

8 September 2021

Hon Kiri Allan,
Minister of Conservation
Parliament Buildings,
WELLINGTON

Dear Minister

RE: WEST COAST CONSERVATION BOARD

1. I am writing on behalf of Whitewater New Zealand Incorporated, a multidisciplinary, national body of paddlers and passionate river people. We have an active supporter base of approximately 4000 people. The West Coast region is of specific importance to us as the outstanding wild rivers found there are world class, and present uniquely challenging, rewarding and stunningly beautiful expeditions for paddlers, a diverse and passionate sector of the community in Aotearoa
2. Due to the combination of its geographic features, pristine water quality and virgin native forest, the West Coast is famous for its river trips (whether it be kayaking, rafting, canoeing or packrafting). As such, the majority of our members have enjoyed the experience of paddling on these rivers. Many people travel the length of the country to spend whatever time they can on the West Coast rivers. Furthermore, the rivers are of such excellent quality they draw international attention with world-renowned athletes travelling to visit and experience these rivers (in normal, non-Covid years).
3. As such, the quality of management and conservation of the West Coast is of paramount importance to our organisation. We write to you very concerned about the West Coast Conservation Board's behaviour, function and outcomes. Its efficiency (or lack thereof) directly affects our community and the wider outdoor-recreation community as well its own conservation objectives.
4. Having witnessed and heard of bullying, conflicts of interest (from mining and hydro lobbyists) and outright dysfunction of the board, it is clear that it is not working as it must. Accordingly, we respectfully request the following:
 - a. An independent, paid, professional chairperson is appointed to oversee meetings and steer it away from the conflicts which often cause the Board ructions. We are requesting an individual with strengths in governance and team building skills. We recommend a chairperson is appointed from outside of the West Coast to avoid any conflicts of interest.

- b. A stricter approach is adopted in terms of conflicts of interest. That is, any member of the Board who has any conflict of interest is required to stand down. We request that all actual or potential conflicts of interest are registered and updated continually with the board and that the register is made available to the public. .
 - i. One such obvious conflict of interest is the community representative *Francois Tumahai*: holding any position on the *Conservation* Board is clearly a conflict of interest as he also sits on the Board of Directors of Bathurst Resources (a mining company) and Minerals West Coast Trust (a pro-mining lobby group and mining support organisation).
 - ii. As part of our request in point 4.b. to avoid conflicts of interest, we suggest that stakeholders in exploitative/extractive industries that may benefit from any DoC concession, directly or indirectly, be precluded from sitting on the Conservation Board.
- c. New members are appointed to the Board. We note here that it will be very difficult to find willing, capable and independent members as the toxicity of the Board's culture has been well publicised and few people will be willing to take on the role unless an obvious shift in culture and leadership has occurred. As such, points a and b must be implemented first.
- d. It is possible that the above suggestions will not be enough to resolve the dysfunctional culture which has developed on the West Coast Conservation Board. To address this possibility, a potential long term solution could be to examine the Conservation Board's boundaries.
 - i. The West Coast Conservation Board presides over the largest conservation estate of any conservation board. Additionally, it presides over the largest area of vulnerable conservation estate due to so much of it being stewardship land.
 - ii. Under section 6L of the Conservation Act 1987, you may appoint up to 19 Conservation Boards, whereas there are currently only 15 boards established. It may be more appropriate to split the West Coast Conservation Board's area of concern into 2 segments, North and South, with separate Boards advising on either area. This would allow for better consideration of localised conservation issues, as well as show an overhaul of the status quo, defeating the ructions and toxicity established by the previous West Coast Conservation Board.

iii. Furthermore, by splitting the area up you would be seen to be taking more decisive action, likely making the Conservation Boards more attractive to those who are currently put off due to the culture, ideally resulting in better candidates and better work done by subsequent Boards.

5. Regardless of how you approach the West Coast Conservation Board issue, Whitewater New Zealand pleads that you take strong and decisive action soon. The toxicity and division that has resulted from the previous Conservation Board is threatening to become entrenched and stall future conservation work on the West Coast. If a clear shake up is made then this gives room for a cohesive Conservation Board(s) to take the old one's place, if no such shake up is made we will be stuck with these inefficiencies and an unbearable culture for years to come.

Please do not hesitate to contact Whitewater New Zealand should you have any questions about the matters discussed above.

Kind Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'HD' with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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