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Department of Conservation: Prioritising and partnering to manage biodiversity

Progress in responding to
the Auditor-General's
recommendations



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Introduction

- 1.1 The biodiversity in New Zealand has been described as unique and among the most varied on Earth. We have an exceptionally high number of species that are not found anywhere else in the world.
- 1.2 In 2012, our report *Department of Conservation: Prioritising and partnering to manage biodiversity* looked at how well the Department of Conservation (the Department) was prioritising work and working in partnership with other agencies and groups to manage biodiversity. For brevity, some of the material discussed in this article assumes that readers are familiar with the content of our 2012 report.
- 1.3 In late 2015, we began to assess the Department's progress in implementing the recommendations from our 2012 report. We met with senior staff and asked the Department to assess its progress. We analysed the evidence provided.

Summary of our findings

- 1.4 Overall, the Department has made limited progress with most of our recommendations. Work is currently under way to make improvements and embed practices and processes as part of a four-year programme of work.
- 1.5 The Department has undergone further restructuring since our 2012 report. New models, practices, and procedures are still being developed. Because they are recent changes, more time is needed before we can assess their effectiveness.
- 1.6 We will monitor the Department's ongoing progress with our recommendations through our annual audit activities, and we anticipate returning within the next few years to do a full audit.
- 1.7 The rest of this article provides more detail on our 2012 findings and recommendations and the findings of our latest work.

Our 2012 findings and recommendations

- 1.8 In our 2012 report, we said that the Department was recognised for its leading conservation methods and practices but was not “winning the battle against the threats to New Zealand’s indigenous species and the habitats they live in”. We also stated that “at best, efforts to date are merely slowing the decline of biodiversity in New Zealand, which is a cause for concern”.
- 1.9 We acknowledged the difficult and complicated task the Department has in managing biodiversity. The task crosses geographical boundaries – between private and public land and waterways – and organisational boundaries at various levels of government and outside government.
- 1.10 The Department is responsible for managing biodiversity on conservation land and waterways. Outside the conservation estate, the Department provides support, advice, and funding to others who lead biodiversity management on private land. The Department’s ability to effectively work with others in protecting indigenous biodiversity is highly dependent on its ability to engage willing partners in a variety of collaborative arrangements.
- 1.11 Despite the Department’s difficult operating environment, the report identified the need for significant improvements and made eight recommendations. These recommendations had three broad themes. We recommended that the Department make improvements in:
- prioritising to manage biodiversity (recommendations 1 and 2);
 - strategic integration (recommendations 3, 4, and 5); and
 - working with others to manage biodiversity (recommendations 6, 7, and 8).
- 1.12 The Appendix lists each of the eight recommendations we made in 2012.

Prioritisation

- 1.13 The job of managing biodiversity on conservation land is greater than the resources available. The Department is able to actively manage only a small proportion of New Zealand's conservation land and threatened species.
- 1.14 As we said in 2012, it is logical for the Department to prioritise its work and to look to other partners, community groups, and commercial enterprises for resources, given the size of the responsibility and the Department's funding constraints.
- 1.15 Since 2012, the Department has made some progress toward implementing a prioritisation tool. Restructuring has helped to create more capacity, strategies are being developed, and goals are being set. This has enabled the use of the prioritisation tool to be embedded into corporate planning. The Department has also run workshops to support staff to use the prioritisation tool, and developed guidance for staff.
- 1.16 The Department is working on developing a long-term monitoring and reporting system. This is a three-tiered system for monitoring biodiversity and is being progressively implemented as work on each tier is completed. The first tier (which focuses on monitoring activities throughout public conservation land) has been implemented and is now producing evidence that can underpin the Department's work.
- 1.17 The Department has completed work on a framework to guide investment in the second tier (monitoring activities in managed areas). Implementing this component of the system relies on aligning and redirecting current monitoring effort throughout the organisation. We have not seen evidence of a time frame for completing this work. However, we understand that a review of monitoring projects is currently under way, which will help to determine the scale and nature of change needed to bring this work into alignment with the framework.
- 1.18 A range of projects is also being carried out as part of the third tier (building on research).
- 1.19 The Department appears to be carrying out a lot of monitoring and reporting activity, but there was no evidence supplied that points to how systematic it is, or how it fits into and links in with the prioritisation tool.
- 1.20 Monitoring the prioritisation approach (which has not been fully implemented) and more effectively and efficiently monitoring biodiversity remains a challenge because tools and processes are not yet fully in place.

Strategic integration

- 1.21 In 2012, the Department was aware that some aspects of the way it had worked in the past needed to improve, and that it needed to be more targeted in how it works.
- 1.22 Since our report, three conservation management strategies have been reviewed and updated, and agreement has been reached on them. A further seven are at different stages of development. In our view, this represents slow progress against our original recommendation.
- 1.23 Since 2012, the Department has had a “regional alignment” that has changed the number of regions that New Zealand is divided into for conservation purposes. Reviews of conservation management strategies that were under way during the alignment, and those reviewed since, have been adjusted to reflect the new regions. However, the strategies already reviewed were not changed.
- 1.24 The Department has a number of working agreements for conservation projects with other partners that have been implemented in the past few years. These agreements have been revised or implemented as the opportunity has arisen rather than using a systematic approach. The Department told us that, rather than employing a systematic approach, it reviews and monitors pilot projects, learns what works well through experience, and applies the improved model for partnerships elsewhere.
- 1.25 We have yet to see evidence of the Department’s review and evaluation process, or whether this has actually helped improve working agreements.
- 1.26 The Department has shown that it has long-term plans for some of its large commercial/philanthropic partnership projects. We saw examples of some long-term plans with partners but could not gauge how widespread these are. The Department told us it is working on a register that will include all of its formal agreements with partners. In our view, this will help the Department to track, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of these agreements more easily.
- 1.27 We have seen evidence of the Department applying a more rigorous approach to working with smaller community partners, including providing longer term (three-year) funding for those groups.

Working with others to manage biodiversity

- 1.28 We have seen some examples of the Department taking a proactive approach to managing conservation risks at a national and regional level. This is where the Department appears to have made the most progress toward implementing our recommendations.
- 1.29 To support the Department's goals and ensure a better regional response, a change programme is being rolled out to all districts, finishing in late 2016. This involves new roles and responsibilities, new processes and procedures, and staff training. In our view, this is a step in the right direction. However, it is too soon to tell what the effect of the change programme has been or will be.
- 1.30 The Department has made good progress in producing tools for preparing working agreements with partners. To do this, it has reviewed and improved its relationship agreement templates, and designed and tested new agreement templates for low-risk activities. The Department was also finalising guidance for partnership agreements established with community organisations. Other systems and tools have also been developed, including stakeholder prioritisation and planning tools, and a relationship management framework for priority stakeholders. There is still more work needed in some areas, such as the identification and recording of relationship managers.
- 1.31 The Biodiversity Advice Fund is now the DOC Community Fund. Arrangements for the Fund are improved: the process to apply is clear; a more consistent approach has been implemented; and longer-term funding is now considered in supporting community groups. Funding applications can now cover up to three years with one application. Funding is released depending on milestones and outcomes agreed and achieved.
- 1.32 Applying to the Fund is more accessible – new guidance on the criteria and eligibility is now online, and applications now use a two-stage process.

Recommendations

- 1.33 We recommend that the Department of Conservation:
- act on all outstanding recommendations from our 2012 report and actively monitor and evaluate progress through clear milestones and objectives; and
 - focus on developing and embedding the improvements made so far, with particular emphasis on consistently applying the prioritisation tool, better monitoring and performance management, and an enhanced approach to working in partnership.

Appendix:

Recommendations from our 2012 audit

Prioritising to manage biodiversity

We recommend that the Department of Conservation:

1. put in place an implementation and risk management plan for its new prioritisation tools, ensuring that:
 - staff have the skills and support needed to successfully use the new prioritisation processes; and
 - there is adequate ongoing consultation with communities and key stakeholders and partners as part of prioritisation; and
2. ensure that there is effective long-term monitoring and reporting of the effects of biodiversity management, including through the Ministry for the Environment's national environmental reporting.

Strategic integration

We recommend that the Department of Conservation:

3. renew all conservation management strategies in a timely manner and before they expire;
4. prepare and implement working agreements with local authorities as a standard practice for managing biodiversity in the regions; and
5. establish longer-term plans and resourcing commitments with partners that are working on core biodiversity operations.

Working with others to manage biodiversity

We recommend that:

6. where biodiversity of national significance is at risk and requires timely and integrated responses, the Department of Conservation's national office ensure that effective regional leadership and co-ordination with other agencies is in place to respond to risks appropriately.

We recommend that the Department of Conservation:

7. produce policies, practices, and tools for preparing working agreements and collaborative action plans that would be appropriate for the range of partnerships it will be involved in; and
8. review the criteria for the Biodiversity Advice Fund for larger multiple-year collaborative projects, advocate for using standardised tools and templates, and set out specific reporting requirements for repeated funding applications.

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