

Submission on the content of the first National Conservation Policy Statement

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Submitter details

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Introduction

1. Recreation Aotearoa is the professional association and industry body for recreation in New Zealand. We provide leadership, advocacy, and professional development opportunities for those involved in the broader recreation sector.
2. We are a collective voice of recreation in New Zealand, ensuring that the value of recreation is recognised across government, industry, and communities. We work at an agency, industry, and professional level to build capability, develop partnerships, and equip individuals and organisations with the skills they need to deliver high-quality recreation experiences that engage participants.
3. Our membership includes recreation policy makers, territorial local authorities, voluntary organisations, regional sports trusts, consultants, outdoor recreation providers, and others involved in the delivery of facilities and services that make recreation accessible throughout New Zealand.
4. Our mission is to enhance wellbeing through recreation. We believe recreation is not a discretionary “nice-to-have” but a fundamental contributor to New Zealand’s physical and mental health, social cohesion, youth development, and climate resilience.
5. The English term “recreation” has no direct equivalent in te reo Māori. Te Kāhui Kura Māori, Recreation Aotearoa’s Māori navigational group, instead conceptualises recreation as Te Whai Oranga – the pursuit of wellbeing. This concept has been adopted as both the title and foundation of our organisational strategy.
6. Te Whai Oranga reframes recreation as a holistic endeavour, shifting focus away from purely physical activity toward wellbeing in its broadest sense. It recognises that individual wellbeing is inseparable from the wellbeing of communities and the environment.
7. Recreation is a major contributor to the physical and mental health of individuals, and to the resilience of our communities. A thriving recreation industry can also help our nation prosper socially and economically. Greater understanding of these benefits and awareness of how legislation, regulation and policy can influence recreation delivery are key to ensuring that New Zealand’s recreation opportunities remain among the world’s best.
8. We acknowledge and thank the Department of Conservation (DOC) as the major provider of New Zealand’s outdoor recreation opportunities. By

investing in outdoor recreation, DOC is helping to instil a lasting culture where active living and a connection with nature matter.

9. DOC has a critical part to play in ensuring people continue to enjoy quality recreation opportunities. Recreation Aotearoa notes that DOC spends more than \$200m per annum on providing recreational opportunities. In the context of the entire Sport and Recreation 'system', this level of expenditure places DOC in the realm of Sport NZ itself and above all but the largest Local Territorial Authorities.
10. 80% of New Zealanders visit Public Conservation lands and waters at least once a year. Recreation Aotearoa notes that according to Sport NZ data, the most popular forms of recreation among NZ adults (Walking, Swimming, Mountain Biking, Fishing, Hunting, Tramping, Trail-running and Snow Sports) are undertaken on Public Conservation Land.
11. Public Conservation Land, managed by DOC, makes up one third of NZ's land mass. The extent to which DOC fosters recreation on Public Conservation land has huge determinative effects on recreation opportunities and the recreation sector.
12. The proposed National Conservation Policy Statement (NCPS) will replace the Conservation General Policy and General Policy for National Parks, and area plans will replace the existing layers of conservation management strategies and management plans. The NCPS will therefore become one of the most consequential instruments governing recreation, public access, visitor management and outdoor education on public conservation land.

Support for a new structure, but not a shift in priorities

13. Recreation Aotearoa supports the creation of a single NCPS and the objective of making conservation planning and concession administration clearer, faster and more consistent. The existing system has become unnecessarily complex, and excessive processing times impose real costs on community organisations, not-for-profit outdoor education providers and other concession applicants.
14. However, modernisation must improve how the conservation system operates rather than alter why it exists. Conservation must remain the overriding purpose of public conservation land. Recreation and public enjoyment should be expressly recognised as principal public benefits flowing from conservation land. Tourism and commercial activity should be enabled only where consistent with, and subordinate to, conservation and recreation outcomes.

15. The draft NCPS is strongly oriented toward standardising concessions and enabling economic activity. Those are legitimate objectives, but recreation is too often treated as an effect to be assessed or a visitor setting to be managed, rather than as a positive statutory outcome that DOC is required to foster.
16. Recreation Aotearoa recommends that the NCPS begin with a clear statement of hierarchy: first, the protection and preservation of natural and historic values; second, fostering recreation, public access and public enjoyment consistent with conservation; and third, enabling tourism, commercial activity and other economic uses where they do not materially compromise the first two purposes.

Recreation must be an explicit NCPS outcome

17. This hierarchy should be reflected throughout the operative policies. Recreation should not be relegated to optional wording. Draft policy 16 provides that area plans “may” describe existing recreational opportunities, while draft policy 19 provides that area plans “may” set recreational objectives unless visitor zones have been applied. By contrast, area plans must identify ecological and cultural values and must set objectives for their protection.
18. Recreation Aotearoa submits that area plans must identify significant recreation values, opportunities and access routes, and must set recreation objectives. Visitor zones are a useful management tool, but they cannot substitute for place-specific understanding of why an area matters to trampers, hunters, climbers, paddlers, mountain bikers, outdoor educators, local communities and other recreational users.
19. Area plans should identify nationally and regionally significant recreation destinations; important tracks, huts, campsites, waterways and access corridors; the character and quality of visitor experiences; existing and reasonably foreseeable demand; barriers to equitable access; and threats to recreation opportunities, including overcrowding, climate change impacts, infrastructure failure and displacement by exclusive or intensive commercial use.
20. The NCPS should also require monitoring of recreation activities, access and visitor satisfaction. Ecological monitoring is essential, but an integrated conservation management system must also know whether people can reach, use and enjoy the places that DOC is required to foster for recreation.

Area plans and participation

21. Recreation Aotearoa supports improved area plans but opposes narrowing their function to little more than concession guidance. Area plans must remain integrated place-based planning documents that establish agreed values, outcomes and management direction. If recreation values are not identified and agreed through the planning process, they cannot be reliably protected when individual decisions are later made.
22. The proposed restriction on area plans setting concession limits and conditions may improve national consistency, but it creates a risk that cumulative effects and place-specific carrying capacity will be poorly addressed. Area plans should at least be able to identify capacity issues, thresholds for management intervention and the outcomes that booking systems, bylaws, closures or concession conditions are expected to achieve.
23. The NCPS should require early and meaningful involvement of recreation interests in preparing and reviewing area plans. Recreation organisations, outdoor education providers, local authorities, conservation boards, iwi, tangata whenua and affected communities should be involved while values and objectives are being developed, not only once a substantially complete plan is released for general consultation.
24. The transition to a new national planning framework will be a major, multi-year exercise. DOC should publish a prioritised programme for preparing area plans, including indicative boundaries, sequencing, timeframes and arrangements for maintaining the effect of existing recreation policies until replacement plans are operative.

Visitor zones

25. Recreation Aotearoa supports the proposed use of visitor zones as a means of describing the scale, character and intensity of recreation and tourism appropriate in different places. The distinction between visitor amenities, high, medium and low visitor zones, and wilderness areas is broadly sensible.
26. The value of the system will depend on how zones are mapped. Zoning should be based on conservation values, cultural values, recreation values, public expectations, current and future demand, access, infrastructure capacity and cumulative effects. It should not simply formalise current development patterns or be used to create a presumption in favour of greater commercial intensity.

27. Visitor zones must protect the full spectrum of recreation experiences. Quiet, self-reliant and nature-based experiences can be degraded by noise, crowding, aircraft, vehicle use, large guided groups or exclusive commercial occupation even where direct ecological effects are limited. These experiential effects must be treated as substantive effects, not matters of personal preference.

Outdoor education must be an exempt activity

28. Recreation Aotearoa submits that qualifying not-for-profit outdoor education activities must be added to the exempt activities in the first NCPS.
29. Outdoor education has been an integral part of New Zealand's education and recreation landscape for generations. Millions of New Zealanders have developed resilience, leadership, teamwork and environmental awareness through structured learning in the outdoors. Public conservation land has long been New Zealand's greatest outdoor classroom, connecting young people with the natural environment while fostering a lifelong appreciation of conservation and responsible recreation.
30. Modern outdoor education is a highly professional discipline. Programmes are delivered by qualified instructors operating within comprehensive health and safety systems, nationally recognised qualifications, rigorous risk management frameworks and external audit requirements. Many providers are registered education organisations or charitable trusts with specialist expertise in outdoor leadership, environmental education, youth development and outdoor safety. These organisations complement schools by providing the skills, equipment and experience that many schools can no longer maintain themselves.
31. The benefits of outdoor education are numerous. It improves physical and mental wellbeing, builds confidence, resilience and leadership, strengthens social connection, and introduces young people to lifelong recreation pursuits. Perhaps most importantly, it develops future conservation advocates. Participants who learn to value New Zealand's public conservation estate as children are more likely to become the volunteers, leaders, educators and environmental stewards of tomorrow.
32. The draft currently proposes only four exempt activities: news-of-the-day filming and photography, collection of air, limited collection of water and observational research. It separately identifies "outdoor education camps" within activities receiving standardised pre-assessment, but that category

concerns the development and operation of a built camping facility. It does not resolve the much wider and longstanding problem facing organisations delivering low-impact outdoor education activities on public conservation land.

33. Outdoor education groups generally use established tracks, campsites, waterways and visitor destinations already open to the public. They do not ordinarily occupy land, construct permanent facilities or alter the landscape. Their activities are temporary and closely resemble those undertaken by schools, youth groups and ordinary recreation users.
34. Most outdoor education on public conservation land is delivered by charitable trusts, incorporated societies, public tertiary institutions and other not-for-profit organisations. Their primary purpose is education, youth development and community wellbeing. They may charge a fee to recover the cost of instructors, transport and equipment, but they do not distribute profits or receive financial gain from conservation land.
35. Under DOC's current interpretation of concessions provisions, a school may take students onto public conservation land without a concession, while a charitable provider or tertiary institution delivering the same educational activity to the same students may be required to obtain concessions, pay processing costs, wait for decisions and comply with restrictive conditions. The activity is the same, the public benefit is the same, and the environmental effects are the same. Only the identity of the provider differs.
36. This inconsistency has significant practical consequences. Processing delays, application costs, annual charges and group-size restrictions can make programmes unviable. Schools increasingly depend on specialist providers to deliver safe and meaningful outdoor education. Where those providers cannot obtain workable access to public conservation land, programmes are reduced or cancelled, and young people lose opportunities to develop skills and a lasting relationship with nature.
37. DOC's activity-fee exemption for qualifying not-for-profit outdoor education providers, granted in 2020, was welcome. But it treats only one part of the problem. It does not remove application processing costs, delays, uncertainty, restrictive conditions or the fundamental inequity between schools and not-for-profit providers.
38. DOC retains numerous tools to protect sensitive places and manage visitor effects without requiring not-for-profit outdoor education providers to hold a concession. These include booking systems, capacity limits, seasonal and temporary closures, bylaws, fire restrictions, wildlife rules, biosecurity requirements and the proposed power to disapply an exemption at tightly

defined sites where significant adverse effects cannot otherwise be avoided or mitigated.

39. Safety considerations do not justify maintaining the concession requirement for not-for-profit outdoor education activities. Providers remain subject to the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, the Adventure Activities Regulations where applicable, WorkSafe oversight, organisational governance obligations and relevant professional standards. A DOC concession should not be used as a proxy safety accreditation where comprehensive regulation already exists.
40. The exemption should apply to the delivery of outdoor education by charitable trusts, not-for-profit incorporated societies and public tertiary education providers where the activity is undertaken for educational or youth-development purposes, any charges are limited to reasonable cost recovery, no profit is distributed, and the activity does not involve permanent occupation, buildings or structures. Permanent camps, buildings and exclusive occupation should continue to require authorisation.
41. Qualifying providers should remain subject to the general conditions applying to exempt activities, including compliance with closures, restrictions, protected-species requirements, fire controls, biosecurity measures and minimum-impact practice. If DOC requires information for visitor management, a simple national registration or notification mechanism would be proportionate; it must not recreate the cost, delay and discretion of a concession process under another name.
42. Commercial outdoor education and ‘edu-tourism’ should not qualify for this exemption. Recreation Aotearoa supports their inclusion within the pre-approved class where effects can be managed through standard terms and conditions. The critical distinction is between commercial activity for private gain and public-good education delivered on a not-for-profit basis.

Other concession reforms

43. Recreation Aotearoa supports exempt, pre-approved and standardised assessment pathways where they reduce duplication and focus DOC resources on genuinely complex or high-impact proposals. However, front-loaded assessment against land classifications and visitor zones must not become a substitute for considering effects on existing recreation opportunities, public access and visitor experience.
44. The standardised framework should pay regard to cumulative effects, displacement of non-commercial users, noise, exclusivity, group size,

congestion and conflicts between activities. An activity may be individually minor but collectively transform the character of a place.

45. Conditions should be nationally consistent where effects are genuinely common, but DOC must retain the ability to impose proportionate place-specific controls where necessary to protect conservation values or recreation experiences.
46. The distinction between exempt, pre-approved and standard applications should be transparent, and applicants should have access to clear service standards and reasons for decisions. Regular public reporting should show processing times, the number and type of applications, use of exemptions and pre-approvals, and whether statutory or operational timeframes are being met.

Resourcing and implementation

47. Recreation Aotearoa has, on many occasions, expressed our concern that the current Conservation Act has not been complied with due to the underfunding of the Department. A simpler framework will not succeed without adequate capability and resourcing. Many current planning and concession delays reflect shortages of staff and specialist expertise as much as defects in the legislation or underlying policy.
48. DOC requires sufficient planners, concession staff, recreation planners, visitor-management specialists and stakeholder engagement capability to prepare area plans, map visitor zones, monitor outcomes and process the applications that remain. Streamlining legislation while leaving implementation functions under-resourced would merely move bottlenecks elsewhere.
49. The first NCPS should therefore be accompanied by an implementation plan, funded work programme, and monitoring framework. It should be reviewed after an initial period to determine whether it has reduced delays, improved consistency, protected recreation interests and expanded access to outdoor education.

Recommendations

50. Recreation Aotearoa recommends that the Select Committee and Minister ensure that the first NCPS:

- states clearly that conservation is the primary purpose of the conservation management system, recreation and public enjoyment are core public benefits, and commercial activity is subordinate to both;
- changes draft policies 16 and 19 so that area plans must identify recreation values and opportunities and must set recreation objectives;
- requires area plans to identify significant recreation destinations, access, infrastructure, visitor experience, demand, pressures and management thresholds;
- requires early and meaningful participation by representative recreation interests in area-plan and visitor-zone development;
- develops area plans as integrated place-based planning documents rather than reducing them principally to concession guidance;
- applies visitor zones transparently, based on evidence and public participation, and protects quiet, remote and self-reliant recreation experiences;
- requires standardised concession assessment to consider cumulative effects, public access, displacement and impacts on recreation experience;
- provides DOC with sufficient funding, staffing and specialist recreation and visitor-management capability to implement the new framework. (outside of scope? Budgetary/political realm)
- adds qualifying not-for-profit outdoor education activities, including those delivered by public tertiary education providers, to the exempt activities in the NCPS;
- makes clear that reasonable cost-recovery charges by a not-for-profit provider are not commercial gain or reward and do not trigger concession provisions in the Conservation Act;
- limits the outdoor education exemption to not-for-profit educational activities and retains authorisation requirements for permanent facilities, buildings and exclusive occupation and commercial outdoor education providers.

Conclusion

51. Recreation Aotearoa supports the objective of creating a simpler, more consistent and more responsive conservation management system. A single National Conservation Policy Statement has the potential to reduce unnecessary complexity, improve concession processing and provide clearer direction for the management of public conservation land. However, these benefits will only be realised if the NCPS retains the proper statutory balance: conservation as the primary purpose, recreation and public enjoyment as core public benefits, and commercial activity enabled only where it is consistent with both.
52. The first NCPS must give recreation greater prominence than is currently proposed. Public conservation land is not only a protected natural estate, it is New Zealand's largest outdoor recreation network and outdoor classroom. Area plans, visitor zones and concession decisions should therefore actively foster recreation, protect the quality and diversity of visitor experiences, maintain public access and ensure that recreation interests are involved early in planning and decision-making.
53. Importantly, this reform provides a rare opportunity to correct the longstanding and inequitable treatment of not-for-profit outdoor education providers. Requiring charitable and public-benefit organisations to obtain concessions for educational activities creates cost, delay and uncertainty without delivering a corresponding conservation benefit. Qualifying not-for-profit outdoor education activities should be expressly exempted in the first NCPS. Doing so would remove unnecessary regulatory barriers, improve equitable access to outdoor education and help more young New Zealanders develop the skills, confidence and connection with nature that underpin lifelong recreation and support for conservation.
54. Recreation Aotearoa wishes to speak to this submission.