



CONFIDENTIAL TO FOREST & BIRD MEMBERS

Discussion document: **Is our structure and our Society still 'fit for purpose'?**

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Introduction

This paper is for discussion at the regional meetings we are holding to get ideas from our membership about how we can strengthen Forest & Bird and ensure we are fit for purpose. In particular, we would like to gauge support for a constitutional change to enable all members to engage in the process of electing the Board. We would also like to stimulate member and branch feedback on how we can increase the active engagement of our members.

In 2018, the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Inc. will be 95 years old. Our mission – to protect and restore nature in Aotearoa/New Zealand – has remained much the same, but the context in which we operate has changed markedly. On the one hand the loss sustained by nature, and the pressures on it from habitat loss and degradation, invasive pests and – increasingly – climate change have become massively greater. On the more hopeful side our work, and that of others has led to both increased Government action (eg through the formation and operation of DOC and environmental protection law) and to increase public awareness, concern and action on conservation and environmental protection.

In recent years there has been a massive shift in the way conservation's 'purposes' are seen: we are no longer focused mainly on protecting scenery or 'museum exhibit' small patches of bush where people of the future can see what our country used to be like: rather, we are now attempting to restore habitats and species at landscape scale, and to eradicate invasive pests, rather than only controlling them. We engage with every aspect of our society in working to re-engineer our economy to require it to serve environmental goals, such as minimising the adverse effects of climate change. These changes have occurred in large part because of the work of Forest & Bird, but despite the huge increase in people concerned about conservation and environmental protection, relatively few of these people are choosing to express their concern or take action on their concern through Forest & Bird.

This paper explores why that may be, proposes a specific constitutional amendment relating to our democratic process, and aims to stimulate discussion and feedback on how we could do things differently to assist the Board in its decision making.

Structure

While there have been some adjustments over the years, the basic structure has remained the same: we are an incorporated society, so are governed by the Incorporated Societies Act, and have a constitution that complies with the Act. People can become members of the Society. The members of the Society elect a Board, but do so indirectly: they can become 'affiliated' to a branch, which appoints delegates to a Council that meets annually to elect the Board (an 'electoral college' model). Branches are established or disestablished by the Board, and are accountable to it. The Board is also responsible for setting the Society's policies.

Does this structure serve us well?

The point of this discussion is to ensure that we do all we can to maximise our capability and capacity for our vital conservation work, across the whole spectrum, including planting, pest control, education, advocacy and all the other functions we have provided over our history.

These issues are not unique to Forest & Bird. Many other organisations, particularly those who, like us, have been around for a long time, are struggling with the multiple challenges of attracting and keeping engagement from a changing population, who are increasingly 'time-poor'. Overall, the strategy must be to create multiple opportunities for people to engage with Forest & Bird, that are characterised by recognising constraints that people have for engagement and offering 'rewards' that are meaningful. The Forest & Bird Youth Strategy and our plan for improving Iwi and Hapū engagement are two steps in the right direction but it seems wise to consider whether other changes could help create this range of opportunities.

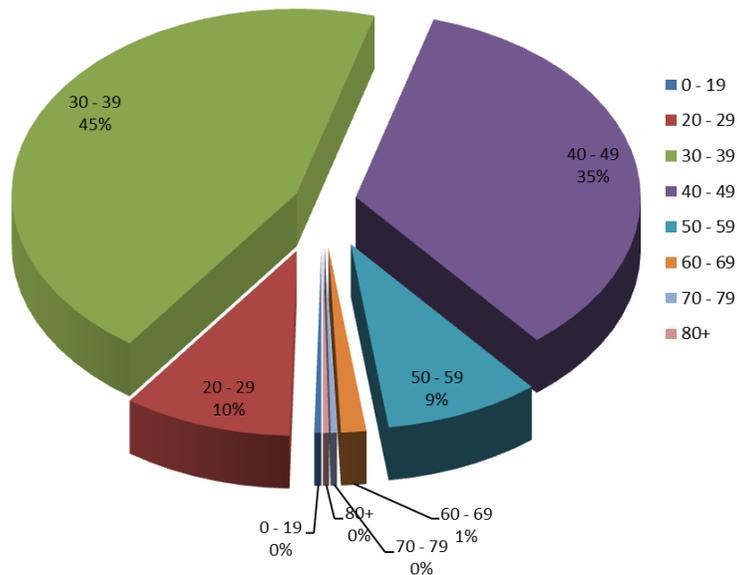
The issues we are looking at particularly are around membership and how members participate in our democratic process and in our on-the-ground 'doing'. Our membership structure is complex and rigid. Membership fees are generally set at a level that covers most, but not all costs of servicing membership, and represent a relatively small part of our overall revenue. There are more than ten times as many people who support Forest & Bird on Facebook, for example, than are members, and we also have more regular givers. Yet members are the basic unit of the democracy - the owners - of the Society, and this suggests that membership represents only a small fraction of the people who have a 'stake' in Forest & Bird or who support us. It should be one of our goals to maximise this democratic ownership by growing our membership. A further goal is to maximise the participation of members in decision-making in the Society, volunteering, and financial support.

1. **Our governance system is not very democratic** - Only a very small proportion (perhaps 5%) of our members are involved in branches, and therefore the vast bulk of our membership is not involved in governance of the organisation, including electing the board, and forming policy, creating a democratic legitimacy problem. In similar organisations the number of members taking part in electing their Boards suggests direct member voting is one way of increasing member engagement.
2. **Our membership definition does not reflect our support base** - Our platform as the 'voice for nature' is based on our large support base which has been traditionally based on our membership. However times have changed and traditional membership numbers are static or declining. This is in a large part a reflection of the change in the way we have generated income by encouraging regular giving which, while it has seen us grow to an annual income of \$1.693 million in 2000 to \$6.88 million in 2017, has seen our membership numbers decline from 10,455 in 2000 to 6,575 in 2017 with 11% of this figure being life members. We now have more regular donors than traditional members, but our treatment of these two groups is inconsistent and muddled. Our declining membership is also a reflection of the way people now use technology to engage, and do not feel the same drive to be traditional subscription paying members of organisations. This is seen in the impressive numbers of people who now follow Forest & Bird on Facebook and support our messages – in 2018 we have over 107,000 people following us on Facebook.

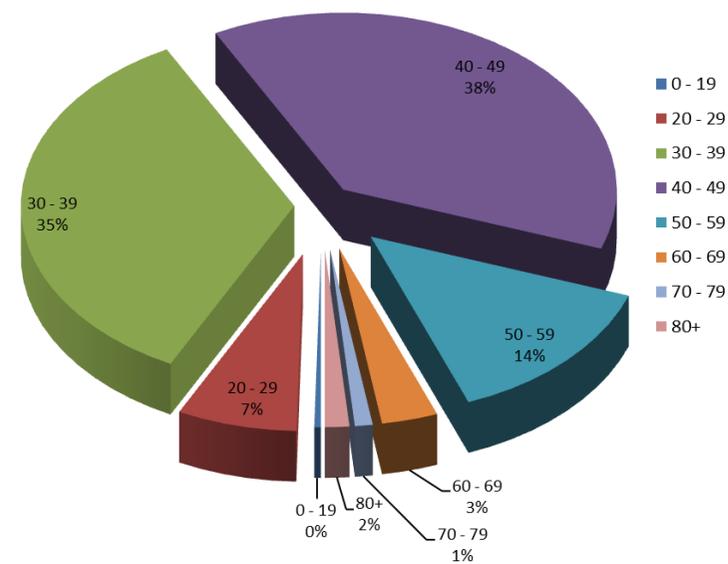
Proposed actions for your feedback:

- Make membership simpler, cheaper and compatible with the more flexible ways people will be engaging with the society in the future
 - Make regular givers automatically members, unless specifically requested by the giver that they do not want to be a member.
 - Increase the direct sense of ownership from members by electing the Board directly by members, rather than through an electoral college (Council) *** *this will require a change to our Constitution.*
 - Develop combinations of products, services and opportunities to create stronger value propositions for membership
 - Better recognise our supporters - not as voting-right members but as people who share our aims and our 'voice'.
3. **Our active volunteer support base is declining** - In most parts of the country the number of active volunteers is declining and average age increasing, leading to reduced capacity for important conservation work; and
 4. **We are not engaging younger adults (including younger adult members) in our activities** - The age profile of active volunteers and those involved in branch meetings or activities does not reflect the age structure of our actual membership. In particular, while the bulk of our members are younger adults, we mostly don't see them in our branch meetings and activities, even though in cities, at least, people in this age group are involved in other conservation organisations.

Regular Givers



Members



The issues identified in 3. and 4. particularly affect our branches who attempt to serve multiple functions: they organise conservation work – both practical work and education, they have to try to provide the indirect democracy by which, for example, the Board is elected, and they often end up effectively becoming “social clubs”, providing social interaction opportunities. The multiple functions that branches are trying to perform, and the slightly old-fashioned administrative systems we often use can mean that someone who comes along to a branch meeting just wanting to be able to do valued conservation work, may never come back. Most active members will recognise the story of people who came for one or two meetings but that was the last we saw from them. An inevitable consequence is that some branches can become opportunities for old friends to get together, but which may be difficult for new people to penetrate. Another challenge seems to be that many of our volunteering opportunities involve longer term commitment whereas, particularly at the beginning, potential volunteers are increasingly looking for opportunities to donate a one-off period of time, socialise with other volunteers, and probably have a bite to eat and some fun. Not all members will choose to ‘affiliate’ with a branch, but equally branches should be able to attract new volunteers beyond our membership (though it would be great if they joined!)

Proposed actions to increase member participation in branches and our on- the-ground ‘doing’ for your feedback:

- Assist branches in arranging and organising new initiatives to engage would-be conservationists that are not currently working with Forest & Bird
- Encourage branches to hold activities, meetings to organise work (or for educational purposes), and social event at times and in places that are as accessible as possible for as wide a range of people as possible (eg not in someone’s own home or in work/school hours)
- assist branches in whatever ways are appropriate to ensure each branch can focus on conservation initiatives rather than being bogged down in the administrative aspects of running a branch
- Provide communication conduits to enable would-be volunteers who engage with the Society, to link into local conservation projects they are interested in.
- Provide conservation issues groups and networks, administered and driven by an appropriate staff member, that enable geographically isolated branch members to connect with people elsewhere in New Zealand with similar interests or issues they face.

We recognise that many of these actions could require more dedicated staff support and resourcing. We want your ideas about whether you support the suggested actions, how we could do them, or any ideas as to how we could improve things.

The proposal to change our election process from Council based voting to membership based voting will require Constitutional change, so we particularly need member and branch feedback on whether there is support for this. If there is sufficient support a formal proposal will be fully scoped and put forward to the Council at the June AGM.

Discussion Points

Forest & Bird needs to make changes to honour Captain Sanderson and all the other pioneers, by ensuring the organisation is ready and able to meet the challenges of a changed environment and a changed society in the 21st Century. The Board has already taken some steps in this direction and now makes the suggestions in this document to reverse our declining membership, particularly to involve our younger members who are mostly disengaged with our branches, and help our branches to organise and carry out conservation work, without unnecessary administrative tasks.

Realising the vast wealth of experience and skillsets prevalent in our membership and branches, we are seeking thoughts and input as to where you see the role for branches in the future, can branches be more effective, can they be more vibrant, and ways in which the Board and the wider Society can assist you to achieve these ends.

If we proceed to make these changes we will need to make some changes to the Constitution. With this in mind a series of regional meetings will be held in March and April, where members can discuss these ideas and indicate support (or otherwise) for them, and propose other ideas. Please come.

You are also welcome to email your ideas to fitforpurpose@forestandbird.org.nz by 20 May 2018.

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Mark Hangar
President, Forest & Bird

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Hague', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kevin Hague
Chief Executive, Forest & Bird