

Case Study 7 Private land conservation in New Zealand as a social movement

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The Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (QEII) model has proven to be a winning formula for cooperative conservation of private land in New Zealand by building on and supporting the aspirations of private landowners to create a legacy. The model provides an excellent example of Principle 3.4 (Part B, Section 3) which notes that recognition and support are powerful incentives for PPAs. QEII's success is also underpinned by many of the aspects of best practice in regards to PPAs, including permanence (Best Practices 4.1.1 and 4.1.7), robust legal and institutional frameworks (Best Practice 1.1.1) and recognition of what private landholders are achieving.

Overview

Over the last 40 years, private land conservation has gone from an untested concept promoted by a few farming leaders concerned about the impact of the Government farm production subsidies of that time on New Zealand natural heritage, to a highly successful PPA movement. The movement has been embraced by many owners of farms and other rural lands despite very limited financial incentives being available to them.

The movement has been led by the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (QEII). QEII operates largely independently from Government under its own legislation (Queen Elizabeth the Second National Trust Act 1977), but with funding support from the New Zealand Government. As part of the funding agreement with Government, QEII focuses on securing covenants that satisfy national priorities for biodiversity protection on private land and/or add to protected corridors or landscapes. This has been a long-standing practice as part of New Zealand's biodiversity strategy (Best Practice 1.2.1). The Queen Elizabeth the Second National Trust Act 1977 has established a robust legal and institutional framework to support covenants as a part of New Zealand's protected areas system to complement public conservation land (Best Practice 1.1.1). However, covenants are not seen by landholders as a regulatory tool of government or environmental NGOs to drive landholder compliance. Instead they are seen as a partnership tool to support rural landholder aspirations for the future of the land they care about.

By supporting private landholders to protect their special areas, QEII has secured an average of two new covenants a week (averaging 40 ha in size) over the last forty years across all the main islands of New Zealand. Today this network of PPAs under the perpetual trusteeship of QEII stands at over 4,450 covenants (180,000 ha), and is expanding at a rate of around 110 new covenants (averaging 3,800 ha) each year with no sign of a slowdown. Once registered on the title of private land, QEII covenants provide permanence by protecting areas as 'open space' for conservation purposes forever (Best Practice 4.1.1).



Kea (*Nestor notabilis*), a native alpine parrot, in flight over Mahu Whenua, QEII's biggest covenant (53,000 ha) in Central Otago © Bill Wallace, National Trust

QEII covenants provide robust legal protection from: Government/Ministerial interference; mining; quarrying; oil and gas development; commercial forestry; housing development; or any other non-sympathetic commercial use or development. Covenants over farmland are also retired from farm use except for a small number where light stock grazing remains consistent with natural heritage and landscape protection objectives. While rare, and only used as a last option, enforcement action of covenant conditions in Court has proven the legal robustness of the covenant agreement. This enforcement action has been welcomed by other covenant owners as it has given them confidence in the protection provided.

All registered covenants are regularly monitored (approximately every two years) with the cost of monitoring borne by QEII. Monitoring visits are used primarily to support landholders with stewardship advice to aid management, and to inspire new landholders who have acquired covenanted land (Best Practice 8.2.1).

Covenanting landholders all become life members of the QEII National Trust, are invited to covenant events in their region, receive signage to recognise their protected area, are recognised in the QEII magazine 'Open Space' and receive advice on stewardship of their covenant as part of monitoring (Best Practice 8.2.1). Having established a good working relationship with QEII regional staff and being proud of what they have achieved, these covenant owners will often encourage their neighbours to also protect adjacent natural areas resulting in clusters of covenants to protect remaining natural features and habitats in the wider landscape.



The Stephenson Block in the Waikato, QEII's first legally protected block of bush on the farm of Gordon and Celia Stephenson, leaders in the establishment of QEII and private land conservation in NZ © QEII National Trust.

Social responsibility for conservation

QEII's model embraces most of the best practice elements of PPAs, but is unusual internationally due to the absence of significant financial incentives (like tax breaks or subsidies) to drive its success. The QEII model also requires landholders to contribute to some of the costs of securing legal protection over their land. Landholders continue to be liable for most ongoing costs of land stewardship and management (except for regular biennial monitoring costs which are borne by QEII). Most covenanting landowners in New Zealand have protected special areas of their land because they believe "it is the right thing to do" and are justifiably proud and are recognised for the legacy they have created through their QEII covenants (Best Practice 3.4.1). It is this sense of pride and legacy that the QEII model is built on rather than financial incentives.

Amongst leading farmers in New Zealand, covenanting is considered a socially responsible thing to do to help protect their native forest areas, natural wetlands and other important natural heritage as part of good farm practice and planning. To date, around 20 per cent of all sheep and beef farms in New Zealand have a QEII covenant protecting natural areas on their farm and this is increasing all the time. Some environmentally conscious individuals have also purchased land rich in natural heritage with the intention of managing and protecting it for conservation purposes. These landholders then work with QEII to secure their land and investment with covenants to provide permanent protection.

Summary

- Forward-thinking farming leaders were the driving force behind the establishment of QEII. These rural roots have given many landowners the confidence to work in partnership with QEII in situations where they may not have been prepared to work with central or local government representatives (Best Practices 8.5.6 and 4.1.5). This model has also had enduring bipartisan support from all governments since its inception forty years ago.
- All covenants have an agreed purpose and objective, and a set of terms and conditions that can be adapted to fit each landholders' unique situation (Best Practice 1.2.1).
- Covenants provide robust and enduring legal protection (Best Practices 4.1.1 and 4.1.7).
- The QEII regional representatives that work with rural landholders are practical conservationists who live in their local communities (Best Practice 8.2.1).
- Some of QEII's best champions for covenant protection are existing owners of covenants (Best Practice 8.1.2).