



Forest & Bird

TE REO O TE TAIAO | *Giving Nature a Voice*

Treasured lands at risk CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP LAND

1/3 of all conservation land, 28% of our biodiversity priority sites, more than 3000 parcels of land.

The **Charleston Conservation Area**, an ex-timberland lowland podocarp forest that is now stewardship land, flanked by the Paparoa National Park. Photo: Neil Silverwood

New Zealand's conservation land is the country's crown jewel, providing clean water supplies, flood protection, carbon sinks, tramping and hunting, as well as the key scenic infrastructure of our thriving tourism industry. **Stewardship land** – around a third of all conservation land – contains some of our most spectacular landscapes and is home to many of our more than 4000 threatened plants and animals.



Outstanding natural values

The glacial moraines on the **Cascade Plateau**, a reminder of the enormity of the Ice Age glaciers which once covered this land, are part of the Arawhata Conservation Area. This stewardship area is part of the Te Wāhipounamu South West New Zealand World Heritage Area. Photo: Neil Silverwood

The stewardship land classification was intended only as a temporary measure. As a result it has suffered under the lowest level of legal protection. It is perceived as ‘low value’ and therefore more easily available for development and extractive industries. This needs to change. Stewardship lands need legal protection reflecting the outstanding ecological values they hold.

When the Department of Conservation was formed in 1987, land considered to have significant conservation value came into the new Department from sources like the Wildlife Service, the Department of Lands and Survey and the New Zealand Forest Service.

Much of this land was obviously incredibly special, such as areas now within the Te Wāhipounamu South West New Zealand World Heritage Area, one of a limited number of natural sites recognised by UNESCO as having outstanding values worldwide. The 2.6 million hectare heritage area encompasses four national parks, but also has large areas with only weak stewardship protection.

This lack of protection does not do justice to the conservation value of the land. Numerous Department of Conservation priority sites for biodiversity lie within stewardship parts of the heritage area. In 2013, 28% of all New Zealand’s priority sites for biodiversity were on stewardship land.



Important additions

Photo: Neil Silverwood

The intention in 1987 was for stewardship land to be reclassified into other categories. However, most of this work has never been done. There are now more than 3000 parcels of land in the stewardship classification, with new land added regularly.

The Nature Heritage Fund is a major player in new conservation land purchases, spending \$163 million to protect around 340,000 ha since its inception in 1990. Areas were sold to the Government with the expectation that this would lead to better protection. Yet years after acquisition, some land remains vulnerable to the exploitation that both the seller and purchaser sought to avoid.

The nearly 80,000 ha St James Station was purchased by the Nature Heritage Fund in 2008. A decade later consultation to review the land classification is only just beginning.

Other additions came when the West Coast Forest Accord was cancelled in 2000 and the region received \$120 million in compensation. These ex-timberland forests were assessed and almost all were found worthy of protection, with around 130,000 ha of forest added to our conservation land. While much of this new conservation land acquired other classifications some remains in the stewardship category.

The Charleston Conservation Area, for example, is home to magnificent lowland podocarp forests and caves and is surrounded on either side by Paparoa National Park.



The **Pisa Conservation Area**, stewardship land acquired through tenure review, is home to distinctive landforms and ecological systems. Photo: Craig McKenzie

Yet whilst a driving factor in the formation of the Park was the protection of unmodified areas of limestone karst, the majority of the significant caves remain outside the National Park boundary in stewardship areas like Charleston.

Tenure review of publicly-owned high country stations has also resulted in additions of approximately 370,000 ha of conservation land. Much of this high country tussock and alpine landscape has been left in stewardship status.



Lake Tennyson, where the bed of the lake is scenic reserve and the land to the right is the Molesworth Recreation Reserve. To the left lies the St James Conservation Area, which has been stewardship land since its purchase by the Crown in 2008.

Photo: Neil Silverwood



Future proofing

The Waitaha River, where development of a proposed hydro scheme would largely de-water a wild and scenic gorge.

Photo: Neil Silverwood

Their low level of legal protection means stewardship areas are often targeted for development. While the Old Ghost Road is now one of New Zealand's most loved wilderness bike rides, the Mōkihinui was recently threatened with inundation by the Meridian hydro proposal. A Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment report on stewardship land quoted the project manager for the development as saying:

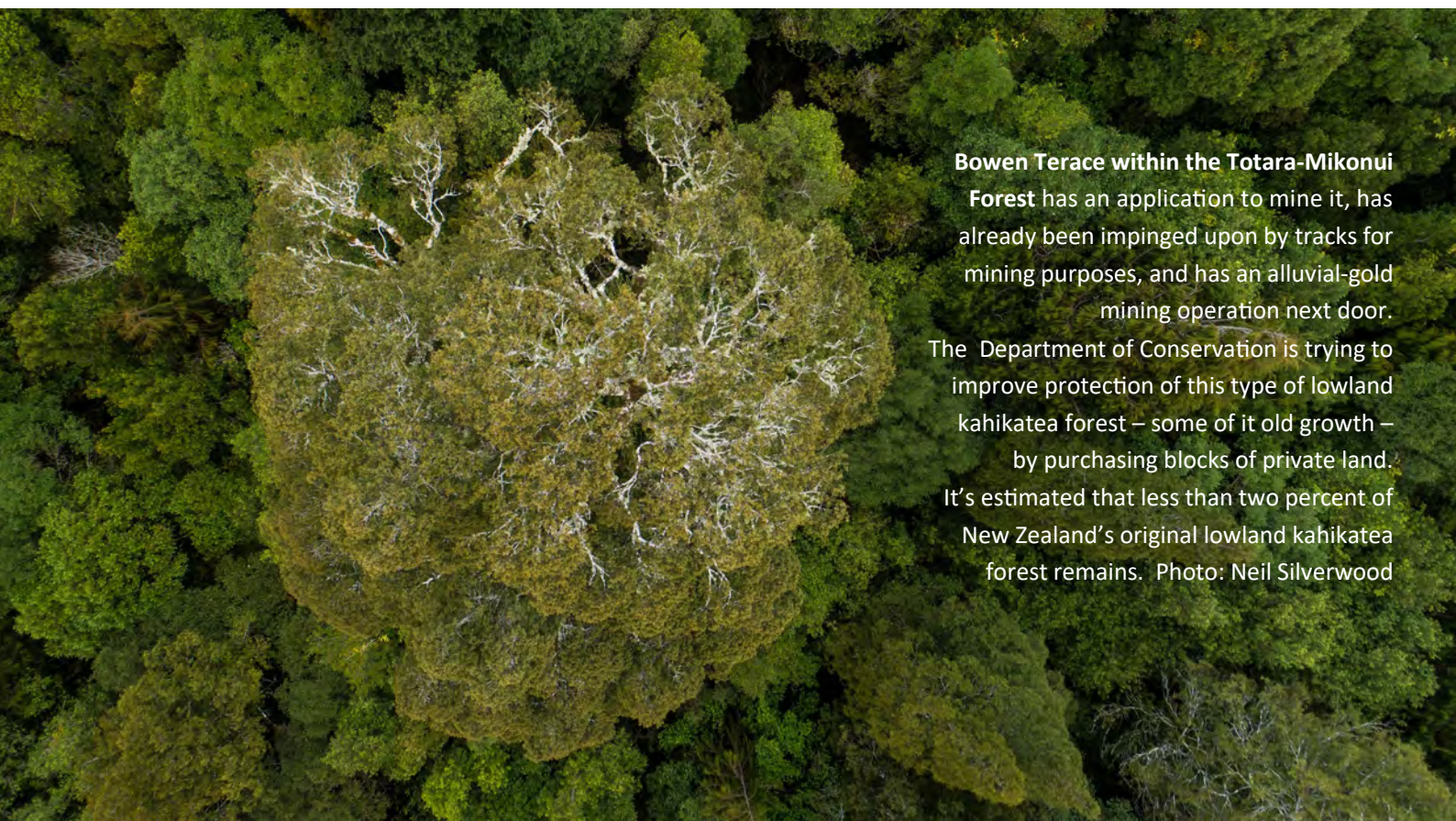
“An important fact of this project is that the area affected by the scheme is stewardship land ... [it's] not in a national park, it's not in an ecological reserve or specially protected area.”

Without better legal protection, it is likely that areas which remain as stewardship land will continue to be the subject of protracted legal battles. The high-value conservation stewardship land on the Denniston Plateau remains under threat from coal mining, the stunning and wild Waitaha River is under threat by an application for a hydro-electric power scheme, and gold-mining threatens numerous areas, including biodiversity priority sites and lowland forest.



Much of **Great Barrier Island** has been stewardship land since the Department of Conservation was formed in 1987. It took nearly three decades for 12,000 ha to be reclassified into Aotea Conservation Park. Photo: Craig Potton

Some stewardship land has had a history of extraction. Yet these recovering landscapes are important to us too. On Great Barrier Island old growth kauri was logged, and gold and silver mined. Over the years more land came under the stewardship of the Crown, including when 10% of the island was gifted by a farmer in 1984. The Aotea Conservation Park was finally formed from stewardship land in 2015, with an expectation of significant tourism, recreation and conservation benefits.



Bowen Terrace within the Totara-Mikonui Forest has an application to mine it, has already been impinged upon by tracks for mining purposes, and has an alluvial-gold mining operation next door. The Department of Conservation is trying to improve protection of this type of lowland kahikatea forest – some of it old growth – by purchasing blocks of private land. It's estimated that less than two percent of New Zealand's original lowland kahikatea forest remains. Photo: Neil Silverwood



Mōkihinui gorge and forests are not only the site of one of New Zealand's most challenging multi-day mountain-bike rides, but are also home to some of the largest expanses of untouched wide river valley forests. It was stewardship land for many decades, and concerted efforts by Forest & Bird and the local Conservation Board mean its inclusion in Kahurangi National Park is nearly achieved.

Photo: Tom Carters

At Tongariro Forest, a strong campaign by local groups brought the forest into conservation land instead of a proposal to turn the previously-logged area into farmland and pine plantations. Today the Tongariro Forest Conservation Area is home to numerous threatened species, including kiwi and whio, and is popular for the range of recreational and tourism activities that occur there.

At a time in history when forests are more important than ever, and so many of our plants and animals are endangered, it's incumbent upon New Zealand to offer real protection for all of our conservation land.

The Tongariro Forest Conservation Area, a stewardship area that is home to both kiwi and whio and is a popular mountain bike riding and hunting area.

Photo: Creative Commons





A driving force in the creation of Paparoa National Park was the protection of Paparoa Karst, the largest unmodified area of limestone karst left in New Zealand. Yet the majority of the longest, best-decorated, most popular and significant caves remain outside the National Park boundaries. This cave is on stewardship land within the Charleston Conservation Area. Photo: Neil Silverwood

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