

Empowering action

Improving funding and support for community conservation in Aotearoa

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Community conservation is a key partner in creating a better future for the indigenous biodiversity of New Zealand.

However, community conservation funding is facing a crisis.

There is a growing disjunct between the demand for support and what is available, alongside a looming funding cliff with the end of Jobs for Nature.

Work is needed to better support community-based contributions to safeguarding our natural heritage.

This research presents a fresh picture of activity across the sector, explores the current state of funding, and considers opportunities to improve it.


[Full research report](#)

MĀTAKI
ENVIRONMENTAL


 **PREDATOR
FREE NZ**

Key findings


Community nature conservation is



Diverse,
growing and
committed

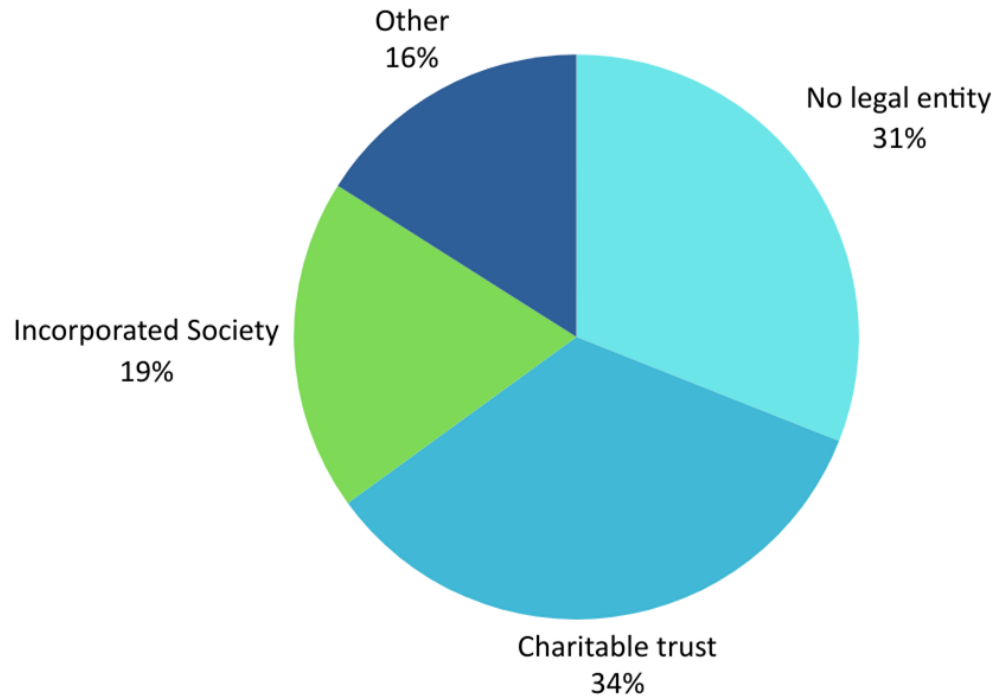


Impacted by
a funding
and support
crisis

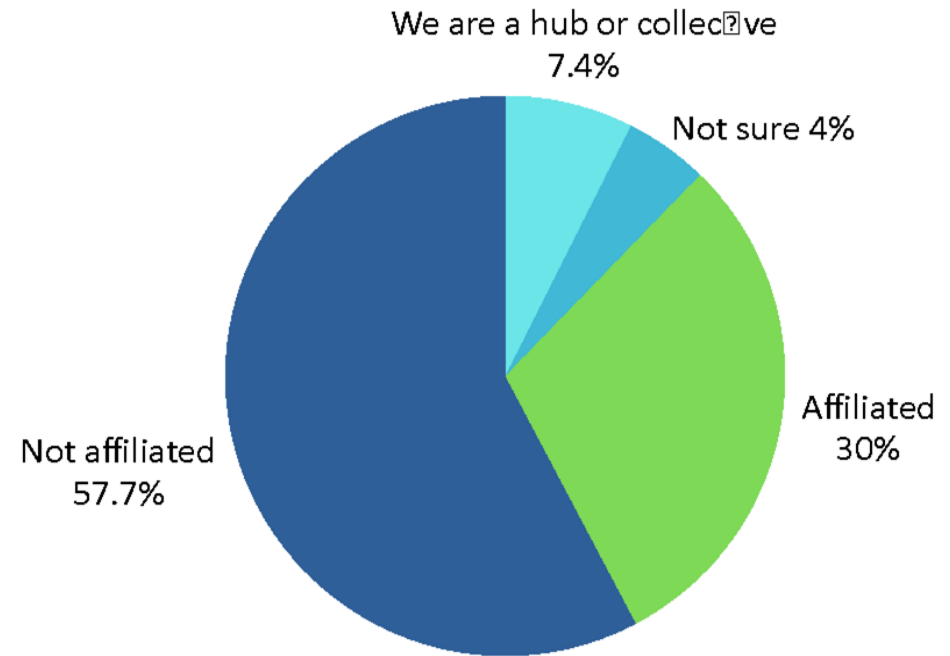


Facing an
uncertain
future

Legal structures vary across community conservation groups and projects, and for a third of groups — they don't have one.

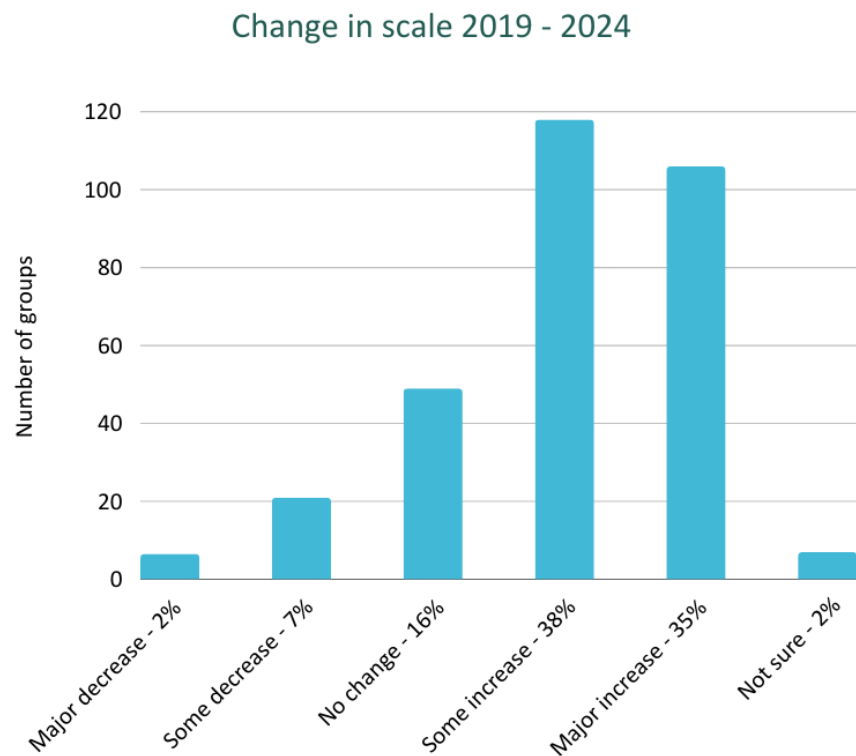


31% are not legal entities



58% are not affiliated with a hub or collective

Scale has increased, and sometimes in a big way. However, a small number of people still tend to do most of the work.



Most groups have experienced some or a major increase in scale in the last 5 years.

Many groups rely on a handful of people, but the most common number of regular volunteers is 6-20.

Q8. How has the scale of your project changed in the last five years (2019-2024)?


For example, the number of people involved, the amount or diversity of work, or the spatial scale.

Initial taxonomy of community conservation groups

Five rough ‘types’ of organisations, projects and groups emerged from the research. These are assumptive and need more exploration but can be a useful way to think about demographics and needs.

1. Hub or collective	Likely a legal entity Looks after constituent groups	Total funding \$25K+
2. Staffed conservation organisation	Likely an incorporated society or trust with volunteers and staff Often linked to an ecosanctuary	Total funding \$100K+
3. Volunteer organisation	Likely an incorporated society or trust Reliant on 5-50 volunteers	Total funding \$5k+
4. Local volunteer group	Unlikely to be a legal entity Between 1 and 20 volunteers	Total funding <\$5k
5. Individual landowner	Working on private land, sometimes with neighbours	Variable funding, often self-funded


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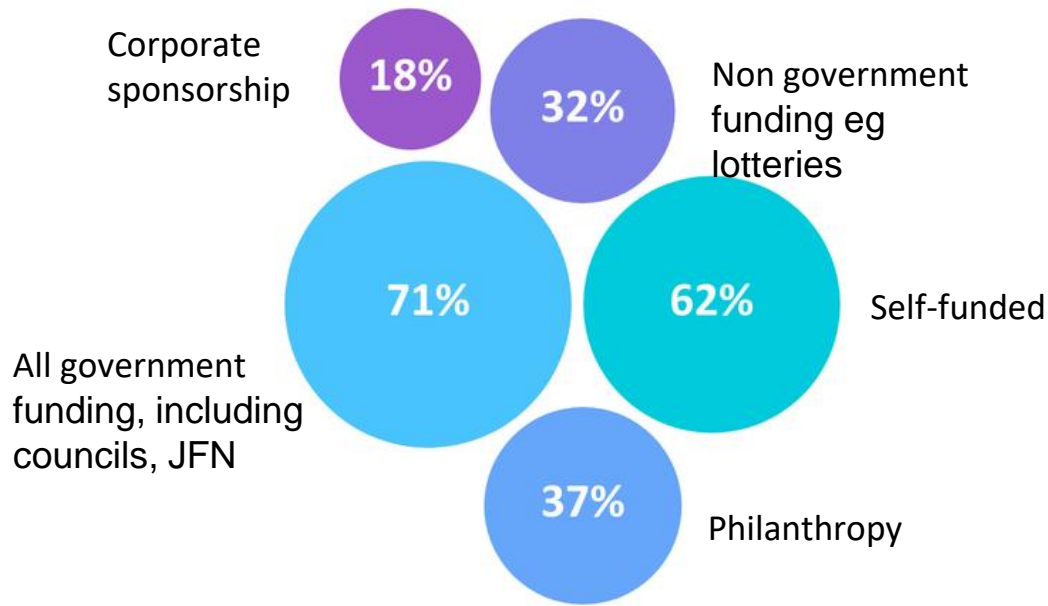
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62% of groups are putting their hand in their own pockets to keep going. 71% of funding comes from government. Other funding sources vary, and some are more impactful than others.

Top sources of funding




Philanthropy and non-government grants are also significant, but less likely to be high impact.

The main spend categories are:


- Buying materials (for all groups)
- Funding staff and operational overheads (especially for more formal organisations)

Staff and opex funding is much tougher to find.

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A lack of secure ongoing funding means a high degree of uncertainty and unease for many groups.

25% of respondents were 'not sure' how much longer their group could continue at current secured levels of funding.

Another quarter think they can only continue for another year.

Confidence about expected longevity was highest among charitable trusts and THE groups with little dependence on external funding.

“The funding model is completely contradictory to long term planning. It is hand to mouth which makes it extremely challenging to provide medium to long term security around contracts.”

“Most funders only offer grants for 1 year, so it's a constant job to keep reporting on those grants and applying for the next one.”

Funders are looking for compelling impact and strong value propositions. However, groups can struggle to demonstrate their value and tell their story.

Outcome monitoring is a clear area for improvement, although many groups don't have the skills and capacity needed to do it.

Several groups and funders alike spoke of the value of relationships. When funders visit groups and see their work, impact becomes obvious.

Roundtable monitoring (meetings instead of written reports) provides rich opportunities for learning and collaborating, especially when other fund recipients also take part.

Key shifts needed

Cooperation
and
alignment

1

Efficient
tailored
funding
models

2

Help to
demonstrate
impact

3

Boost
investment
including in
novel ways

4

This section includes some recommendations and actions to support these key shifts, for consideration. See [full report](#) for context and a more complete set of possible actions for funders, agencies and groups.

1. Enhance cooperation and alignment

Relationships mean so much in community conservation. Being connected and collaborative is important to funders and groups. Hubs and collectives drive cooperation.

Funding is easier to attract when success can be demonstrated collectively through effective planning and measures.

Smaller groups can shed administrative burden when they're part of a hub, freeing up volunteers for other work. Hubs can also broker more effective relationships with agencies.

Achieving this cooperation will require better recognition (particularly by funders) of the importance of **people** driving cohesive efforts.

What groups can do

Join a local hub or collective.

Align goals with regional and national strategies and biodiversity plans.

Demonstrate local cooperation, ensure landscape scale efforts are joined up.

Build staff and overhead costs into project proposals.

What funders can do

Recognise the value of people and operational costs for stable community conservation.

Consider funding models that leverage connections, eg. investment via hubs.

Collaborate with other funders to form networks to streamline and align.

What agencies can do

Ensure staff have the right skills and resources to engage effectively with communities.

Recognise community efforts, particularly where they contribute to statutory outcomes.

Continue to provide crucial coordination and technical expertise to support and empower groups.

2. Efficient, tailored funding models

Conservation is a long game. Sustained, flexible and nimble funding models are the only way to realistically enable community-led conservation and reduce the burden for everyone.

The over-subscription for funding may remove the impetus for funders to improve their processes, however consideration should be given to the resulting time burden and restrictions on groups — and impacts to the conservation sector overall.

Funders and agencies can also help by providing flexible or ‘untagged’ funding that can be deployed where needed. A boost in business and philanthropic giving could also increase the autonomy and agency groups need to run their operations.

What groups can do

Have a clear plan and goals.

Review funding eligibility criteria carefully before applying.

Join up efforts with others where possible.

Ensure techniques are efficient and fit for purpose. Maximise outcomes by using best practice, new knowledge and technology.

What funders can do

Streamline application processes and ensure the effort required is proportional to the level of funding and risk.

Make it easy for potential applicants to assess their eligibility, eg. light-touch EOIs, pre-application conversations.

Promote engagement through funder visits or roundtables — over written reports.

Favour longer-term funding over short bursts — each reapplication diverts effort.

What agencies can do

Ensure funding programmes model effective approaches to support conservation endeavours.

Find innovative ways to support groups in their work, alleviating administration burden.

Provide clear strategic and technical leadership that provides context for group efforts.

Help funders understand how conservation efforts can be best deployed.

3. Help to demonstrate impact

A prevailing concern with community conservation is whether it is delivering outcomes for people and the environment.

Experts and funders interviewed were often sceptical about the effectiveness of many groups in the sector, and this view is only likely to be swayed with sustained evidence of outcomes.

More analysis is needed to help prove the effectiveness of community conservation.

Addressing the information gap from a funding and support perspective is important because it supports effective planning, and helps groups demonstrate their value to attract further funding.

What groups can do

Have a plan and framework for monitoring outcomes from the outset. Baseline monitoring is powerful information to show change.

Seek advice on appropriate methods from local experts or agencies.

Consider technology that supports effective information recording eg. apps, cameras.

What funders can do

Fund monitoring costs.

Ensure any required monitoring has a genuine purpose and gets used.

Consider innovative ways to support monitoring and value demonstration.

Appreciate the importance of operational costs, including staff, to effective outcome monitoring.

What agencies can do

Support funders and groups to understand defensible, consistent metrics and ways to demonstrate value.

Consider undertaking monitoring on behalf of groups to improve consistency.

Ensure science and technical expertise is retained internally to provide key support.

4. Boost investment, consider alternative funding mechanisms

The funding available for community conservation is outstripped by demand. While enhanced cooperation and fund distribution would help, the pie is simply not big enough.

While grants-based funding and public sources need to be boosted, groups are exploring opportunities elsewhere. These have their own risks and benefits.

Common options include brokering partnerships with local, regional and national companies, selling materials like traps and guided walks, running events and other fundraising initiatives and of course, self-funding through contribution by volunteers directly.

Alternative financing options some groups are considering

See [full report](#) for things to consider with these options.

Contracts for services

Community groups obtain contracts with agencies and the private sector to deliver services usually delivered by commercial entities eg. weed control in community parks. Arrangements are bespoke between entity and contracting party.

Endowment funds and bequests

Endowment funds invest one or more one-off donations and the interest funds the activity. It is a long-term and theoretically perpetual source of funding with potentially significant legal and financial complexity.

Resource management mitigation funding

One-off or regular payments from developers or resource users as a requirement of a statutory permission, such as a resource consent. Arrangements are specific and may entail significant commitment.

Voluntary carbon credits

Income is based on verifiable units of value that reflect carbon sequestration as a result of activities. Income potential from the voluntary carbon market is subject to considerable variability in a fast-changing context. Eligibility and entry requirements vary considerably.

Questions

See full report on predatorfreenz.org

[Empowering Action: Improving funding and support for community conservation in Aotearoa](#)