

## **Saving New Zealand's Wild and Natural Places**

### **COMMENTARY TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF THE COMPANION OF THE NEW ZEALAND ORDER OF MERIT FOR CONSERVATION TO DR GERARD (GERRY) MCSWEENEY OF LAKE MOERAKI, SOUTH WESTLAND.**

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I am humbled by being awarded the Companion of the NZ Order of Merit. It recognises the importance of protecting natural ecosystems and native plants and animals in New Zealand and worldwide. It also acknowledges efforts by a huge number of NZ people passionate about conservation. My conservation work would not have been possible without the constant support for our conservation efforts of my wife Anne Saunders, our children Katie, Michael and Claire and many active nature lovers working with the Forest and Bird Society throughout New Zealand.

We depend on wild places for our survival. These places also remind us what makes New Zealand/Aotearoa special. They have a place in our hearts. We play in and explore these wild places and they are vital for our health and wellbeing. They supply all of us with abundant freshwater and clean air. They underpin NZ's recreation and tourism industries that are the lifeblood of many small remote NZ communities. Nature-based tourism provides jobs and an economic future to many of those small communities, places where my family and I have lived for much of our lives.

Wild places need guardians/kaitiaki.

In 2020, nature conservation efforts have never been more important in a world where wild nature is disappearing at an ever-increasing rate. For the past 50 years I have been closely involved with voluntary community conservation efforts first through the Native Forests Action Council then the Forest and Bird Society, served the last 30 years with the Nature Heritage Fund and served the last 9 years with the NZ Conservation Authority. I have seen the huge difference that ordinary people and local communities committed to looking after their local area are making throughout New Zealand. I have also seen just what an important difference people in our larger cities can make to protecting nature throughout the country. As well as looking after their local areas in the cities, they add their strong voice and economic support to efforts to protect nature in the more remote parts of NZ. Nothing illustrates this better than the 2010 nationwide rallies against plans to open up National Parks and specially protected areas to mining. These protests resulted in a Government backdown and a promise to permanently protect our National Parks.

Small communities located alongside our great NZ protected areas are absolutely vital for the future of these special places. I want to acknowledge all the neighbours of the National Park and conservation lands who care for these places, are the guardians and who often benefit from the visitors who come to enjoy these special places.

I also want to pay tribute to the people who were described 34 years ago as the "Green Dots" then spread through a range of Government departments where they were trying to protect nature in departments that were dominantly focused on development. I had the honour of being part of the Department of Conservation (DOC) Establishment Unit in 1986. Those "Green Dots" were bought together into the Department of Conservation. Over the 34 years since then, all the successive Governments have supported DOC in its work, although not always with adequate funding. The Governments have all recognised that DOC is a world leader in natural land and species management.

It has been an honour to be closely involved in efforts to protect nature over the last 40 years. Some highlights for me over that period have been the following:

- **The establishment in 1986 and successful operation ever since of DOC.** It looks after nearly one third of NZ land area and is working with our Treaty of Waitangi partners to develop a new land ethic of caring for nature and for people.
- **The establishment of Te Wahi Pounamu/South West New Zealand World Heritage Area in 1990. This protects 10% of NZ stretching from Westland/Tai Poutini National Park south to southern Fiordland.** It includes New Zealand's largest remaining area of lowland native forest. Te Wahi Pounamu is recognised by UNESCO as one of the most special natural places on earth.
- **Protection of our remaining NZ native forest from logging and the 1991 signing of the NZ Forest Accord between the forest industries and the conservation movement.** This focuses all timber production on plantation forests and not on native forest logging and clearance.
- **Establishment from 2000 to 2010 of South Island High Country Tussockland and Conservation Parks that now protect around 1 million hectares of mountain lands, valleys, lakes and rivers.** I did my Doctorate studies on high country tussockland. It is wonderful that these wild and beautiful landscapes that are home to unique species of plants, birds, insects and lizards are now permanently protected and open to be enjoyed by all of us. Many of these special areas were protected through the work of the Nature Heritage Fund with the support of high country land owners.
- **Tiakina Nga Manu/Battle for our Birds and Forests that started in 2014 means that finally we have a nationwide programme where our legally protecting natural areas are now getting practical protection through landscape scale pest control targeting rats, stoats and possums.** This programme now covers nearly one quarter of all our protected conservation lands and National Parks. In partnership with huge community conservation efforts, it guarantees a long-term future to birds such as kiwi, kaka, kea, kokako, mohua, whio, tawaki penguins and to giant landsnails and to the native forests and shrub ecosystems that are home to this wildlife. We do still have big challenges ahead in deer, goat and pig control.
- **The most important transformation that is taking place throughout NZ is the integration of nature protection with all other aspects of economic life in NZ.** Farming is increasingly focused on sustainability as is forestry. Commercial fishing has been slow to achieve sustainability and still has a long way to go. The goal is to achieve sustainable productive systems that do not run down the natural capital of soil, clean water and clean, unpolluted air.
- **Our biggest national and global challenge ahead is to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases resulting in climate change.**

Over the last 30 years with my wife Anne Saunders and our family members, we put our money and efforts where our mouth was by establishing our Wilderness Lodges in two remote parts of New Zealand at Lake Moeraki in South Westland and at Arthur's Pass in the Canterbury High Country. We have tried through the Wilderness Lodges model to show that conservation is everyone's business and that it can make a major contribution to the economy and to the health of both small rural communities committed to protect the land. Conservation creates jobs through nature tourism, gives us clean water and clean air and provides a sustainable future for our descendants. We are delighted to have our son Michael and his family now working in our Wilderness Lodges business.

Our Wilderness Lodges main focus has been eco-tourism. Visitors come to see wild nature and to learn about natural ecosystems. They go away with a much greater awareness of human

dependence on nature hopefully to make a difference in the places that they call home. At the Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass farm, they also see sustainable production of high-quality export-focused goods. We are suppliers of super fine merino wool to Icebreaker. The shrublands that we have legally protected on Cora Lynn Station through a conservation covenant and the tenure review process are not only maintaining biodiversity and are a source of freshwater, but also produce honey. We are contracted with Ngai Tahu company, Oha, to produce manuka honey from our protected shrublands. We also have a close relationship with the education sector and host regular visits by schools, universities and researchers interested in eco-tourism and sustainable land management.

Latest research by NIWA and DOC show that the rainforests of South West New Zealand are making a major contribution to locking up the excess of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. This is an exciting new science frontier that we never even considered during the battles of the last 40 years to protect New Zealand's native forests. NIWA and DOC are jointly working to quantify the measured dramatic drop in CO<sub>2</sub> levels between upwind of the rainforest to downwind measurement at Baring Head near Wellington. This appears to result from the storage and sequestration of carbon by these protected forests. This example shows how the benefits of nature conservation are not always immediately apparent.

*As a university student in the 1970s I helped fund my studies by guiding tourist walks in National Parks. 45 years later at Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki I still guide rainforest walks and kayak trips almost every day. I remain just as fascinated by the wonders of nature and by the people I guide as I was in those early student days. We are always learning more about what makes wild New Zealand special. This year in Lake Moeraki, Anne and I discovered that NZ fur seals have taken up residence in this freshwater lake, 3 km inland from the ocean. They are feeding on trout and eels. After 31 years of counting, this spring we recorded the highest number of breeding Tawaki penguins in our local rainforest breeding colony. 2020 has also been the best flowering for many years here of Southern Rata, the South Island Christmas Tree.*

*Anne Saunders & Gerry McSweeney*

Owner/Managers



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