

# **Working with landowners to protect biodiversity: some personal reflections**

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## **BOPRC biodiversity programme**

In collaboration with DOC we carried out detailed ecosystem prioritisation across the region. We ended up with 2 maps, one showing potential ecosystems (what was likely to have been present in the past) and one showing what we have now. This allowed us to prioritise based roughly on what was left of what was once there. Funding for landowners is 25 – 100% depending on ecosystem rarity and management prescriptions involved. Funding is dependent on landowner protecting the site with some sort of covenant. Landowners enter into agreements with us voluntarily.

One of the issues for the future is funding. If pest control or weed control is involved (the former usually only in large sites), management costs are ongoing and increase year by year as more sites come under management.

## **Working with landowners**

Attitudes have changed considerably over the 16 years I've been involved in this work. To some extent, this is a generational shift. There are increasing numbers of landowners who have some understanding of the value of biodiversity and the environment generally and want to do the right thing but are not sure how and are of course concerned about the cost and the impact on their business. Part of my role is to help them work through this and show how doing the right thing may actually be beneficial to their business. It's important to find out what their motivations are, what drives them, what the common ground is, and how to capitalise on that. Also key is to consider the process from the 'client's' point of view and perspective and trying to put myself in their shoes. Many landowners have in the past seen the regional council simply as the regulator and respond accordingly. It takes time and effort to get past that and develop confidence and trust. My relationships with landowners are crucial and need to be nurtured long term. Rather than putting the "hard word" on them, I'm always looking for opportunities to gently steer the conversation and their ideas and co-create solutions. I'm also always looking for opportunities to engage with more landowners, through personal contacts or through various fora (for example DairyNZ discussion groups).

The work I do with landowners I see as collaboration between us and the relationship can be very different with each. Each has their own knowledge, experience and ideas to contribute. I contribute some context, expertise, guidance and advice, while taking my cues from them. In that sense we are equals and we build together. Importantly, the landowner needs to have genuine ownership of the work they are doing. Any given project is theirs, not mine or the regional councils.

In a given community or catchment, it's also important to know who the influencers are and prioritise work with them.

There are still some, but a rapidly decreasing number, who are fiercely determined not to do the right thing, the attitude being that this is my land and no-one's going to interfere in what I do with it.

Not so long ago, the bush block on the farm was an asset in terms of being a source of a bit of extra winter feed and shelter for the stock.

I recently went to see an older dairy farmer who I had thought was fairly conservative, who had just bought a new farm and had asked about fencing a wetland. On my visit, I also suggested fencing and planting small gullies and wet spots and also a significant area of kahikatea forest. Rather surprisingly to me, he had already planned all this and some of it was underway. He wasn't interested in financial assistance. He was only partly motivated by biodiversity protection for him it was more about making stock management easier. He also had some understanding of how this work would help to improve water quality.

On top of the obvious understanding of ecology, weed control and pest control, it's really important for me to have a good understanding of farm management, practice and the farm business. Biodiversity protection needs to be seen in the context of everything else happening on the land in question including the farm operation and also other issues such as nutrient losses and water quality improvement. An understanding of these inter-relationships is important and this includes elements of climate, hydrology, geology, soils, erosion etc. Not forgetting, and it is often forgotten, the role of ecosystem services. Biodiversity must be understood as more than just a few pretty trees and rare birds. Taking it further still I like to see biodiversity protection being managed in an integrated way alongside all other aspects of good land management in a catchment or sub-catchment approach.

### **Working with Māori landowners and iwi and hapū**

I work extensively with iwi, hapū, whānau and individuals – Māori make up more than half of the local population in the Ōpōtiki District. Māori here have a deep seated and very justified mistrust of Pākehā bureaucracy, so first step, and it's a big one, is to overcome that and develop trust. And the relationship will always be with me, not BOPRC. I need to remember that, generally, Maori groups have difficulty comprehending our corporate, bureaucratic world and they often don't have the experience or capacity to engage in the way we often require them to engage. And they generally don't have much in the way of financial resources. I get paid to engage with them, they don't get paid to engage with me. Māori often have quite different perspectives on biodiversity and its significance which also need to be understood and respected. Additionally then there are the complexities of Māori land tenure which Judge Harvey described so eloquently. This work takes time and cannot be rushed. I've been working with trustees of a Māori forestry block on the E coast to improve the management and protection of a very significant wetland since 2009 and we still don't have an agreement in place. But I'm confident something will happen one day when everyone's ready.

I need to understand where they are coming from and what their journey has been like. Our collective past in this part of the country is not a pretty story.

Our collaboration with Ngā Whenua Rāhui is important. They are a vital component in the protection of biodiversity over large parts of the North Island in particular. I think it behoves us to remember that Māori have been left with large tracts of the least productive land but land which now contains some of the highest biodiversity values.

## **Working with community groups**

I work with a large number of volunteer community groups, largely funded by BOPRC and generally engaged in pest control and restoration, and am in awe of their passion, knowledge and hard work. In most respects, working with community groups is little different from working with individual landowners. But I need to be aware of the voluntary nature of their work. Paperwork is the surest way of turning people (landowners as well as community groups) off from doing great work – they are passionate people who simply want to get out there to nurture, plant, kill pests and make a difference. So I try to make the processes (in terms of BOPRC documentation requirements such as reporting, H&S, monitoring) as simple as possible. How do they feel; what is reasonable? I consider what the minimum requirements are and the least onerous way for them to meet these and do as much of any documentation as I can on their behalf. I assume some level of trust by BOPRC in both the group and their aspirations and myself as a responsible staff member. I provide resourcing and logistical support, expertise (where it's required, which is rarely) and perhaps most importantly encouragement and recognition. Helping to build their social capital both within the group and their local community is also important. Again, they have complete ownership of the projects they are involved in and free to progress them in whatever way they see fit. In a way I am but a facilitator.

The work we (BOPRC) do is based on pretty robust prioritisation while always accepting that there are places that, while not being a great priority for us, are none the less extremely important to communities. We need to make allowances for this.

## **Some general comments**

People are not generally very familiar with what biodiversity protection really means (or even the meaning of the word biodiversity). For example, they may understand the need to fence out stock and to control possums but are rarely aware of the impact of rats or weeds. Most don't see the difference between a patch of bush in decline, severely impacted by browsers, predators and weeds, and a fully functioning ecosystem and the value of it.

There is a great need for further outreach about this and about the ecosystem services indigenous biodiversity provides. More effort needs to be put into this by all of us from central government down to the likes of myself. But it needs to be carefully targeted and the various landowner groups, and the wider public, engaged in a way that is meaningful for them. Looking after our biodiversity needs to become something which is part of all of our lives, part of what we do, part of who we are. We all need to have a shared aspirational vision (as in the recently announced predator free Taranaki).

In the end, biodiversity protection and conservation are about people. For me, this work is predicated on good relationships, collaboration, knowledge, understanding and genuine engagement.

I strongly believe we don't need too much more regulation. In my experience regulation creates a "them and us" situation, creates conflict and leads to people doing the minimum to comply, without any real care and often leads to people taking short cuts and finding loopholes. This work is more about winning hearts and minds and providing incentives. A landowner with a genuine understanding of, and belief in, the importance of protecting biodiversity will do it well with the

minimum of assistance. Adding more complexity with more rules and bureaucracy is not helpful. I see it as my role to help guide landowners through the regulatory minefield we already have, to take care of the paperwork for them as much as possible so they can focus on the actual work. Of course there has to be a basic regulatory framework but finding the right balance of regulation, incentives and developing understanding I think is the key here.

We must be very careful of not putting up barriers to the good work people do.

I think I could sum up my thoughts this way:

Our indigenous biodiversity and its intrinsic values, its ecological integrity and the services it provides, is understood, valued, protected and thriving through the collaborative efforts of landowners, managers and stewards, iwi, government agencies and, crucially, the public generally.

Notes provided on 5 June 2018

Presentation was on 9 May 2018 at Te Manuka Tutahi, Whakatane