



Archdiocese of Wellington

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Submission of The Ecology Justice and Peace Commission Integral Ecology Committee of the Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington to the Environment Select Committee on the Conservation Amendment Bill 2026

"Human beings frequently seem to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption."- Pope Francis, Laudato Si', paragraph 115

1. Introduction

The Wellington Catholic Archdiocese Commission for Ecology, Justice and Peace is established to contribute to and participate in work for justice and peace inspired and informed by Catholic Social Teaching.

The Commission's key responsibilities are:

- Supporting the communities of the Archdiocese and wider community to hear and actively respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor;
- Scrutinising all issues and institutions in society and in the Archdiocese in the light of Catholic social teaching

These Catholic social teaching principles are broadly shared by many others, regardless of religious background.

2. Position on the Conservation Amendment Bill

The Commission rejects the Bill in its current structure. The Commission is concerned about the negative and detrimental environmental impact of this Bill. In particular, the Commission rejects the ease by which land disposals for 60% (over 5 million hectares) of forest or public conservation land can occur under the final decisions of the Minister for Conservation.

The Commission rejects the manner and criteria by which whenua/lands currently managed and maintained by the Department of Conservation (DoC) are at risk of being sold or exchanged, as well as the building of, in the current definition of this Bill, 'visitor amenities', on or around all forms of Conservation lands managed by DoC (16(1) of this Bill).

The Commission questions whether this Bill is truly at heart concerned about Conservation and environmental protection, juxtaposed by its intention to utilise the resources and natural environment for economic gains and "enable more development on Conservation lands" (Explanatory note of the Bill) as well as "to

enable use and development on this land under the greatest extent practicable” (6(ea)).

Furthermore, Section 4 of the principal Act in question (Conservation Act 1987) gives effect to the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) navigated through Treaty settlements and claims, applying the entire Te Tiriti o Waitangi in how Conservation land is looked after. The Commission is concerned that defining the way and establishing arbitrary principles by which Te Tiriti is given effect and operational in the Bill (a proposed “Section 4A” in the Conservation Act 1987) means that in effect, the Bill oversteps and violates the scope by which Te Tiriti is effective in the original Covenant and Interpretation for which was signed.

The Bill changes how concessions, or permits, for individuals and groups to perform an activity on Conservation land, is granted. The Minister has the powers to grant concessions or permits to carry out appropriately deemed commercial activities without a competitive tender process (14ZG), which runs the risk that permits or concessions are not scrutinised by other parties and mana whenua before they are granted.

3. Biodiversity and Ecosystems at risk – the Common Good

Except for land deemed to be a National Park, Wilderness Areas, Nature, Marine and Scientific Reserves, Wildlife Sanctuaries, and a few specific Heritage sites and specific nature reserves (Kaikōura Island and Rakitu Island), the other 60% of the public conservation land currently administered by DoC can be sold or exchanged.

These ‘stewardship lands’ have often not been assessed in terms of their unique natural, cultural or historical value; as such, it is premature and impossible to say that their value (whether commercial or ecological/environmental) can be indiscriminately enhanced and “utilised and developed” without further detailed assessment. The categorisation from the Conservation Act 1987 as stewardship lands affords them the opportunity for assessment, which could allow these areas to be defined as lands worth further protection under the designation of National Park, sanctuary or reserve. For example, new species of flora and fauna are continually discovered outside of areas designated National Parks, sanctuaries or reserves - such as a species of Trapdoor Spider (*Cantuaria*) in Taranaki¹. and a new species of worm or a

¹ Caught in a Web: Biologist Discovers Possible New Spider Species (2026). Radio New Zealand. Accessed 25 Jun 2026. Available from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/environment/583420/caught-in-a->

‘gravel maggot’ on a beach at Wellington’s South Coast². Therefore, because the natural, cultural or historical values of stewardship lands have not been assessed, the Bill makes an erroneous assumption that these areas are of “lower value” for protection than established National Parks or nature, marine or scientific reserves.

The Bill does not address appropriate legal frameworks which integrate with the environmental protection of regionally designated significant ecological areas as determined by regional or local councils. For example, the Taranaki Regional Council identifies Key Native Ecosystems (KNE) in their area as sites valued for their high “indigenous biodiversity values and ecological significance”³.

KNEs may host a range of threatened or endangered species. Habitat alteration and unregulated anthropogenic (human) encounter in Aotearoa NZ over the past 1000 years has led to extinction of species⁴. The Bill seeks to redefine Conservation efforts through a National Conservation Planning Strategy (NCPS) and “area plans”, which may run against the grain of local and community-based conservation efforts, and collaterally undermine and supersede many current Conservation priorities. Undermining such local efforts effectively prevents the Catholic Social Teaching practice of Subsidiarity.

Ecosystems can be irreversibly modified when humans have the notion that nature can be driven by the selfish motivations of a select few, in the guise that their actions amount to “development”. Pope Leo XIV has written about the perceived notion of progress and the false solution this brings human society and the natural world –

“the mere sum of individual interests is not capable of generating a better world for the whole human family. Indeed, it is an illusion to think that simply pursuing one’s own progress without caring for others is sufficient for contributing to the good of all” (Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, paragraph 61).

web-biologist-discovers-possible-new-spider-species

- 2 Smeagol the ‘Gravel Maggot’ leaves its rare mark on the remote West Coast (2022). Department of Conservation. Accessed 25 Jun 2026. Available from <https://www.doc.govt.nz/news/media-releases/2022-media-releases/smeagol-the-gravel-maggot-leaves-its-rare-mark-on-the-remote-west-coast/>
- 3 Key Native Ecosystems (2021). Taranaki Regional Council. Accessed 25 Jun 2026. Available from <https://www.trc.govt.nz/environment/farmhub/biodiversity-in-taranaki/key-native-ecosystems>
- 4 Stella Frances and Paula Warren, “Conservation of New Zealand’s Biodiversity into the New Decade - Opportunities and Challenges,” *New Zealand Journal of Environmental Law*, no. 3 (1999): 169–178.

It seems that the Bill's intent is to increase the use of 'low value' conservation land as if they cannot be left in their natural state they are currently, and that they are perceived to not have value because they have not been developed or utilised enough – needing to be 'unlocked' in some way for progress and development. Therefore, the goal for “more development” with “using the land to the greatest potential as practicable” is a dangerous legal precedent which extends the power of a few at the expense and vulnerability of the wider natural environment, when safeguards to environmental protection is loosened.

At the time of writing, the Minister for Conservation is working on changes to the threshold by which conservation land is sold and will bring these suggestions to Cabinet. As such, the clauses related to the disposal and exchange of Conservation land in the Bill are developing.

4. The Principles of Human Dignity and Subsidiarity in environmental decision-making

The Bill proposes that in land exchanges, a “net conservation benefit results if the natural resources and historic resources of the incoming land are assessed as being greater than those of the outgoing land” (Explanatory note). It is unclear how the minister assesses net conservation benefit⁵, especially if at the most obvious and quantifiable level, it is the replacement of one indigenous endangered species of flora or fauna over another that is more worthy of preservation. It is nebulous how the minister can make a final decision on such exchanges of land and which exchanges meet the criteria of this definition.

The definition of “net conservation benefit” lacks scientific rigour in terms of environmental impact assessments in its application, when the minister is solely responsible for the final decision. Ecosystems are not left to exist in the interconnected and interdependent fashion among flora and fauna at the various trophic levels; rather, discrete blocks of land can seemingly be carved out and replaced by another as if these changes will not affect overall strategies to maintain sustainability in biodiversity in Aotearoa New Zealand. Unless the Minister for Conservation has a team of Conservation experts and consultants to oversee and inform their decision on what pieces of conservation land to buy or exchange, there is real potential for unmitigated environmental damage,

5 Stewardship Land: Net Conservation Benefit in Land Exchanges. Report from the New Zealand Conservation Authority (2018). Department of Conservation. Accessed 25 Jun 2018. Available from <https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/getting-involved/nz-conservation-authority-and-boards/nz-conservation-authority/2018-nzca-report-to-moc-re-stewardship-land.pdf>

without real ecological indicators or scientific baseline data that test and guide decisions to determine that the land exchange is truly beneficial from an ecological point of view.

Indeed, it is a question of Subsidiarity. In the guise of efficient processes, the Bill alienates those at the lowest levels to make competent decisions regarding the public conservation land in their local area, leaving it to a 'higher' authority who can make vicarious and sweeping changes as deemed appropriate.

Concerning the disposal or alienation/sale/privatisation of conservation land, the Bill considers the condition for appropriate disposal to be met especially:

“where the land is not important for the conservation of threatened species or ecosystems, the habitat provided is not one of the best examples of its type, and the Director-General of Conservation (the Director-General) has recommended it”.

Habitats which are “not the best examples of its type” is a vague condition which suggests only the best and most unique habitats consisting of the most threatened species are protected. This is an unacceptable environmental threshold. There is certainly Conservation land which may not be in the highest consideration in its category, but even if there is Conservation value, it may still be disposed of. For example, one of the three UNESCO World Heritage sites in New Zealand is the Te Wāhipounamu Heritage Site – which comprises of the South Westland Area spanning four National Parks but also consists of land mass outside of these National Parks⁶. The Bill will make it possible for these connecting areas which are not under the protective definition of “National Park” to be further developed and commercialised with fewer safeguards that protect the natural environment.

The Commission will therefore only support the sale of land which has met the stringent threshold of little to no ecological value, and that there is ample research to suggest that the sale of such public conservation land will have next to no impact on surrounding natural ecosystems.

The recent years has seen the DoC restructured, with the loss of both scientifically and administratively competent based roles in the department. This restructure has meant that not only is there now more reliance on technology and the efficiencies of modernising the department – it has meant that the

6 Te Wāhipounamu – South West New Zealand. UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Accessed 25 Jun 2026. Available from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/551/>

remaining staff will have to accomplish more work in a role that they were not necessarily employed for out of their initial job description. As a result of public underfunding in the DoC⁷, the Commission therefore is concerned that the Bill is a part of a wider framework which places unrealistic responsibilities onto a fewer number of people, which means the quality and level of expertise resulting from the work also suffers. This infringes on the Human dignity of work, especially when we compare the likes of humans in roles and their ability to fulfil 'units' of work, rather than their intrinsic value on who they are and the value of their work that cannot be measured by costs that can be saved.

5. The Principles of Stewardship and Participation

The purpose of Public Conservation Lands under the Conservation Act 1987 is to firstly safeguard and ensure that nature is preserved and biodiversity is sustained. It also has the role of ensuring that public enjoyment of the natural environment is maintained and accessible. From a Catholic perspective,

“The entire material universe speaks of God's love, God's boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is a caress of God” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 84).

As such, the role of the Ministry for Conservation and the DoC is to enforce and maintain such premises which protects and preserves natural environments, so they are in a pristine condition and worthy of handing down through the generations.

However, the Bill introduces the concept of “Visitor Amenities” that can be built on Public Conservation Lands:

“16. Minister may set apart visitor amenities areas

(1)The Minister may, by notice in the Gazette, set apart an area of land as a visitor amenities area within any of the following land that is vested in the Crown and managed or administered by the Department:

(a) a conservation park:

(b) a stewardship area:

(c) a national park:

⁷ David Williams (2026) Conservation on the Cusp: Funding Cuts and a Chrisp Appointment. Newsroom. Accessed 25 Jun 2026. Available from <https://newsroom.co.nz/2026/06/02/conservation-on-the-cusp-funding-cuts-and-a-chrisp-appointment/>

- (d) a reserve classified as—*
- (i) a recreation reserve under section 17 of the Reserves Act 1977:*
 - (ii) a historic reserve under section 18 of the Reserves Act 1977:*
 - (iii) a scenic reserve under section 19 of the Reserves Act 1977:*
 - (iv) a government purpose reserve under section 22 of the Reserves Act 1977:*
 - (v) a local purpose reserve under section 23 of the Reserves Act 1977”.*

The purpose and types of visitor amenities that are considered are clearly indicated in the Bill:

“16A Purpose of visitor amenities areas

(1) The purpose of a visitor amenities area is to provide the public with recreational and public amenities and related services to further the use and enjoyment of land held under this Act or any Act listed in Schedule 1.

(2) Without limiting subsection (1),—

(a) recreational and public amenities include—

(i) toilets, visitor centres, accommodation, car parks, restaurants, and cafes; and

(ii) any other infrastructure that supports visitors and recreational activities; and

(b) related services include tour operator services, catering, merchandising, guiding, transportation, and equipment rental.”

Under the Bill, it is not too far a stretch to suggest that the legislation will empower the Minister for Conservation to carve out areas of National Parks for the sake of building visitor amenities – which may include accommodation, restaurants and cafes. While accommodation, restaurants and visitor centres inside National Parks are not unknown (such as Minaret Station Alpine Lodge), they must operate under a considered Concession and assessed on a case-by-case basis in terms of the environmental and ecological impacts of the operation or business. Therefore, the vesting of responsibility for the Minister to solely determine whether such amenities can be developed and loosened on an indiscriminate basis will remove all environmental protections any Conservation land currently has (whether they have a high conservation value such as a national park or a lower one, as in a scientific reserve or purely stewardship land).

Research has shown that when housing, accommodation and public amenities such as restaurants encroach on natural areas with biodiversity, there will inevitably be attempts to urbanise and shape the landscape. An overseas study⁸ considered the relationship between built amenities for recreation and their impact on the wider environment. It found that the relationship between amenities and the preservation of the environment and biodiversity is a complex issue. On one hand, the building of simple amenities – such as walking tracks, in protected areas and areas of high natural value and significance, can improve public awareness and appreciation for environmental protection through access into such areas. Adequate signage can also raise the amenity value of the protected area. On the other hand, the allowance of other amenities can conflict with efforts to protect biodiversity. For example, certain types of non-native trees may be more aesthetically pleasing to the landscape than endemic or native species and may be introduced in the process of urban landscaping. The introduction of such species often have little to do with ecological function or considerations and what the “rate payer” or citizen deems to be “unimproved capital value” that can be developed or enhanced with the area. In summary, what may be perceived to be an improvement to the landscape may in fact be detrimental to the environment from a biological and ecological point of view.

Unregulated development of visitor amenities may paradoxically prevent public access to public conservation areas. The commercialisation of conservation areas will mean that there are certain areas, huts and tracks which will be restricted to private operators but will prevent recreational access to everyone else. This limits participation and what public access rights currently available for recreation in certain areas may be extinguished with a land sale or swap⁹.

The Bill considers charging international visitors to Conservation areas (new Section 11). While this may be an extra avenue of funding for the DoC, the revenue needs to be placed back into conservation efforts rather than unnecessarily developing more amenities that encroach on degrading the natural environment.

8 Christopher D. Ives and Andrew H. Kelly, “The Coexistence of Amenity and Biodiversity in Urban Landscapes,” *Landscape Research* 41, no. 5 (October 21, 2015): 495–509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2015.1081161>.

9 Gerhard Uys (2026), Conservation Bill Sparks Public Access Concerns. Farmers Weekly. Accessed 25 Jun 2026. Available from <https://www.farmersweekly.co.nz/news/conservation-bill-sparks-public-access-concerns/>

6. Participation and Stewardship in Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The Bill proposes to give effect to what it means for the Conservation Act to honour the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. It states the set normative processes and timeframes for consultation to happen (from 20 days – 40 days) for advice and comments concerning the NCPS, area plans, disposal of land, exchange of land and the building and setting up of visitor amenity areas. However, such timeframes for comment are rather short for many settlement processes, and the Bill will stunt full and considered involvement for Māori in honouring agreements currently under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

As the codification of how the Treaty is enacted is imprinted onto the Conservation Act, it drastically narrows the scope of iwi and mana whenua in the partnership with the Crown. Inevitably, it is the Crown making the final decision through advice from iwi and setting the pace for which negotiations will happen. Ultimately, it will mean that a power imbalance in the partnership will ensue, rather than a co-responsible model of environmental management forged between the Tangata Whenua/Tangata Tiriti partnership and Tino Rangatiratanga – a free and authoritative self-determination over ancestral lands and ecosystems.

7. Summary

This Bill, while concerned about the economic gains that can be achieved in developing land that has “unimproved capital value”, sacrifices environmental protections and safeguards currently in place for public conservation lands in Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular, the development of conservation areas for economic gains, the lack of consideration for ecology and connected ecosystems in the exchange or disposal of lands, the building of high-environmental impact visitor amenities on public conservation lands, as well as the disregard for the integral partnership of iwi rooted in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, negatively encroaches on the Catholic Social teaching principles of Participation, the Common Good, Stewardship and Subsidiarity. In addition, the increased level of work placed on a smaller number of workers/staff, especially in the DoC, raises good questions about whether Human Dignity, particularly of work, is fully expressed under a model of economic development that seems to be promoting just the bottom line.