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A short history of the Department of Conservation 1987-2007 - Born with a mission

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Born with a mission

On 1 April 1987 the Department of Conservation was launched by Prime Minister David Lange in Wellington, at Antrim House, with 1111 permanent and 718 casual staff nationwide. Its first Minister was Russell Marshall, followed within the first three years by Helen Clark and Philip Woollaston.

Staff were drawn from the land management and surveying departments of the Department of Lands and Survey, and the much smaller Section of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and the Department of Conservation Affairs, as well as other government agencies.

Worker in the original DOC uniform

Gone were the green and khaki uniforms; light blue and beige would represent a fresh face of "conservation" in New Zealand. The first Director-General, Ken Piddington, was explicit that the new Department would shake off the baggage of its parent agencies.

The environment, generally, was ripe for restructuring in New Zealand, in the prevailing 1980s climate of free market reform. The move towards a single "conservation" agency started in November 1984, and gained force after a national conference in 1985.

At the time the NZFS was both protecting and logging native forests, and Lands & Survey was caught between protecting land and burning it for development, as well as managing national parks and reserves. Forest and Bird, the Native Forest Action Council, Friends of the Earth, Maruia Society and other NGOs were campaigning to protect lowland podocarp forests around the country.

To the Executive of the day, the public service was burdened with mixed objectives, and there was no coherent approach to biodiversity conservation. It made sense to gather the "green dots" around the country into one agency.

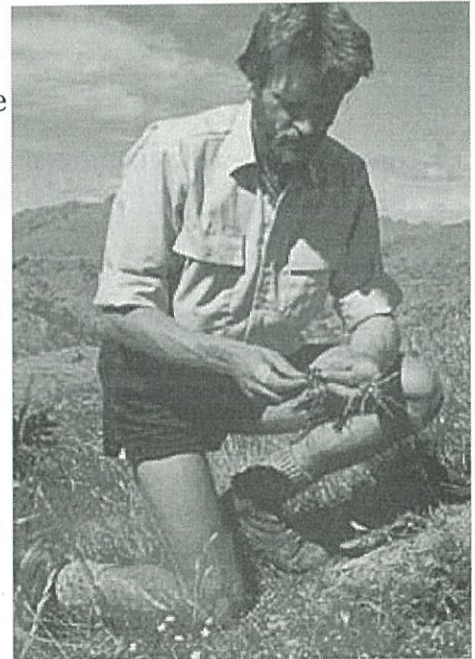
Thus, the Conservation Act 1987 requires DOC to protect natural and historic heritage, and provide recreational opportunities on land entrusted to its care. Nature was to be protected for its own sake and the benefits to New Zealanders protected for future generations to enjoy.



(DOC, n.d.[d])

1987
DOC established

As at date of publication
Archive



Bird scientists were brought under the same umbrella as park and reserve managers, and nature conservation benefited almost immediately. Initially, however, most Wildlife Service staff at district level were concentrated in the Taupo and Rotorua areas, because of the trout fishery rather than native species.

Not least, the Department was launched with an expectation of an entirely new relationship with Māori; Section 4 of the Conservation Act requires the Department to "give effect" to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. Ken Piddington was (and still is) fluent in te reo.

* The Historic Places Trust was accountable to the Minister of Internal Affairs and partly funded from Vote Internal Affairs, pre-1987. Staff were employees of Internal Affairs. With the passing of the Conservation Act 1987, these responsibilities were transferred to the Minister of Conservation. The Director-General was represented at HPT Board meetings until 1993 when the HPT gained greater independence from DOC. While still responsible to the Minister, HPT staff then became employees of the Trust. Both agencies continued to work together but each developed its own focus, e.g. with the HPT taking on a policy advice role within government.

In 1998, the Minister of Conservation's historic heritage review resulted in a further administrative change, with the portfolio responsibilities for the HPT being transferred to the Minister for Culture and Heritage.

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