

MĀTAKI

ENVIRONMENTAL

RESEARCH • STRATEGY • REGULATION



Empowering action

Improving funding and support for community conservation in Aotearoa

Dr Marie Doole

July 2024



DR MARIE DOOLE

Executive Summary

IMPROVING FUNDING AND SUPPORT FOR
COMMUNITY CONSERVATION IN AOTEAROA



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](#)

Key findings

Community-based nature conservation is

Diverse,
growing and
committed

Impacted by
a funding
and support
crisis

Facing an
uncertain
future

Without improved funding, we stand to lose the ecological and social gains achieved to date.

Key shifts needed to improve funding

- 1 Enhance cooperation and alignment to improve impact
- 2 Efficient funding models, tailored to sector needs
- 3 Help groups to demonstrate impact
- 4 Boost investment including through alternative funding options

How can we achieve these key shifts?

1

Cooperation & alignment

Leverage the power of community hubs and funder networks and support them.

Fund people and operational costs, not just 'kit'.

Join up local conservation efforts with strategic goals.

2

Efficient funding models

Streamline and simplify funding programmes to support effective conservation.

Build closer relationships between funders and groups.

3

Demonstrate impact

Provide expertise and funding to help groups illustrate their impact.

4

Boost investment

Increase core government support and consider the role of alternatives.

About the research

Research goals and methodology

This research aimed to understand:


- Demographics of the sector as they apply to funding
- Current state of community conservation funding
- Opportunities to improve funding and support shortfall

Insights have been drawn from a survey of community groups and projects, alongside interviews with funders and fund-seekers, and a literature review.


Survey sample 311 complete responses and many interviews. See [full research report](#) for detailed background and analysis.

Key findings


Community nature conservation is



Diverse,
growing and
committed



Impacted by
a funding
and support
crisis



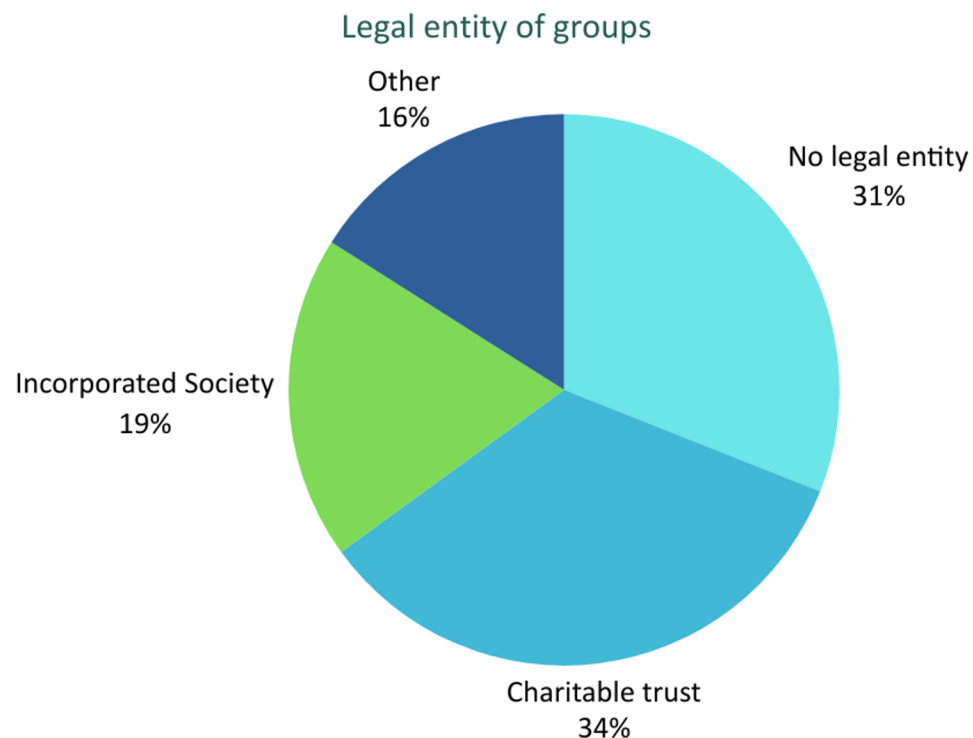
Facing an
uncertain
future

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

Three main groups dominated in survey responses.

The way a group is structured has important implications for funding and support.

Not being a legal entity can limit funding options, although it does avoid the need for time-consuming paperwork and legal wrangles.

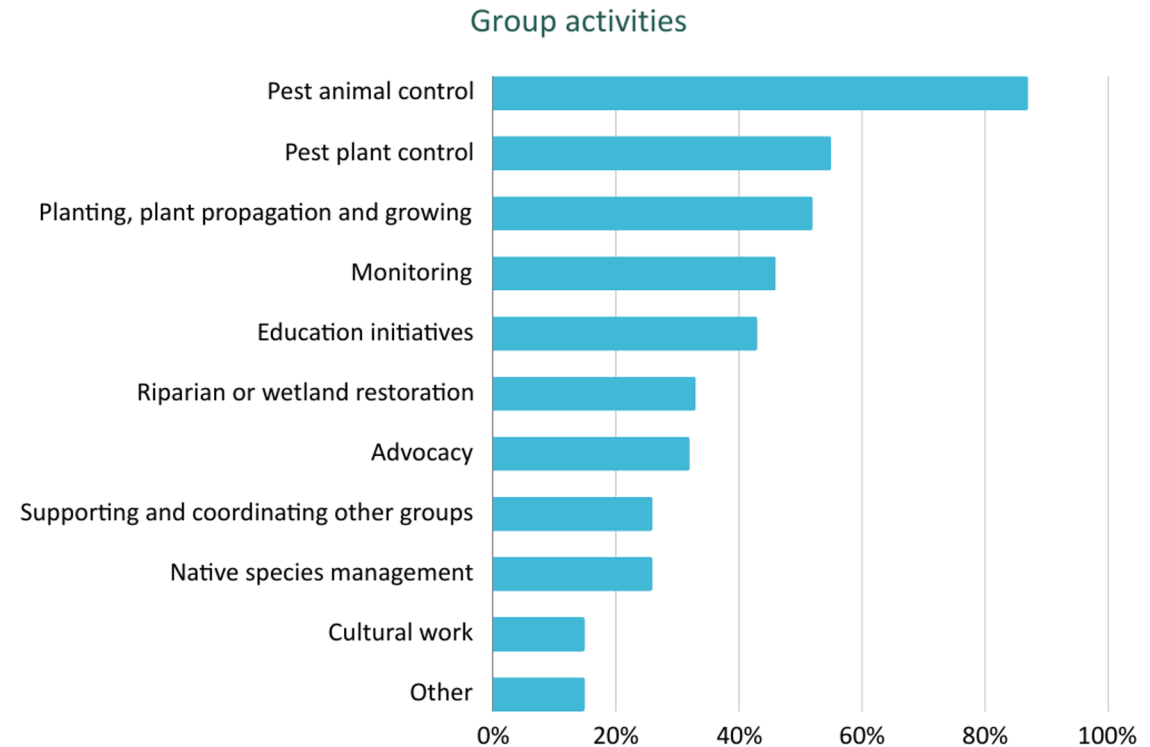


Community conservation is increasingly complex. Different activities across multiple land tenure types mean groups need support and flexibility around funding and planning.

Pest animal control is a key focus for 87% of respondents.

This is important because it requires ongoing, sustained commitment to bring long-term biodiversity benefits.

Nearly three quarters of groups are active across multiple land tenure types.



Note: the survey has a bias towards groups focussed on predator control, as it was distributed by PFNZ.

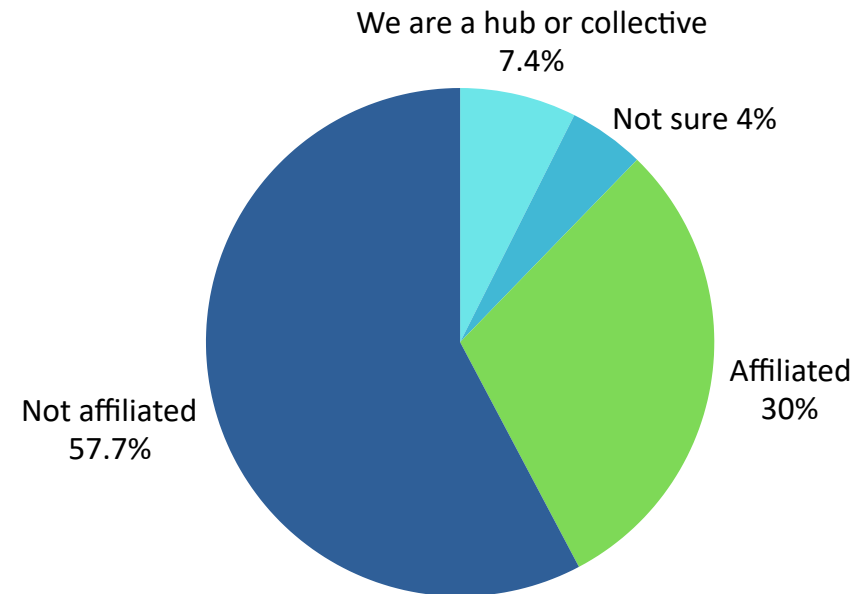
The increasing longevity and experience of groups reflects a maturing sector. However, most aren't part of a hub or collective.

A group's age reflects the maturity and commitment behind it.

Our 2018 report noted 82% of groups were less than 5 years old. In this survey, 32% of groups were less than 6 years old, and more than 25% had been active for 16+ years.

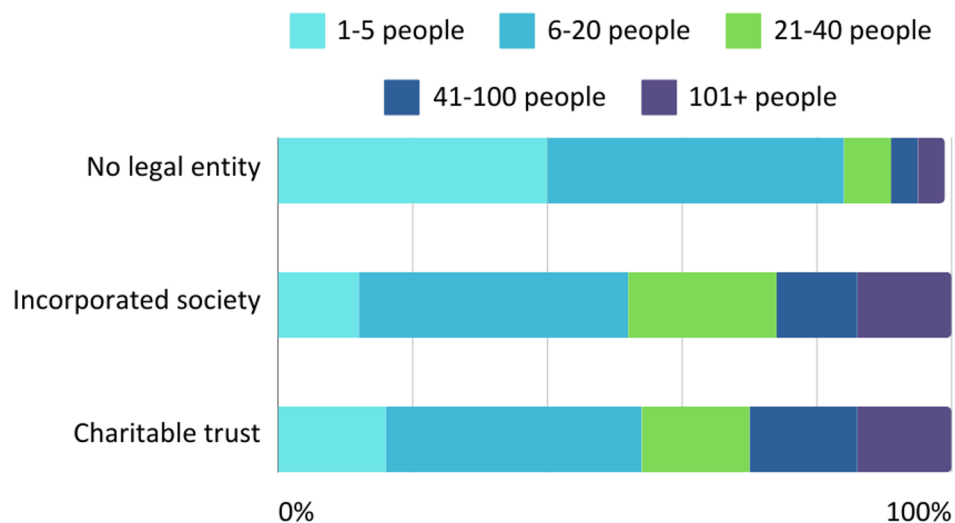
37% are part of a hub, suggesting room to improve on regional support and cooperation.

Groups affiliated with a hub or collective



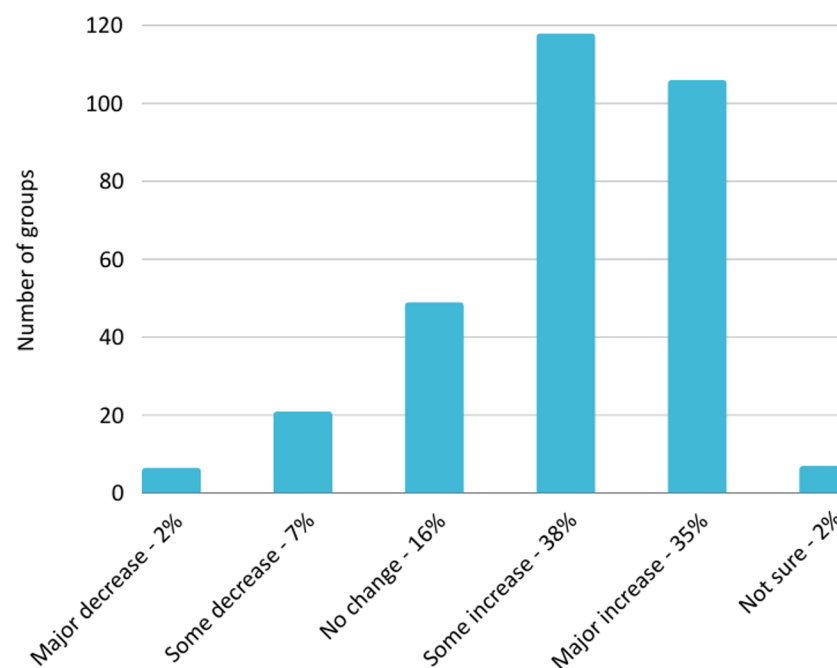
Scale has increased, and sometimes in a big way. However, a small number of people still tend to do most of the work.

Participant numbers in a standard month



Q21. How many people participate in your group or project's activities at least once in a standard month, including you?

Change in scale 2019 - 2024



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.

“ We are a small group that opened an old track to gain access for recreation and planting and we have extended into pest and weed control. ”


“ Our project started in 2021 so we have gone from no people involved, and no work being done, to currently employing 9 staff and a huge amount of work being done. ”

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. See [Appendix](#) for more detail.

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


Community nature conservation is



Diverse,
growing and
committed



Impacted by
a funding
and support
crisis

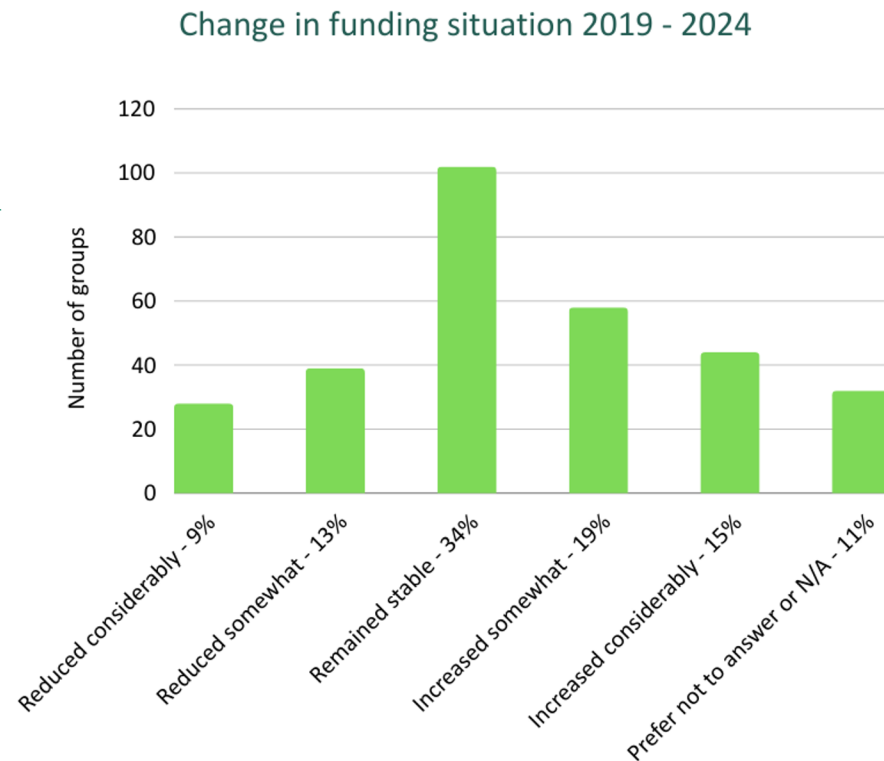


Facing an
uncertain
future

Most groups have experienced stable or increased funding over the last five years. But that stability often reflects very small amounts of funding.

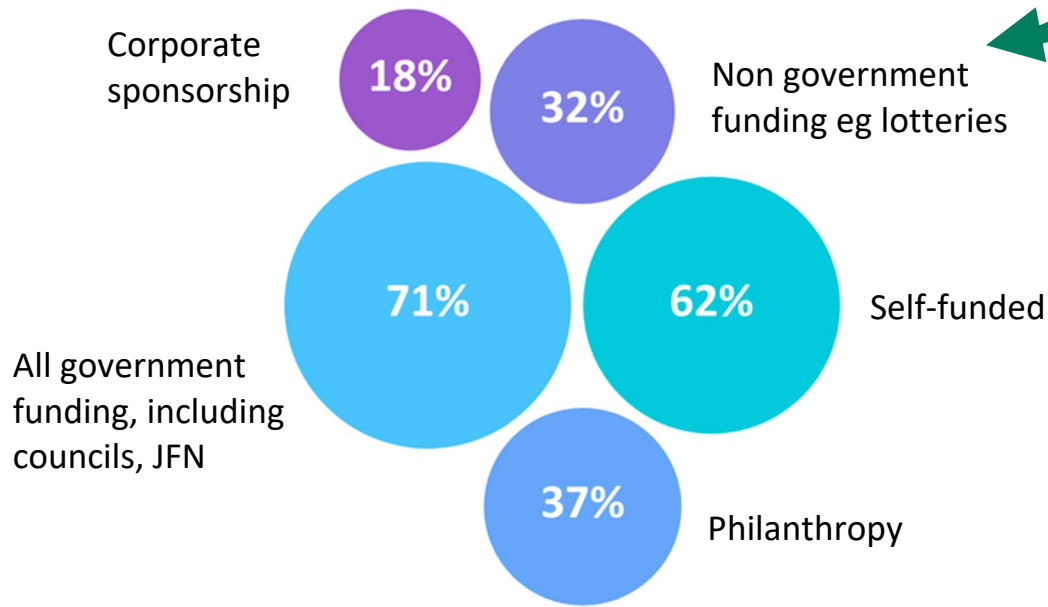
34% said their funding situation had increased somewhat or considerably in the past five years, and a similar number reported stability.

However 16% said they received no funding over the last year, and another 25% got less than \$5,000. At the other end of the scale, 8% reported annual funding of more than \$500,000.



More than 60% of groups are putting their hand in their own pockets to keep going. Other funding sources vary, and some are more impactful than others.

Top sources of funding



Of these top funding sources, Government grants, including councils, were cited as most impactful. 33% mentioned councils specifically.

Business and philanthropy are more variable in how impactful their support is, depending on context.

In-kind support (usually equipment and expertise) is seen as critical by many groups.

“ We are volunteer based. At our current scale, without any increase in scope of activities we just need a small amount of funds to buy bait/lure and hardware for trap repairs. I am currently just paying for this personally as I don't have the time to put in to securing more funding. ”

Funding is mostly used for materials (by 80% of groups) and staff (by 41%). Paid staff are seen as critical to many larger groups' success in particular, but securing their funding can be hard.

Groups say that capital costs and equipment are more readily accepted by funders as reasonable expenditure. It's also easier to prove their impact.

The value of staff as connectors, amplifiers and enablers is not well understood by comparison.

“While people understand about giving for tree planting, they are less likely to understand the importance of having a paid person to organise the activities, prepare the sites, oversee and train volunteers, monitor survival rates, write reports, purchase trees etc and equipment.”

Note. 65% of groups surveyed have no paid staff (rises to 92% for those with no legal entity). Nearly half say their group's work is all unpaid. These findings aren't new. See [full report](#) for detail.

The time and effort needed to find appropriate funding isn't worth it for many groups, particularly those run by volunteers.

Frustration at the complexity of many funding processes is starkly evident.

Groups say the effort to acquire the funding often greatly exceeds its value. They struggle to find and apply for funding, and then to meet reporting requirements.

The opportunity to enhance the efficiency of fund distribution is clear.

“All groups really need one person who is happy to spend their precious time ploughing through the ghastly paperwork.

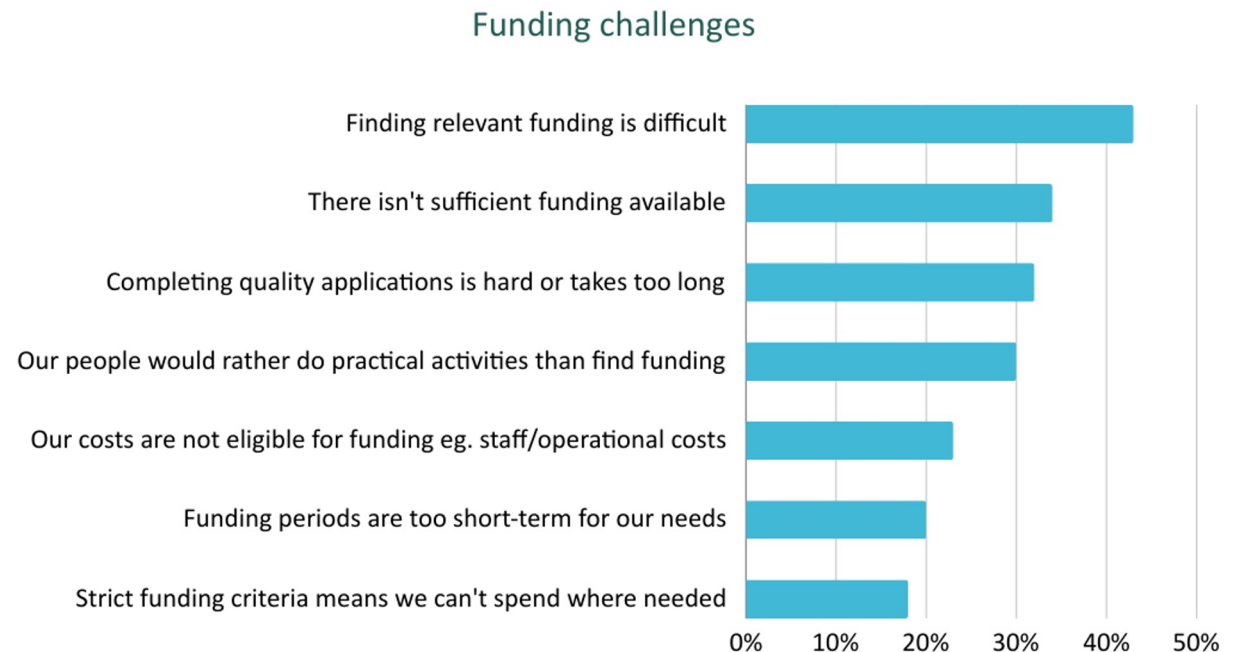
Do the people who are paid to create these applications, ever think they could focus on simplifying or streamlining this paperwork to be more user friendly for the applicants?”

KEY FINDING: FUNDING AND SUPPORT CRISIS

Finding and applying for funding is hard, and there simply isn't enough to go around. This exacerbates competition and erodes the opportunity for relationship building and cooperation.


The themes in this graph were echoed in interviews.

Competition for funding was often noted by groups with limited resources and time for relationship building and communication — which are in turn hardest to fund.




Q17. What are the key challenges your group or project experiences regarding funding and resourcing your activities?

Community nature conservation is



Diverse,
growing and
committed



Impacted by
a funding
and support
crisis



Facing an
uncertain
future

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 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.

Appendix

See full report on predatorfreenz.org

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

Initial taxonomy to help refine community conservation funding and support

Type	Core purpose	Participation	Total funding	Legal status	Paid staff/contractors	Geographic area
Hub or collective	Specific purpose of coordination/engagement through provision of advice and promotion of cooperation	Constituent groups and the collectives own focus areas (may cover hundreds or thousands of people)	\$25,000+	Legal entity, such as incorporated and or charitable trust most likely	Likely to have than 1 FTE, likely more	May be functional in a particular area of conservation (species based) or a geographic area. May also not be solely focused on conservation
Staffed conservation organisation	Community-led conservation organisation with a core staff	A core of volunteers of 20+ with staff, most likely linked to an ecosanctuary	\$100,000+	Most likely an incorporated society or charitable trust	Likely to have at least 1 FTE, likely more	May cover a significant geographic area (potentially landscape scale) and/or do a wide range of work
Volunteer organisation	Volunteer reliant organisations with minimal paid resourcing focused on place-based or topic-focused conservation	5-50 volunteers	>\$5000	Most likely an incorporated society or charitable trust	<1 FTE and may have contractors for specific things	Variable but most likely place-based with a moderate range of work areas
Local volunteer group	Volunteers and/or landowner-based initiative	Likely to rely on a small number of volunteers, as few as 1 and up to 20-40	<\$5000 of funding per year, and may be only in-kind materials	Unlikely to be a legal entity	No regular staff, but specified contractors (e.g. pest control) may be used	Likely to work in a confined area or doing a narrow range of tasks according to capacity
Individual landowner	Landowner initiative on private land	Landowner and potentially others	Variable, often self-funded	Unlikely to be a legal entity	May utilise contractors or existing staff (e.g., farm manager) to carry out work	Within private property boundaries but may include other areas on the periphery