

Biodiversity Notes – 29 March 2022

The key focus for the meeting was continuing the discussion around the definition of Significance. This discussion was informed by information prepared by staff in November 2021 and a response with questions prepared by some group members and circulated prior to the meeting.

The group discussion included the following key points:

1. The words “the protection of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna” in the RMA in their interpretation into criteria on the RPS. There was concern that the RPS criteria were not particularly helpful as to the average person “significant indigenous vegetation” means “noteworthy native areas” and the interpretation of the RPS criteria in the Wildlands assessment seem to have resulted in all “indigenous vegetation” being identified as significant in Upper Hutt.
2. The group put forward that significant indigenous vegetation could be defined as in the context of national importance and not just because there is little of it in the Wellington/Upper Hutt area.
3. Discussion around whether there has been a reduction of significant indigenous vegetation areas in Upper Hutt over time
 - Is there any data available to show the extent of the indigenous vegetation reduction, or if these have even reduced? Other districts have provided this information as part of the justification for significance of remaining indigenous vegetation. Suggested that GW may have this information and it might be helpful.
 - The timeframe for the measurement of any reduction also needs to be determined, There was a suggestion a timeframe of 20-30 years could be based on the time many group members have owned their land. It was suggested that 20-30 years is just a minimum starting point. More information is always better. If there is a steady increase or decrease, then why? We need to go back to the turning point and work out what the difference is. Eg, is it the implementation of better farming practices from 30 years ago, or some GW/UHCC/government policy that was implemented 35 years ago that has made the difference?
4. The discussion about criteria considered an example used from the Greater Wellington Regional Councils report on Kaitoke Regional Park where criteria is used to determine if a site fits into the “Key Native Ecosystem Programme”. This report had an additional criterion of “being able to be sustainably managed”, the group discussed whether this could be applied to SNAs. There was some concern that while this criterion is applicable for public land such as regional parks, as they will be actively managing and restoring the land but raises a question about what sustainable management looks like on private land.
5. Discussion around land management and landowner support. The issue around landowner support is proposed to be discussed at the next group meeting. Some of the ideas raised in this meeting were ETS (Emissions Trading Scheme), carbon offsets, rates remission and assistance with management including planting, fencing or pest management.
6. Concern from the group that much of the SNA extents have pest management issues, including deer and pigs in large numbers. There was a concern raised about costs for UHCC ratepayers and whether there will be an increase due to pest management etc in SNAs. Noting that pest management is a regional council function for private land, as far as we are aware there are no proposed changes to pest management costs or approaches. In addition, the Department of Conservation undertakes

periodic pest management programmes. There was frustration expressed that the lack of consistent or effective pest management on public land has meant increased pests on adjoining private land with the pest management burden becoming a private landowner cost.

7. Concerns about who will fund the maintenance and improvement of SNAs. The WRPS (Wellington Regional Policy Statement) states in objective 16 that “Indigenous ecosystems and habitats with significant biodiversity values are maintained and restored to a healthy functioning state” but there is some concern from group members that some of the areas identified are already in a poor state of health. If the vegetation is degraded to a level that it is dead, diseased or dying that can be a reason to exclude it from an SNA, but the decision to include it, or not will be a professional judgement from a qualified ecologist.

At this time Council has an ecologist who can assess areas up until a plan change is notified for SNAs. Council is happy to arrange additional site visits for the ecologist when the covid level reduces to orange. After a plan change is publicly notified submitters who disagree with the council ecologist’s assessment can engage their own ecologist to make an assessment. The issue of support to landowners, or funding for maintenance and improvement will be discussed in more detail in the next meeting.

8. Question raised about whether each council should be different. If it was determined that Upper Hutt district had a much higher amount of SNA shouldn’t there be different rules applied as they are already being maintained and looked after. Approximately 13% of the SNA areas in Upper Hutt are privately owned and the remaining is public land including regional parks.
9. Discussion around Manuka being included in SNAs, this discussion looked at the reasons for including manuka and identified that manuka has a role as a nurse crop for other species (but so does Gorse-sometimes more successfully). Concern raised that although gorse provides some nursery qualities, the variety of native plants and animals is not as great as the nursery provided by natives. Thought that some further study needs to be done before stating it is 'more successful'.

Some farmers consider Manuka to be a pest plant invading their pasture or crops. Others however are farming manuka for honey, or manuka oil and this requires regular pruning of the plants to get best productivity. The use of manuka for primary production will be picked up as part of a discussion about activities in SNAs that need to be provided for in district plan rules in a future meeting.

Manuka is currently identified as a threatened plant; this is primarily due to the Myrtle rust risk. Anecdotally ecologists believe that myrtle rust is not an issue for Manuka, but it may be several years before the threatened list is changed to reflect this. It was also noted that manuka can be a significant fire risk when in close proximity to buildings and infrastructure. Setbacks, clearances around buildings will also be picked up as part of a discussion about activities in SNAs that need to be provided for in district plan rules in a future meeting.

10. There was some further discussion about other items for the rule framework, including harvesting for medicinal purposes (rongoa) and firewood collection.

Next meeting

11. Areas of support for landowners – including farm management plans, incentives
12. We will re-visit the list of topics to make sure we are addressing all the concerns