

Conservation Amendment Bill Submission

Submission on the behalf of: Far Out Grotto

Written by: Tadhg McKergow-McLachlan, FOG Secretary

Date: 22/7/26

The Far Out Grotto is an online club for cavers living in Aotearoa New Zealand. We exist to advance education in caving and benefit our caving community which expressly includes acting to “protect, conserve, and preserve the cave and karst landscapes of New Zealand for the public benefit, and to advocate for and raise public awareness regarding the ecological significance and conservation of these environments”. The Conservation Amendment Bill is fundamentally at odds with our organisation's purposes and a large part of what it means to live in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Aotearoa has a fantastic range of wildly unique landscapes and species that inhabit them. Our cave and karst regions are no exception. A worrying amount of these features are put at risk by this bill since they fall outside of our National Parks, in conservation areas and stewardship land that this bill wants to pawn off to the highest bidder. The timescale these areas formed over and the improbability of their formation is reason enough to protect them. These landscapes cannot be recreated at all. There is no rebuilding, relocating or mimicking a cave and its formations as they formed over the hard-to-conceptualise geological timescale.

New Zealand caves are notable on an international scale. Aotearoa is home to the largest open pit abseil and the second longest through-trip in the southern hemisphere. Bulmer Cavern under Mt Owen alone is of international speleological significance. Also of international significance is that our caves are comparatively pristine, with human interaction being a relatively recent addition to their history. Being pristine is an opportunity to strengthen legislative protections rather than weaken them. As an example of what is permitted in developing land having effects to caving, intensive human land use like clearfelling in the Tākaka hill region led to erosion that filled caves with mud, slash and silt. All types of extractive earthworks would lead to direct or flow on damage to caves present. The majority of cavers would be very aware that the caves they care for are made of economically desirable materials themselves, occurring mostly in limestone and marble.

NZ caving culture sets a good example of not accessing the most fragile areas. If a cave/passage is not able to be accessed by humans without causing any irreparable damage, then that cave/passage is simply not accessed. Unbridled economic development that can cause irreparable damage, on public conservation land, karst or otherwise, should be treated the same.

FOG would also like to note that these amendments grossly overlook the importance of Te Tiriti and mana whenua engagement in conversations about the whenua. Little consideration has been given to how these amendments will impact Treaty settlements, deed-of-settlement obligations or iwi co-governance regimes on PCL.

Caving may be a niche pursuit but it exemplifies New Zealanders' important relationships to the outdoors. We may seem like 'connoisseurs of the obscure' but knowing the inherent value of a place in the state it evolved to be in is common to every person who gets out and appreciates our Public Conservation Land. These places have inherent value over human exploitation and deserve protection in their own right.

A large-scale amendment of conservation legislation like this is not the kind of legislation to rush through, due to the large flow-on effects possible for our taonga species, whenua, local communities and our climate.

Recommendations

The Far Out Grotto also supports the submissions made by the Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand, the New Zealand Speleological Society, the New Zealand Canyoning Association, and WhiteWater New Zealand as organisations with the same purposes of exploring, appreciating and protecting our incredible backcountry by many modes. Our recommendations are our own.

FOG opposes this amendment bill in its entirety.

FOG recommends that the Select Committee:

- Reject this amendment bill in its entirety.
- Ensure conservation remains as the primary purpose of the Conservation Act.
- Do not allow changes that make economic development a core function of DOC (as would section 6(ea)). Scrap section 6(ea).
- Make the primary purpose of DOC to protect, preserve and rehabilitate PCL to the greatest extent practicable.
- Do not allow the 'sale, exchange or disposal' of public conservation land.
- Public access to public conservation land is a priority of many who call NZ home, the government should reflect the priorities of its people.
- Engage the experts, iwi and communities impacted and leave a useful amount of power with them when legislating.
- Any reform of this magnitude requires a public mandate, full Te Tiriti engagement and a select committee process commensurate with its consequences.
- Listen to the vast majority of New Zealanders telling the select committee 'this land is not for sale',
- And lastly, touch some grass.