

5 SIGNIFICANT INDIGENOUS VEGETATION AND SIGNIFICANT HABITATS OF INDIGENOUS FAUNA

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The district is characterised by widespread indigenous forests. While the river valleys and certain lower altitude areas have been cleared of forest and converted to agriculture, extensive native forests are located in the more remote ranges and river valleys. Approximately 80% of the district's native forests are managed by the Department of Conservation. Most of the remaining area is administered by Timberlands West Coast Limited, who in accordance with the West Coast Accord and the Forests Amendment Act manage the forests for long term sustained yield to meet contractual demands for saw logs. There is comparatively little indigenous forest in private hands outside of the two organisations identified above.

Grey District also contains many areas of valuable [wetlands](#). Some major areas include Paroa Wetland, Lake Ahaura, Lake Haupiri, Lake Hochstetter and Blaketown Lagoon. [Wetlands](#) provide habitats for fauna, are an important recreational resource and have important water retention and purification functions. They have been drained and developed indiscriminately in the past, which has led to the situation where they are a threatened ecosystem.

Birdlife in the district is rich, achieving both numbers and diversity not generally found elsewhere in New Zealand. Native birds found in the forest include, the owl, New Zealand falcon, native pigeon, tui, bellbird, silver eye, grey warbler, rifleman, robin, tom-tit, fan-tails and the flightless weka and kiwi. Rarer birds include the red and yellow crowned parakeet, kaka, blue duck and spotted kiwi. Shags, white fronted terns, various gulls, oystercatchers and banded-cotters occupy coastal breeding grounds. A colony of burrowing Westland black petrels occupy coastal hills south of the Punakaiki River and are the only mainland-breeding colony of this bird.

Seals are regularly seen on rocky headlands and islands off Point Elizabeth. The seastacks between Point Elizabeth and Motukiekie are special coastal features of the Grey District. These seastacks support a diversity of indigenous flora and fauna, including rare and threatened plant species and birds. Important coastal sites for indigenous vegetation exist, such as areas of coastal vegetation at New River Estuary and important sites for the habitat of indigenous fauna such as skink habitat at Cobden beach.

In addition to the native species of eels, smelt, bullies, and torrent fish, the coast is perhaps best known for its whitebait. Flows of whitebait move upstream through the estuaries on rising tides generally between August and November. Regulations regarding fishing for whitebait are currently enforced by the West Coast Regional Council (**WCRC**) and the Department of Conservation (**DOC**).

The provisions of **Section 6(c)** of the [Act](#) place an obligation on [Council](#) to recognise and provide for the protection of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of fauna. Given that a substantial percentage of these significant areas are public conservation lands, this materially assists in providing for their protection. For example there are 205,000 hectares of indigenous forest of which 85% is held by DOC.

As noted above, there is a relatively small amount of indigenous forest on private [land](#) (12.5%). Evidence available to [Council](#) indicates that there is little removal of the indigenous

forests taking place. This is partly due to the steepness of the slopes, the requirements of the Forest Amendment Act and the conservation ethic now adopted by many landowners. Sustainable forest management on private [land](#) effectively means that indigenous timber can only be milled under an approved plan or permit or a specific approval from the Director General of Agriculture and Forestry as provided for under Part III A of the Forest Act Amendment. Unfenced stock also have a major impact on indigenous vegetation in some localities.

It is also apparent that pests such as possums are having a major effect on indigenous vegetation and the protection of the forests will be enhanced by pest management programmes that are properly funded. **Council** is also aware of difficulties in identifying significant areas on private [land](#) in terms of their “significance” and their exact location given that typically they have not been accurately surveyed. **Council**, with other local authorities on the West Coast, has obtained Sustainable Management Funding (SMF) to carry out a district wide survey of such resources. This study entitled “A Cost effective Approach To **Section 6(c)** RMA Responsibilities” will establish criteria for significant natural (SNA) areas, define particular areas and provide a range of mechanisms for protection of the areas. Conservation groups input will be part of the study.

Resources such as [wetlands](#) can be affected by drainage, [land](#) development and sphagnum moss harvesting. Again however, it is clear that a significant proportion of [wetlands](#) are already administered by DOC. Many [wetlands](#) are adjacent to lakes and any drainage is likely to be impracticable in terms of cost and scale. The West Coast Regional Council also have a number of controls in place designed to protect waterbodies such as [wetlands](#). These controls are also applicable to activities relating to indigenous forests and specifically relate to [earthworks](#), soil disturbance and vegetation clearance.

5.2 ISSUES

1. Some of the areas of indigenous vegetation and habitats of fauna can be susceptible to damage from:
 - a) pest and predators, including;
 - i) the presence of possums, mustelids, feral cats and pigs
 - ii) the spread of weed species
 - iii) escape or release of feral species
 - b) [land](#) development activities such as farming, forestry and mining
 - c) stock grazing

While large areas of indigenous vegetation and fauna in the Grey District have some kind of protection, those areas that are not protected have the potential to be degraded. It is noted however, that pests and predators do not respect the boundary between protected/non protected lands.

5.3 OBJECTIVE

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The protection and where possible enhancement of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and habitats of indigenous fauna. |
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5.4 POLICIES

1. To identify areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna.
2. To recognise such areas in accordance with the following criteria:

Representativeness – a measure of the current extent of a vegetation type/ ecosystem compared to its extent at some fixed point in history.

Rarity/ Distinctiveness – a measure of the presence of rare species (using appropriate threatened species classifications) or of a distinctive species feature (e.g. a species at a distributional level).

Ecological Context – a measure of the ecological role played by an area in the health of the wider ecosystems in its environment.

Sustainability – a measure of the ability of the identified areas to remain viable or their potential to become viable in the long term.

(Refer to the report “West Coast SNA Project: SNA Assessment and Protection”, August 2001 for a more detailed explanation.)

3. To avoid, remedy or mitigate adverse effects on the ecological integrity, functioning and habitat values and natural character of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and habitats of indigenous fauna.
4. To reduce the effect that pests, including the introduction of new pests, can have on significant areas of indigenous vegetation and habitats of fauna.

5.4.1 EXPLANATION AND REASONS

Past development in particular has resulted in the depletion of areas of ecosystems in Grey District. Remaining significant areas should be protected where possible, given their value in contributing to the natural character of the district and the requirements of **Section 6(c)** of the [Act](#). The policies implement the objective and in particular a coordinated approach to dealing with the matters in the Grey District is adopted. The [Council](#) is committed to a joint process with other authorities on the West Coast to develop a cost effective approach to dealing with areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna through the SNA study. The objectives of the project will essentially fulfil the [Council's](#) policies. The criteria that make an area significant are set out in order to provide certainty in respect of meeting obligations under the [Act](#). Pests are having detrimental effects and while pest management is not a primary area of District Council responsibility, the [Council](#) supports efforts to reduce such effects.

5.5 IMPLEMENTATION METHODS

- 1) Regional Council objectives, policies and rules
- 2) Forest Amendment Act.
- 3) Encourage the implementation of a Pest Management Strategy.
- 4) Educate and encourage landowners to protect areas by fencing and other appropriate land management techniques.

- 5) Encourage landowners to consider informal/formal protection options such as conservation covenants/Kawena through such programmes as Nature Heritage Fund, Nga Whenua Rahui, and Queen Elizabeth II Covenants.
- 6) Co-operate with Department of Conservation and the West Coast Regional Council in the implementation of their programmes.
- 7) **Council** seeks to encourage those individuals and groups interested in the conservation of indigenous vegetation and fauna to contribute towards its protection by a variety of means, including funds for the purchase of **land**.
- 8) To actively participate in and put in place the outcomes of the Sustainable Management Fund project, “A Cost Effective Approach To Section 6(c) RMA Responsibilities”.
- 9) Rules controlling the clearance of indigenous vegetation in riparian areas and in Significant Natural Areas (SNAs).

5.5.1 REASONS

There are a variety of non-regulatory and regulatory methods to implement objectives and policies. The protection of the majority of significant habitats and indigenous fauna are by DOC stewardship. **Council** is however currently undertaking a project to identify Significant Natural Areas (SNAs) on all **land** not administered by DOC within the District. Any SNAs will be incorporated into the District Plan by way of plan change following consultation with landowners.

Clearance of vegetation in identified SNAs will require resource consent. Until a **site** had been assessed as to whether it contains an SNA, a general vegetation clearance rule will apply to that **site** and also DOC **land**. Once a **site** is assessed resource consent will not be required for vegetation clearance outside of the SNA.

However, notwithstanding the outcomes of the SNA Study, indigenous vegetation clearance in proximity to waterbodies and **wetlands** will require resource consent.

There are a raft of WCRC objectives, policies and rules relating to **earthworks**, land disturbance in proximity to waterbodies, drainage and diversion for waterbodies. To avoid duplication, resource consent is not required where the WCRC has granted a resource consent to an application that addresses an issue that is common to the functions of both councils.

A Pest Management Strategy, which is the responsibility of the Regional Council, is the primary mechanism for the control of those pests that are a major threat to habitats. On-going pest programmes are in place. **Council** will also, where appropriate, cooperate with other agencies in promoting awareness of pests including referral of enquiries to appropriate agencies and distribution of information on good practices and pest threats.

Council will also pursue other methods which rely on a voluntary approach, and to date have used this approach of informing landowners of options. Purchase of **land** and the use of covenants are a real option. **Council** also encourages fencing to control stock although it is acknowledged this is also a funding issue.

5.6 ENVIRONMENTAL RESULTS ANTICIPATED AND MONITORING

Anticipated Environmental Results	Monitoring and Review Data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification and protection of significant areas of indigenous vegetation and habitats. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMF Study • Maintaining records of land under reserve or protection by the Crown • Consultation • Awards recognising protection of areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management of existing areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Consents • Feedback • Consultation • Monitoring records of land under reserve • Awards recognising management of areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased knowledge and participation of public and property owners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback • Correspondence • Consultation