and Bird, advocating conservation issues while a member and latterly chair of the Waiheke County Council from 1983 till 1989. When Waiheke was merged with Auckland City she was elected the island's ward councillor for two terms. A high profile in local politics won her support far beyond the constituency of Mana Motuhake (she was already deputy co-leader of the Alliance) — in 1993, Sandra Lee became the first Maori woman to be elected by a general electorate, unseating her Labour opponent, Richard Prebble (now leader of the ACT party).

In Parliament, Sandra Lee has often taken up the cause of conservation. Her first achievement as Minister was to guide the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Bill into law, with a hugely supportive majority. (The Bill fell off the National Government's last-minute order paper after unexpected set-backs relating to the return of public land at Takapuna Head, North Shore City. The land, long occupied by the defence forces, is now to be returned to public ownership,

benefiting a burgeoning city short of local parks and reserves.) She gives much of the credit for the park to the advocacy of National's Minister of Conservation, Denis Marshall, and the forum ideas of his successor, Dr Nick Smith. (See Conservation Briefs, page 6).

The conservation policies of the Alliance and Labour both make reference to possible forms of management for conservation land involving Maori and the Crown. Sandra Lee says such policies shouldn't be read in isolation from the parties' Treaty of Waitangi policies.

'The sky doesn't fall in if we have joint management between the Crown, the public and tangata whenua,' she says. ('The public is part of this joint management process,' she confirms.) 'Treaty settlements need to be made on a case-by case-basis, consulting local people.'

'The previous Government's model was fundamentally flawed. It was very much focused on the fiscal approach.'

'No one opposed it as vociferously as I did, particularly over the Ngai Tahu settlement.'

'There are significant cultural issues to be addressed in these settlements,' she says, instancing protection for Maori waahi tapu (sacred sites) on public land. 'But there are over-arching issues to be settled too. We want to create jobs, and close the economic gaps. Limiting claim settlements solely to conservation land in recompense for Treaty breaches is not the best solution. That way Maori are likely to end up as "lone park rangers" with a huge management problem. Instead, money needs to be

spent acquiring land which is economically viable. The key test is whether or not the settlement land provides a real economic resource base, which doesn't have to mean DoC land would be alienated.'

And this needs to be done locally. The Ngai Tahu settlement did nothing for her tribe, the Poutini Ngai Tahu, according to Sandra Lee. Its concentration on wider South Island issues overrode their regional West Coast concerns.

'Treaty settlements need to be made with local people, and hapu in particular. Sometimes this may mean passing all management of a reserve to Maori. More often it's simply a matter of recognising Maori have a clear stake and interest in the place.'

'Joint management does not necessarily have to be about 50:50 control of an area between Crown and Maori. The Hauraki Gulf Marine Park (which has six iwi representatives on its guiding forum) is an excellent model. It requires tangata whenua and all agencies to be proactive in protecting the gulf, not reactive.'

Improved funding for the Department of Conservation is part of both Alliance and Labour policies. Sandra Lee talks about 'clawing across funds' from other sources to build up conservation funding. 'I'm hopeful the outcome of the biodiversity strategy will help pull across additional resources.... Regional development funds and employment schemes, and the developing visitor industries are possible resources which can benefit the environment too.'

— Gordon Ell



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*The Minister of Conservation, Sandra Lee, at the first Cabinet meeting of the Labour-Alliance Government. Ranked seventh in Cabinet, Sandra Lee also holds the portfolios of Minister of Local Government and Associate Minister of Maori Affairs. She is leader of the Mana Motuhake Party, a list MP, and deputy leader of the Alliance. While well-known as an Auckland, Sandra Lee is active in the affairs of the Poutini Ngai Tahu of the West Coast, South Island. She also has tribal links with Ngati Toa Rangatira and Ngati Kahungunu. She has two adult daughters, two granddaughters and a grandson.*