

12 July 2026

Submission to the Committee Secretariat of the Environment Committee on the ***Conservation Amendment Bill***.

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Auckland believes that how we care for the natural world is a matter of justice. The decisions we make today affect not only present communities but also future generations and the wider community of life with whom we share this diverse land and sea. Guided by the principles of human dignity, care for creation, participation, subsidiarity, the common good, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, we, therefore, strongly oppose the Conservation Amendment Bill in its current form, and urge Parliament to strengthen, rather than weaken, the protection of Aotearoa New Zealand's conservation estate.

As outlined in public analysis of the Bill, the proposed changes would significantly expand the categories of conservation land eligible for sale, disposal, or exchange, embed a stronger commercial use focus within conservation management, centralise decision-making powers, and reduce opportunities for community participation in decisions affecting public conservation lands.¹

We believe these changes directly conflict with:

- Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Catholic Social Teaching (CST)
- The principle of stewardship of creation
- The common good
- Intergenerational justice and
- The protection of New Zealand's unique natural heritage status.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

We believe the Crown entered a covenant relationship with Māori Tangata Whenua through Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The preamble records the Crown's desire that Māori retain

¹ Toop, G. (2026, June 4). *The biggest attack on conservation land in New Zealand's history*. Greenpeace Aotearoa. <https://www.greenpeace.org/aotearoa/story/the-biggest-attack-on-conservation-land-in-new-zealands-history/>

their authority and lands: "kia tohungia ki a ratou o ratou rangatiratanga, me to ratou wenua".²

Article Two further guaranteed Tino Rangatiratanga – full authority and control of [their] lands, villages and all their taonga:

"Ko te Kuini o Ingarani ka wakarite ka wakaee ki nga Rangatira ki nga hapu – ki nga tangata katoa o Nu Tirani te tino rangatiratanga o o ratou wenua o ratou kainga me o ratou taonga katoa."³

The Commission recognises that conservation lands contain many taonga, including indigenous species, forests, waterways, wāhi tapu, and landscapes of profound cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance.

The Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti extend **beyond** consultation. They include active protection of taonga and a commitment to genuine partnership with Tangata Whenua. Concentrating decision-making authority in the Minister and reducing the role of Conservation Boards, the New Zealand Conservation Authority, and public hearings risks weakening that partnership and diminishing opportunities for iwi, hapū, and local communities to participate in decisions affecting taonga.⁴

The Commission submits that any reform of conservation legislation must strengthen, rather than weaken, the Crown's ability to honour Te Tiriti obligations.

Care for Creation

CST strongly recognises creation as a gift from God entrusted to humanity for responsible stewardship. Pope Francis wrote that: "The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development."⁵

² Māori text - *Read the Treaty* | NZHistory, New Zealand history online. (2023, May 29). Nzhistory.Govt.Nz.

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/treaty/read-the-treaty/maori-text>

Professor Kawharu, I H. (2020). *The full text of Te Tiriti o Waitangi* | *The Treaty of Waitangi* | Te Papa.

Te Papa. <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/digital-museum/explore-digital-museum/treaty-waitangi/treaty-close/full-text-te-tiriti-o>

That their chieftainship (authority) and their lands would be protected for them.

³ Ibid.

The Queen of England guarantees to the chiefs, the hapū, and all the people of New Zealand the Tino Rangatiratanga (full authority and control) of their lands, villages and all their taonga.

⁴ Toop, *The biggest attack*, Greenpeace Aotearoa.

⁵ DID Staff. (2015, May 24). *Laudato Si' Excerpts*. Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue.

<https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/laudato-si-excerpts/>

He further teaches: “Our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.”⁶

A gracefully expressed sentiment that also comes with a warning: “This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.”⁷

The Commission is concerned that the Bill's emphasis on enabling commercial activity on conservation land fundamentally changes the purpose of conservation management. Greenpeace notes that the Bill would require the Department of Conservation (DOC) to enable commercial activity “to the greatest extent practicable.”⁸

Conservation land should not be viewed primarily through the lens of economic return. Ecological value transcends economic value when ecological integrity, biodiversity, cultural identity, spiritual significance, recreation,⁹ climate resilience, and the wellbeing of future generations are fully respected, considered and preserved.

The Commission believes that stewardship and protection must remain the primary purpose of conservation law in Aotearoa.

Indigenous Wisdom and the Sacredness of Land

The Commission notes the profound harmony between Māori understandings of whenua and Catholic teachings regarding creation.

Pope Francis acknowledges the wisdom of Indigenous peoples: “For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors”.¹⁰

This understanding resonates deeply with Māori concepts of whakapapa, Kaitiakitanga, and the relational connection between people and the natural world.¹¹

Both Te Tiriti and CST challenge us to reject approaches that reduce land to a commercial asset. The ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of conservation land must remain central to strengthen policy and decision-making.

The Common Good

⁶ Pope Francis. (2015, May 24). *Laudato Si’*: *On Care for our Common Home*. The Holy See.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

n.1

⁷ Ibid. n.2

⁸ Toop, *The biggest attack*, Greenpeace Aotearoa.

⁹ *Parks & Recreation*. (2025). Department of Conservation. Te Papa Atawhai.

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/>

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, n.146

¹¹ Frankham, C. (2024, June 26). *A Sacred Connection with the Land – O&G Magazine*. O&G Magazine.

<https://www.ogmagazine.org.au/26/2-26/a-sacred-connection-with-the-land/>

The principle of the common good lies at the heart of Catholic Social Teaching.

Pope Francis teaches: "The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone".¹²

Public conservation land is a shared inheritance. It belongs not only to the present generation but also to future generations.

These lands provide:

- habitat for endangered species
- carbon storage and climate resilience
- clean water and healthy ecosystems
- recreational opportunities
- cultural and spiritual enrichment and
- connection to place and identity.¹³

The Commission is therefore deeply concerned by proposals that could make significantly larger areas of public conservation land eligible for disposal or exchange. Greenpeace reports that approximately five million hectares (or around 60 percent of public conservation land) could potentially become eligible for sale or exchange under the proposed framework.¹⁴

The management of conservation land must prioritise the common good over short-term commercial interests.

Participation and Democratic Responsibility

CST affirms that people have both a right and a responsibility to participate in decisions that affect their communities and the wellbeing of society. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* teaches: "Participation is a duty to be fulfilled consciously by all, with responsibility and with a view to the common good".¹⁵

The Commission is concerned by proposals that reduce opportunities for public involvement in conservation decision-making. Greenpeace notes that the Bill removes powers from existing independent conservation bodies and weakens rights to public hearings.¹⁶

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n.95

¹³ Toop, *The biggest attack*, Greenpeace Aotearoa.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Pope Saint John Paul II. (2004). *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The Holy See; Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html n.189

¹⁶ Toop, *The biggest attack*, Greenpeace Aotearoa.

Conservation land is held in trust for the people of Aotearoa. Decisions about its future should remain transparent, participatory, and accountable.

Subsidiarity

A further principle of CST is subsidiarity, which teaches that decisions should be made as closely as possible to the communities affected by them. As a rudimentary expression of Church teaching: "A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order".¹⁷

The Commission proposes that iwi, hapū, local communities, Conservation Boards, and independent conservation authorities should continue to have meaningful roles in decisions affecting conservation land. Centralising authority within ministerial decision-making risks undermining both democratic participation and local stewardship.

Intergenerational Justice

Catholic teaching emphasises that each generation receives creation as a gift and must preserve it for those who follow. Pope Francis states: "Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us".¹⁸

He further reminds us: "Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home."¹⁹

Many of Aotearoa's ecosystems are already under pressure. Conservation lands provide critical refuge for threatened species and play an important role in climate mitigation through carbon storage in native forests.²⁰

It is essential to understand the concept of intergenerational equity within sustainable development. This principle asserts that the current generation has a **moral and legal responsibility** to preserve the natural environment, including conservation lands, so that future generations can enjoy comparable options, quality, and access to resources.²¹

International declarations, such as the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and the 1992 Rio Declaration, explicitly state that natural resources must be safeguarded for both present

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II. (1991, May 1). *Centesimus Annus*. The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html n.48.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n. 159.

¹⁹ DID, *Laudato Si' Excerpts*, n.13.

²⁰ Toop, *The biggest attack*, Greenpeace Aotearoa.

²¹ Bándi, G. (2022). *Sustainable Development, the Interests of Future Generations, and Moral and Legal Implications*. In J. E. Szilágyi (Ed.), *Constitutional Protection of the Environment and Future Generations* (pp. 17–71). Miskolc–Budapest: Central European Academic Publishing.
<https://books.ceapublishing.hu/index.php/ceaprofnet/catalog/download/31/45/1152?inline=1> pg. 40.

and future generations. The idea that conservation land is not simply property of the current generation, but a form of common heritage or trust, where the state (and, by extension, us as a society) acts as a trustee.²²

This means managing, protecting, and maintaining these lands to ensure their ecological integrity and biodiversity are not diminished over time. For example, the Hungarian Constitutional Court emphasised that natural resources, including conservation land, form the common heritage of the nation, and it is the obligation of the state and everyone to protect and preserve natural land and resources for future generations.²³

This trust-like responsibility ensures *that short-term interests do not override the long-term well-being and rights of those yet to come*, making conservation land stewardship a fundamental aspect of justice and sustainable development.²⁴

We therefore recommend that all decisions affecting conservation land should be evaluated against the principle of intergenerational justice and the obligation to preserve ecological integrity for future generations.²⁵

Decisions that permit the irreversible degradation, sale, or fragmentation of conservation lands compromise the inheritance available to future generations.

The Commission believes environmental stewardship is a matter of justice. Future generations have a legitimate claim on the ecological integrity of the lands we hold in trust today.

Recommendations

1. Retain Conservation as the Primary Purpose of the Act

We oppose any amendment that redefines the purpose of conservation legislation to facilitate commercial exploitation. To reiterate Greenpeace's position that the Bill would require DOC to enable commercial activity "to the greatest extent practicable."

Our recommendations are to:

- Retain conservation, ecological protection, and biodiversity preservation as the primary purpose of the Conservation Act.

²² Ibid. 38-39, 62,

²³ Ibid. pg. 48, 50.

²⁴ Ibid. pg. 43.

²⁵ For more insight on intergenerational justice in conservation: Weiss, E. B. (2021). *Intergenerational Equity: Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*. Oxford Public International Law. Published under the auspices of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law under the direction of Professor Anne Peters (2021–) and Professor Rüdiger Wolfrum (2004–2020).

<https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1421?p=emailAw0H3uQ56.sGc&d=/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1421>

- Explicitly require all decisions under the Act to prioritise the protection of indigenous biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural heritage.

2. Strengthen Te Tiriti Commitments

We believe Te Tiriti o Waitangi should be explicitly reflected throughout conservation legislation. This includes:

- A clear statutory obligation for all decision-makers to give effect to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
- Require partnership and shared decision-making with iwi and hapū where conservation lands contain taonga, wāhi tapu, or other significant cultural values.
- Require impact assessments on Treaty interests prior to any disposal, exchange, or commercial concession.

3. Retain Existing Protections Against Sale or Disposal

We are particularly concerned about proposals that could significantly expand the categories of conservation land available for disposal or exchange. Again, to reiterate Greenpeace reports that as much as 60% of conservation land could become eligible for sale or exchange under the proposed framework is unacceptable. We recommend:

- Retaining the current requirement that conservation land may only be disposed of where it has been independently determined to have little or no conservation value.
- Requiring Parliamentary approval for any significant disposal of conservation land.
- Strictly prohibiting disposal where biodiversity, climate, cultural, or Treaty values would be adversely and irrevocably affected.

4. Protect Public Participation

This is a particularly strong Justice and Peace issue because it relates to human dignity, subsidiarity, participation, and democracy. Our recommendations are to:

- Retain public notification and hearing requirements for all significant proposals.
- Preserve the role of Conservation Boards and the New Zealand Conservation Authority.
- Ensure communities, environmental groups, Churches, Iwi, and affected stakeholders continue to have meaningful opportunities to be heard and considered.

5. Apply Climate and Biodiversity Tests

Require every proposal for land exchange, disposal, or concession to demonstrate that the change in legislation:

- Will not increase biodiversity loss
- Will not reduce climate resilience
- Will not undermine New Zealand's environmental commitments and
- Will protect endangered and threatened species.

6. Uphold Intergenerational Justice

We suggest that by embedding the principle of intergenerational justice in the Act, all decisions on conservation land will protect ecological integrity, biodiversity, and climate resilience for future generations to further:

- Recognise conservation land as a public trust, held for the benefit of present and future generations, not solely current economic interests.
- Require assessment of long-term impacts on future generations before any land sale, disposal, exchange, or developments are approved.
- Prohibit activities that would cause irreversible degradation or loss of significant conservation values.
- Ensure all conservation decisions reflect the principle that the natural environment is a collective good and a shared inheritance.

Conclusion

Once more we reiterate that the **Conservation Amendment Bill** be rejected in its current form. Should Parliament choose to proceed, substantial amendments are required to ensure the legislation honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi, protects the integrity of the conservation estate, preserves public participation, safeguards biodiversity and climate resilience, and reflects the principles of stewardship, the common good, and intergenerational justice that are central to Catholic Social Teaching.

We believe the Bill:

- Risks undermining the Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Weakens protections for taonga and conservation lands
- Prioritises commercial interests over stewardship
- Reduces public participation in decision-making
- Threatens biodiversity and ecological resilience
- Undermines principles of subsidiarity and the common good and
- Fails to adequately protect the interests of future generations.

We conclude with the words of Pope Francis: "The earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone."²⁶

Conservation land and estate in Aotearoa New Zealand should remain a taonga held in trust for present and future generations.

We urge Parliament to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and uphold the principles of subsidiarity, human dignity, intergenerational justice and solidarity, and ensure that conservation law remains focused on the protection of creation and the common good.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n.93.