

Speech to FMC Conference

Thank you for joining us for this significant occasion. The eightieth birthday of FMC.

A number of you were here for our fiftieth birthday, the seminal wilderness recreation in NZ conference at Lake Rotoiti in 1981.

We hope that these two days will be as influential.

It would be easy for me, as someone who was a child at the time of the Wilderness conference, to think that it was inevitable that I would have grown up in a New Zealand with a network of protected areas that is the envy of the world.

This would be a mistake.

It is only through decades of passionate and intelligent advocacy by FMC, and others, that we have achieved this.

The conservation reforms of the 1980s were built upon the efforts of many people, of which FMC was at the forefront.

The Conservation Act and the National Parks Act before it set out in legislation a range of important values and principles.

The egalitarian notion of free and equal access, the preservation of a range of different landforms and bio-diversity, the recognition that there is a national interest in the perpetual preservation of these places, and the recognition that some places should be left as they always have been, to be enjoyed on their own terms all add up to make New Zealand the envy of the world.

Looking back it is hard to believe that a country like New Zealand wouldn't see the opportunity that would come from codifying these principles. Yet those of you who attended the Wilderness conference, and were involved in this era had to show real courage, vision and leadership to get New Zealand here.

I think it is interesting to view the Conservation Act and National Parks Act alongside legislation of the time like the Bill of Rights Act, the Public Finance Act or the Reserve Bank Act.

They are, in general, not understood by many people. Yet they each establish a framework that is critical to the wellbeing of New Zealanders.

All these Acts should be enduring. They are part of our constitutional, economic and societal fabric that endure beyond shifting political preferences.

The Conservation Act differs in one important regard. If we make a blunder under the Conservation Act we lose it forever.

The economy is resilient enough to sustain poor quarters. But if we lose a species, it's gone. If we lose our historic heritage we can't recreate it and as outdoor recreationalists have found to

our cost, where commercial activity is established on public land it changes the nature of that area for generations.

It is this difference that makes conferences like this a necessity. Unlike the time of the 1981 Wilderness conference, the policy settings are fairly sound.

In the 21st century, it is the narrower choices around resourcing and priorities that give cause for concern.

Indeed, we will shortly hear from the architects of the Wilderness conference, and long time advocates for our wildlands. They are much better placed than I to reflect on the 30 years since the wilderness conference, and the extent to which the vision has been realised.

What I can do is to think about what success might look like in twenty years time. A number picked because my two good friends and FMC colleagues Ben and Quentin have young children who will hopefully be taking a university tramping club – and the NZ mountains – by storm in 2031, and also because I may have to reflect on such things at a FMC centenary celebration.

I hope it goes without saying that in 2031 I want to see a strong and vital outdoor culture in New Zealand. One where the people of New Zealand cherish and nurture our conservation lands.

That New Zealanders feel that we have a real stake in the work that DoC does, and where we can take pride in our conservation work, and the recreational opportunities here.

An outdoor culture where we are happy that our wildlands are preserved for their own sake, but also where we spend lots of time enjoying them. Whether on foot, boat or bike.

FMC has a part to play in this. The allegation is sometimes levelled that FMC and our partners are too elitist and are only interested in preserving wildlands for the healthy and the wealthy.

I don't think that we've been good at pointing out the fallacy of this argument. FMC has long emphasised the importance of offering and preserving a wide range of experiences and encouraging a love of the hills.

But we can do better at explaining how critical public values like wilderness aren't elitist. We also need to think about how enduring values such as wilderness fit with new forms of recreation.

FMC, and tramping clubs, also need to do better at sharing our love of these places.

If the 1930s were about filling in the blanks on the map, 2011 is time to start exploring how we can attract people from backgrounds who currently don't show much interest in the outdoors.

This work might seem challenging, and it might not be easy, but it is vital to maintaining our relevance. It is also vital to supporting a culture that appreciates free and equal access. The recent loss of access to the Kaimanawa ranges should be a salutary lesson.

Tomorrow we will announce the first winners of our inaugural youth scholarships, which is our start at this challenge.

I think that contributing to this outdoor culture will be a huge role for DoC in the next twenty years, and one where the Department could make mistakes that will be arguably as far reaching as loss of species.

In my vision of 2031, the fundamental principles of the National Parks Act and Conservation Act will still be in place.

In much the same way that the Bill of Rights Act establishes fundamental, universal human rights that exist irrespective of changes in political preference and societal upheavals, the principles in the Conservation Act are enduring.

Just as the hallmark of a civilized country is to recognise the rights of those we despise, a civilized country would also recognise that as resources – of all kinds – become scarcer, it is even more critical to cherish, and nurture, those that we have chosen to leave alone.

To put it another way, DoC is not a land, or resource, bank, waiting for the rate of return to hit a certain level. To ensure it remains this way, a focus of the next twenty years needs to be on ensuring that conservation land is appropriately protected.

The case of our Stewardship lands is a sad one, highlighted by the Mokihinui. People ask me how it is possible that we can even be considering damming the Mokihinui given its bio-diversity and wilderness values.

The answer is, that in effect we couldn't be bothered protecting it. We thought it would be OK to hold it as stewardship land.

If the Mokihinui had some higher level of protection, a level that it deserves, it is unlikely that we would be in the situation we are in.

If the plight of the Mokihinui doesn't highlight the deficiency of this land tenure the proposed dam on the Waitaha river might. Indeed, most of those magnificently wild West Coast rivers are held as Stewardship land. The access to the Adams Wilderness area and some of our greatest summits depends on no one having a better idea for their use. This is insufficient for perpetual protection.

By 2031 I'd like to think stewardship land would be a historical concept and all this land will have been folded into parks.

I have characterised conservation land as land that we have chosen to "leave alone." We need to do more than leave it alone.

If we were to do no more than leave it alone, in 2031, we will tramp in silent forests. We won't be entertained by the antics of Whio as we paddle a West Coast river, and we won't hear the small voice of the rock wren as we move across the alpine tops en route to climbing or hunting.

It is natural to expect that the Department of Conservation will continue to get better at what they do in the next twenty years. But keeping them lean and mean won't bring species back from the brink. In New Zealand, conservation is inextricably linked to pest control.

This costs money. So let me float an idea to the elected members here today. What about if by 2031 we spent 1% of government expenditure on conservation. 1%.

FMC isn't here to offer suggestions on alternative priorities, but what if, to pick a random example, instead of locking people up, with no benefit for the economy, we actually invested in the bio-physical resources that underpin our economy.

Yes it would take leadership, and there may or may not be an electoral pay-off. But I come back to the selection of legislation from the late 1980s and early 1990s. None of that legislation is vote winning. Yet it has been fundamental to creating New Zealand in 2011. Given the challenges facing the planet, investing more in the life, and wealth giving properties – the eco-system services – of this country will be just as critical to New Zealand in 2031.

Of course it shouldn't be that difficult to justify investing in preserving eco-system services on economic grounds. For seventy years we have protected water and soil quality through a network of protection forests – that happen to offer some neat tramping, and our tourism industry has built on a hut and track network that was expanded to control deer, and thus water and soil quality. Eco-system services is not a new concept to outdoors folk.

I'm not going to labour a basic economics discussion here, but these have all been founded on the basis that this protection is a public good. Society captures the economic benefits – our agricultural industry relies on good quality water pouring out of our mountains - and New Zealand also captures wider public benefits ranging from health benefits through to the value of wilderness.

Thus a taxpayers dollar invested by DoC, is a dollar recovered by a wide range of private individual taxpayers many times over, in many different ways.

It is fair to say that we see a real challenge where private funding is seen as the best way to extend these services. While philanthropy can deliver the effect of a public good, the model breaks down when these eco-system services are portrayed as a trade-off.

From the business perspective, we'll give you a high level of protection in valley X, but we'll knock the top off hill Y. Or more pertinently, from our perspective we'll gain a coastal forest and lose a block of the High Country to foreign ownership.

In summary: private involvement in conservation is desirable. However, if it is coming at the expense of the important values in the Conservation Act, then it's time to look for a different investor.

I've sketched out some broad ideas for progress in the next twenty years. Over the course of today FMC is making a conscious decision to sit back – a little – and to give you the space to hear alternative visions for our conservation lands. Then tomorrow we want to broaden the conversation and to hear from you – those whose commitment I must acknowledge – about your vision for our lands.

By our lands, I of course don't mean just FMCs lands, I mean everyone in New Zealand. Although, I would humbly suggest that the users of our wildlands who are represented here, the trampers and climbers the fishers the hunters the paddlers and the cyclists do provide a vision that extends beyond a short term focus on next weeks pay cheque. A vision that I think, honours the efforts of those who have gone before us.