

Submission on the Conservation Amendment Bill from the New Zealand Psychological Society Te Rōpū Mātai Hinengaro o Aotearoa

Introduction

The New Zealand Psychological Society (NZPsS, the Society) is the premier professional and scientific association for psychologists in Aotearoa New Zealand and is committed to supporting quality practice, education, and research in psychology.

The NZPsS represents more than 2300 members and students and encompasses a broad range of practice in psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand, including clinical, counselling, health, organisational, and educational. As an organisation we have a strong commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The Society is making a submission on the Amendment Bill as it considers the loss of access to te taiao will cause psychological harm to all New Zealanders, and in particular to Māori.

Position on Conservation Amendment Bill

The Society rejects this Amendment Bill in its entirety, for the following reasons:

- This Amendment inverses the original intent of the Conservation Act to protect conservation lands *in perpetuity* for future generations to enjoy the benefits of te taiao, our natural environment, by changing the focus from protection of nature over all else to a model that allows for economic development.
- Potential economic development of conservation lands opens natural environments originally held in perpetuity for future generations to be degraded and destroyed or lost from public use forever through sale of land.
- Te taiao is integral to the health and wellbeing of all people. It is interwoven in every aspect of te ao Māori, the indigenous culture of Aotearoa, and is the underpinning theme of our national identity (i.e., ‘clean and green’ and our international reputation of beauty). Impacts and losses to te taiao will therefore result in negative

effects on the identity, health, and wellbeing of New Zealanders, including their psychological/mental health.

- The Amendment Bill removes decision-making ability and input by Māori, thereby breaching Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This therefore impacts on the health and wellbeing of Māori, causing psychological and mental harm.
- The Amendment bill removes decision-making ability and input from communities and therefore impacts on the health and wellbeing of many individuals and communities, including causing psychological and mental harm.

Background

Aotearoa is rich in biodiversity. Our island nation is a beacon for people all around the world who want to experience nature at its finest. Our focus on protection of our conservation lands above all other forms of use, including tourism and resource extraction, combined with our isolation via distance from the rest of the world, has allowed us to escape much of the extensive environmental degradation seen in most other places on the planet and the associated ill-health of its citizens. Practices such as open-cast mining, nuclear fission, and fracking have long been resisted by all New Zealanders, Māori and Pākehā alike, to practice excellent stewardship and kaitiakitanga of our lands, oceans, and wildlife for generations to come.

Psychological and Protective Benefits of Te Taiao

There is strong evidence that access to green and blue spaces supports mental health and wellbeing. For example, the World Health Organization has identified green and blue spaces as supporting psychological relaxation, stress reduction, social cohesion, physical activity, cultural connection, and overall mental wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2016).

Conservation lands provide an invaluable contribution to public health. For many people in Aotearoa, conservation land provides places of restoration, belonging, recreation, cultural practice, connection with whānau, and relief from stress. Again, national identity is wrapped up with the cherished memories of holidays, important events, and whanaungatanga associated with the most important priceless psychological aspects of humanity such as love, home, and family. We threaten the very core of what it means to be 'Kiwi' when we risk the loss of our conservation lands.

From a wellbeing perspective, the key risk is that conservation land becomes increasingly treated as an economic asset at the cost of its public, ecological, cultural, and psychological resource. If economic development of tourism is allowed through, for

example, increased access charges, commercial concessions, or visitor amenities, the potential is for our most vulnerable members of society to be adversely affected, such as low-income communities, Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, young people, and families, as they may face greater barriers to accessing the benefits of nature-based recreation and restoration. Mental wellbeing benefits from nature should not become available only to those who can afford them (Bratman, Hamilton, Hahn, Daily, & Gross, 2015; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; White, Alcock, Grellier, Wheeler, Hartig, Warber et al, 2019; Zhang, Zhao, Mavoa, & Smith, 2024).

This Amendment Bill would allow for the increasing and cumulative effects of commercialisation, infrastructure, noise, crowding, or restricted access on conservation lands, gradually reducing the above-mentioned restorative qualities of conservation spaces. Taken all together, the potential decline in health – physical, mental and spiritual – for all New Zealanders would far outweigh the potential commercial and economic gain for corporate and international interests.

Science and Mātauranga

While there is ongoing scholastic debate about the validity of indigenous knowledges, the research and science when examined objectively is increasingly becoming in accordance with ancient knowledges such as mātauranga Māori (Mercier, 2018; New Zealand Association of Scientists, 2022).

For example, well-established disciplines of science such as ecology and biology increasingly underscore the long-held belief by indigenous cultures of the importance of looking at the ecosystems as based on the premise of interconnectedness, and some scholars have proposed that in light of recent environmental challenges such as climate change, the world can be regarded as one great organism. What this means is that every element, every being, every microscopic part of the world is inextricably linked to every other part of the whole world. You cannot act upon, change or alter any part of the whole without affecting *every other part of the world* (Panelli & Tipa, 2009).

Disproportionate Effect on Māori

Ka ora te whenua, ka ora te tangata

When the land is well, we are well

Every aspect of our lives depends on the health of the whenua – food, clean water, and our economy. From a Māori perspective, caring for the whenua must be our priority. Everything must be measured against this.

Beyond this, Māori and indigenous philosophy asserts that *we are nature*, we are not above it or beyond it. In fact, humans and the natural world are joined together by whakapapa – in other words, *we are whānau*. There is no separation between tāngata whenua and the whenua. Harm to the land is harm to people, as the whakatauki above states. These epistemologies therefore state that there exists a reciprocal obligation: as our mother earth feeds us, so do we as humans have a responsibility to care and respect her.

This Amendment Bill also seeks to remove obligations to Māori by the Crown as required by Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Since colonisation began, Māori have led the fight to protect the whenua, as they have always known the value beyond economic exploitation.

Unfortunately, despite these efforts, much of our natural flora and fauna has been decimated and polluted. Again, referring to the whakatauki above, this loss and its associated loss of cultural and ways of being, has led to the accumulation of harm over generations leading to well-documented ill health of Māori much in excess than that of non-Māori, including psychological and mental distress and illness. Māori cannot afford to lose any more whenua.

Reducing Māori authority to contribute to the conservation decision-making process, loss of access as well as cultural practice, or relationships with whenua and wai, may cause cultural and psychological harm. Treaty settlement commitments and takutai moana rights must be upheld. Māori tino rangatiratanga, cultural identity, and intergenerational wellbeing must be upheld, otherwise negative effects on psychological and mental health and wellbeing will follow for Māori (Panelli & Tipa, 2009).

Disproportionate Effect on Young People

The increasing negative impacts of climate change and continued damage done to the environment by economic exploitation and development globally has become an increasing source of stress and harm for young people, particularly for their psychological and mental health. Terms such as ‘eco-distress’ and ‘eco-anxiety’ have been coined because of the increasing presence of these specific forms of distress. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is even a proliferation of suicide related to these forms of psychological distress. Disempowerment, disillusionment, anger, and grief are some of the reported psychological impacts of young people afraid that there will not be a future for them (ReachOut, 2024).

The efficacy of adventure and outdoors therapy has undoubtedly proved valuable and effective when working with young people (Mohan, Malhotra, Narayanan, White, Gaffney H, 2022). The loss of any of our natural environment would adversely affect this and be a great loss to our society when already our youth lead in many global negative mental health

statistics such as suicide (Mohan, Malhotra, Narayanan, White, Gaffney H, 2022; UNICEF, 2020; Zhang, Zhao, Mavoa, & Smith, 2024).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this proposed Amendment Bill opens previously protected lands to economic exploitation and the degradation and permanent loss of biodiversity, and native flora and fauna species that *cannot* be regained, and that we *cannot* afford to lose in this time of economic and social hardship in our society.

Taken together, the potential loss to health and wellbeing and harm to New Zealanders should this bill proceed is immense. Therefore, the Society recommends that this Amendment Bill not proceed.

The Society further recommends that any further amendments made in the future to this Bill include an explicit requirement for decision-makers to consider the mental health, social wellbeing, cultural wellbeing, and equity impacts *above* any economic benefits that may be gained from conservation lands.

Offer of Knowledge and Expertise

The Society is willing to meet with Ministry officials and Government or Parliamentary representatives to explicate the points raised in this submission. We can also advise on approaches that can be employed to engage communities and assist with messaging to counter resistance and encourage acceptance of interventions and programmes.

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