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## Abstract

In 1986, New Zealand became the first Contracting Party of the Ramsar Convention to publish a Wetland Management Policy. Interpretation and context have changed since publication of the New Zealand Wetland Management Policy, which the New Zealand Government is considering updating. The Policy recognizes that the wetlands of New Zealand have always been an important part of the nation's environment, from the earliest days when Maori settlers harvested shellfish and fin fish, collected material for weaving and farmed the extensive flat swamplands. Drainage of wetlands for economically productive farming has been a continuing trend, leaving few of New Zealand's native lowland wetlands intact and compromising their capacity to provide habitats for plants and other wildlife. The New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy recognizes the difficulty of reversing this trend towards drainage for short-term gain.

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**Introduction**

In 1986, New Zealand became the first Contracting Party of the Ramsar Convention to publish a Wetland Management Policy. A scanned copy on the *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy 1986*, can be found on the Ramsar Commission (n.d.) website. However, the New Zealand Department of Conservation has added a note stating that: “*As the first National Wetland Policy by a Contracting Party, this document is becoming outdated in terms of both the evolution of the Convention and the changes in legislation and governance structures in New Zealand during the past thirteen years. Accordingly, a stock-taking of implementation is currently under way, which may lead to a formal review of the policy*”.

The contents of this chapter are derived from the wording of the *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy*, though with the cautionary note that interpretation and context have changed since its publications and that the New Zealand Government is currently considering updating the Policy.

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**New Zealand’s Wetlands**

The *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy* recognizes that the wetlands of New Zealand have always been an important part of the nation’s environment. The earliest Maori settled and harvested shellfish and fin fish, including eels, from the coastal estuaries and lagoons, and collected material for weaving as well as snaring waterfowl from the flax swamps. Flax fibres from these flax swamps subsequently assumed economic importance, enabling establishment of the New Zealand settlement, and the extensive flat swamplands yielded fertile soil when drained, sustaining farmers and supporting sheep and dairy cows. Drainage became a major cultural activity, turning New Zealand into an economically productive land.

Consequently, few of New Zealand’s native lowland wetlands remain intact, compromising their capacity to provide habitats for plants and other wildlife including rare species, natural landscapes, water storage systems and filtration plants for managing floods and water quality, and recreational pursuits like hunting waterfowl and fishing.

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**Development of the New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy**

The *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy* recognizes the difficulty of reversing this trend towards drainage for short-term gain. The situation at that time was exacerbated by little legislation for protecting wetlands yet a lot of policy

and expertise facilitating their destruction, further compounded by the scattered nature of government agencies responsible for wetlands hampering coordinated policy.

Ratification of the *New Zealand Wetlands Policy* foreshadowed establishment of the Department of Conservation (<http://doc.govt.nz/>), which after vesting took a lead role in advocacy for wetland protection. Today, the Department for Conservation divides its roles with respect to New Zealand's natural environment, including its wetlands, into: protecting species; restoring places; monitoring; managing threats; and developing proposals (often in collaboration with others) for new parks, reserves and projects on conservation land. WERI, the national wetlands inventory, serves as the database for implementation of the *New Zealand Wetlands Policy*.

In approving the *Policy*, New Zealand's Cabinet Policy Committee noted "...that the policy is intended to indicate that in broad terms the Government regards the protection of representative important wetlands as being desirable, rather than to bind the Government to any course of action or to justify restrictions on the actions of the private sector". This is hardly the most ringing of endorsements of the need to preserve the broader values provided by the nation's dwindling wetland resource against a range of development pressures, though the statement has to be interpreted today in the context of the time in which it was made.

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## **The New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy**

The *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy* defines wetlands as "A collective term for permanently or intermittently wet land, shallow water and land-water margins. Wetlands may be fresh, brackish or saline, and are characterised in their natural state by plants or animals that are adapted to living in wet conditions". It also recognizes the legacy of wetland loss, and with it the degradation of a range of beneficial hydrological, ecological, economic, recreational, educational and cultural services, noting that "The need to preserve representative natural ecosystems already has public support and has been embodied in legislation".

A number of key considerations are noted in the *Policy*, beyond the issues of public support and Government intent to offer wetlands – rare types of wetlands in particular – greater protection as noted above. These broader considerations include:

- Wetland management must consider causes and consequences beyond the wetland boundary;
- The long term benefits lost by modifying wetlands frequently do not justify the short term benefits gained; and
- Wetland modification may cause irreversible changes.

## **Objectives of the *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy***

Three principal objectives are noted in the *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy*, each supported by a range of sub-objectives. Quoting from the Policy document:

### 1. Preservation and Protection

- To act urgently to protect by reservation additional wetlands that fulfil the criteria of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) for Wetlands of International Importance.
- To protect wetlands of national importance, and where appropriate, wetlands of regional and local importance.
- To gain adequate permanent protection of representative examples of all types of wetland in private and public ownership. Priority will be given to preservation of the least modified and most ecologically viable examples of each kind.
- To retain or re-establish wetlands significant for the protection or enhancement of aesthetic, scenic, recreational and tourism values.
- To protect and manage habitats important for native flora and fauna, giving priority to rare and endangered species and habitats of importance to migratory bird species.
- To protect, enhance, or re-establish wetlands and their access ways which are important for fish.
- To promote the concept of managing all wetland catchments so that the complex relationships that exist within a wetland, and between a wetland and surrounding ecosystems, are taken into account.
- To protect and manage wetlands that have an important hydrological role in such a way as to maintain or enhance that role.

### 2. Wetlands Inventory

- To maintain an inventory of the most significant wetlands.
- To link the national inventory for wetlands with other related government resource inventories to ensure optimal compatibility of the inventory.

### 3. Public Awareness

- To promote public awareness of wetland values and encourage public participation in the planning and management of wetlands.
- To preserve and enhance the opportunities afforded by wetlands for education, scientific study and recreation.
- To promote the tourism and recreational potential of wetlands.

New Zealand's Department for Conservation today offers educational resources and other means for people to get involved with wetlands, including for example web pages dedicated to 'Wetlands Conservation' (Department for Conservation [n.d.](#))

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## Next Steps

As noted in the *Introduction* of this chapter, the New Zealand Department of Conservation acknowledges that the current Policy has become outdated, and requires formal review. Nonetheless, interpretation of the *Policy* has evolved since its publication.

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## Conclusions

On publication, the *New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy 1986* constituted the first such national policy by a Contracting Party of the Ramsar Convention, recognizing long-standing losses to the nation's wetland resource and with them their substantial and diverse societal values. Measures put in place in the intervening years include institutional arrangements and use of emerging science. Today, the Department of Conservation recognizes the need to review the *Policy*.

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