

STEWARDSHIP LAND

A Note for the Prime Minister

Environmental Defence Society February 2025



Stewardship land is commonly perceived to be land that has no conservation value; land that does not deserve the status of national park or reserve. That is incorrect. Stewardship land is simply land that has not yet been given a status appropriate to its value. It is a holding category.

Much land inherited by DOC from former state agencies (NZFS and Lands & Survey), allocated following review of pastoral leases, or purchased by the Crown (Nature Heritage Fund) was placed in the stewardship category pending review of its status. A review of stewardship land on the South Island's West Coast commenced in 2022 but remains unfinished.

That review found that most stewardship land has conservation value: much of it high conservation value, sufficient for national park or scenic reserve status. The review, and an independent assessment of that review, found that only a very small proportion of stewardship land had low (or no) conservation value.

Extensive tracts of pristine old-growth forest on the West Coast are on stewardship land, including areas recognised internationally as World Heritage Area (South Westland). These include the best remaining lowland forest in New Zealand and provide habitat for critically endangered species like Haast kiwi. Many of these lands adjoin national park and have values like those in the park.

Elsewhere, substantial areas of lowland forest lie on stewardship land, including large areas in the central North Island. These forests are remnants of the country's formerly extensive forest cover, provide habitat critical for the survival of our endemic forest birds, and important community services (flood control, water yield, water quality, recreation).

Extensive areas of stewardship land, notably in the eastern South Island, support tussockland, shrubland and, at harsh or disturbed sites, sparse low-growing vegetation (herbfield and stonefield). Many of these areas did not naturally support forest. This non-woody vegetation provides habitat for a suite of specially adapted plant species and several iconic bird species, many of which are now at risk of extinction, like black stilt. The degraded appearance of these stewardship lands belies their importance for New Zealand's unique flora and fauna.

Some stewardship land supports young regenerating native forest, typically on steep hill country. These forests provide important habitat for forest birds, stability in erosion-prone hill country, and much-valued walking and hunting opportunities for local people. They will become ecologically valuable native forest. They are sequestering and storing carbon.



The backdrop to our rural landscapes and major highways includes stewardship land, especially in the South Island. These landscapes give New Zealand its natural character, valued by locals and admired by tourists. Protection of that resource is important for rural communities and relied upon by tourism operators.

Important parts of New Zealand's longest walk – the Te Araroa Trail – traverse stewardship land. This popular trail is one of the country's premier walks and is attracting an increasing number of international visitors.



Backcountry lands, of which stewardship land is an integral part, form the upper catchments of our major rivers. Intact protected vegetation on these lands is critical for flood mitigation, erosion control, and for downstream water quality, and water yield.

Stewardship lands include areas of riverbed and river floodplain. Protection of these areas is important for the management of rivers in a climate that is forecast to be wetter and stormier. Stewardship lands on river floodplains, especially on South Island's West Coast, provide important opportunities for restoration of lowland forest and carbon sequestration.

Some stewardship land has little or no conservation value. Examples are sections that formerly had Government buildings, or land with old mine workings. However, most stewardship land has some conservation or community value. There should be a robust assessment of those values before any stewardship land is developed or disposed.

