

The shape of CONSERVATION to come

A conservation project in Abel Tasman National Park has struck a new agreement which will ensure environmental gains are guaranteed by future governments.

By Dave Hansford

IN 2013, conservation minister Nick Smith and Devon McLean were trudging along the Abel Tasman Coast Track, talking over the static of a cloudburst.

Abel Tasman National Park was in a sorry state: had the cloud lifted, the pair would've seen ranks of wilding pines choking the uplands, along with another 112 weed species. Stoats were scoffing the birds, goats were hoovering up the forest understorey, and Smith knew there was nothing he could do about it.

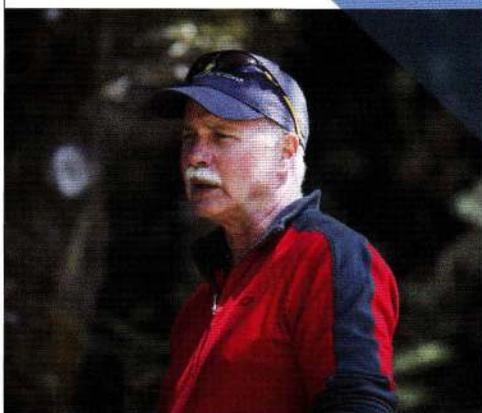
Between Torrent Bay and Marahau, McLean, the manager of Project Janszoon, a philanthropic trust funded by Neal and Annette Plowman's Next Foundation, presented Smith with a glimpse of the future of conservation in New Zealand.

Janszoon has stepped into the looming gap where Treasury should be, stumping up the cash for weed eradication, pest control, species reintroductions and many other projects in the park. Along with the Abel Tasman Birdsong Trust, community groups and local iwi, in the last five years the public/private partnership has all but banished the wildings, reduced stoat numbers to tolerable levels, and brought kaka, pateke, kakariki and robins back to the mainland.

But, McLean told Smith the trust wouldn't work forever. So the two nipped out what has become the Tomorrow Accord, signed in 2014, but only recently fleshed out into what is essentially an exit clause. "As an investor, I need to know when I

can stop killing stoats and move on," says McLean. Once Janszoon's work is done, it'll hand responsibility back to the Crown. The Tomorrow Accord obliges DOC to make sure it wasn't all for nothing. Whichever shade of government happens to be in office at the time, it'll be bound to uphold the gains won.

The agreement also sets out ecological targets that tell the Next Foundation when it's free to leave. In the case of Abel Tasman, says McLean, "One will be when there are no coning-aged wilding conifers left in the park".



RUTH BOLLONGINO

Devon McLean says there's a limit to philanthropic funding

*The objective is to secure **more than 80 per cent of terrestrial biodiversity** in a much safer state*

"As far as the birds are concerned, we're using kaka and pateke as indicators of stoat pressure," he adds. "We have a state-of-the-art monitoring network, and we think they're doing well. We're also watching robins and other small bush birds, and there's a promising trend there."

Janszoon is also keeping tabs on the park's native snails, and browsing pressure on palatable plants. As each target is met, the trust takes another step back, gradually withdrawing until DOC is flying solo.

But why wouldn't Next simply keep supporting the park in perpetuity?

"There's a limit to philanthropic and other private funding for conservation," says McLean. "It doesn't make sense for funders to set up endowments at three per cent interest to fund such projects forever."

Instead, he says, the Accord allows investors to "make a transformational difference," hand the project over to the Crown, then move on.

The Tomorrow Accord is much bigger than just Abel Tasman. The Next Foundation has 10 more projects to get on with and \$100 million to spend over the next 10 years: "We started with 64 locations across the country, and whittled it down. The overarching objective is to secure more than 80 per cent of terrestrial biodiversity in a much safer state."

The Tomorrow Accord is an agreement open to all, and because the rules of the game are clear and binding, says McLean, other philanthropists are now getting involved too, on projects like Taranaki Maunga. Next's "ecological resilience strategy", will stretch from the Auckland Islands, Stewart Island, throughout the country to the kauri forests of Northland. "We're talking now to partners who might be interested in a piece of that action." Each project will set itself tailor-made ecological objectives, just like at Abel Tasman.

The Accord takes account of contingency, protecting investors from chance setbacks like bushfires, disease outbreaks or consequences of climate change. "Some things will be completely out of our control," says McLean. That may yet extend to the whim of politicians not yet on the party lists – "Technically, no incumbent government can bind the next one", but he'd like to think there'll be a strong ethic of goodwill.

"We've brought other parties into these transformational projects on the clear understanding that they're entering into them because of the Tomorrow Accord. So we're raising the moral stakes if you like. Are we fully protected there? Not from a government that has no money, or has made some really bad decisions."

Out of that soggy conversation back in 2013, the Tomorrow Accord has emerged as a blueprint for public/private conservation that is, in these market-driven days, probably here to stay. **w**