



NGĀ ARA WHETŪ
CENTRE FOR CLIMATE,
BIODIVERSITY & SOCIETY

Ngā Ara Whetū Submission to the Ministry for the Environment on the draft Long-term Investment Briefing

“Where to from here? How we ensure the future of wellbeing of land and people”

October 2022

About Ngā Ara Whetū

Ngā Ara Whetū is a Research Centre on Climate, Biodiversity and Society at the University of Auckland. *Ngā Ara Whetū* (Star Paths) highlights the ethos of our centre named for the journeys of our collective ancestors to the shores of Aotearoa, New Zealand. Ngā Ara Whetū enables and enhances collaborative research and training.

The *Ngā Ara Whetū* network draws on transdisciplinary scholarship at the University of Auckland in the fields of the natural sciences, social and health sciences, Māori studies, law, engineering, and economics. It strives to connect this work to policymakers and the public, engaging Aotearoa New Zealand in environmental action.

In response to the Ministry's questions

1. *Are there any other main drivers you think should be included?*

There are three key drivers missing from those listed in the briefing:

- a. Land use change is a key driver of biodiversity loss and environmental degradation that was notably absent. While it can be inferred from “economic and consumer demands” that phrase alone does not adequately address the central role of agriculture and other land use changes within our economy and communities. This tied into a broader pattern in the briefing of avoiding difficult topics that Aotearoa New Zealand must tackle head-on in order to arrive at fair and sustainable solutions that both celebrate our innovation and protect future generations.
- b. The role of misinformation as a social driver preventing environmental progress has emerged as critical for advancing, or limiting, progress. Again, this could be subsumed within “social and cultural values.” However, clarifying that this is a distinct factor is important if these drivers are to be adequately tackled by utilizing points of leverage. While social and cultural values imply incrementally developing social and institutional norms, misinformation is targeted, goal orientated, and chaotic.
- c. Current socio-political and economic structures and systems incentivise un-sustainable activities. These intersect with other drivers, including values,

but also produce and reproduce values and outcomes along with short-term, fragmented 'solutions' that fail to adequately address the problem at hand.

3. *How well does the way we describe what the future could look like align with your aspirations for the land and New Zealanders' relationship with it?*

Overall, we understood the Ministry's vision for the future as strongly aligned with our goals and values of Ngā Ara Whetū. We would like to voice specific support for:

- a. The importance of tangata whenua and kaitiāngatanga.
- b. The idea of reciprocity with the environment.

The draft could be strengthened by better clarifying that these tenets apply to all New Zealanders, including those in urban settings where the connection to natural lands and seas is more tenuous, but the reliance on the environment is no less critical.

4. *Would you add to or change anything about the descriptions of what the future could look like?*

We suggest adjusting the fourth challenge: "ensure all New Zealanders are connected with nature."

- Every New Zealander is inherently connected to nature. Thus, in our view, it is rather dispelling the myth of separation that is crucial to encouraging engagement with environmental issues and developing policy.

Proposed wording for the fourth challenge:

Ensure all New Zealanders have opportunities to experience their connections with nature and understand our respective roles in sustaining one another.

We would recommend adding two further challenges:

- a. *Embed an intergenerational perspective into New Zealand's environmental approach and values.*
- b. *Build a future in which New Zealand lives within its environmental means.*

5. *For each leverage point, what could we do to make them effective?*

While we strongly support finding evidence-based methods that will make leverage points more effective, this work requires focused research. As such, we support three broad approaches that should guide the identification of methods to implement the leverage points: scientific, specific, holistic:

Scientific

- Implementing all the leverage points must be led by informed, scientific evidence. It is not enough to invest in science and mātauranga Māori as a discrete lever contributing to transformation. Evidence-based decision-making must form the basis of all transformation in conjunction with transparent and accountable processes.

Specific

- Overall, the briefing lacked specificity. When addressing complex, difficult systems, research will contribute to more specific directives, policies, actions, and other responses. Specificity will also aid transparency and accountability.

Holistic

- Environmental action must be holistic and systems-based, recognising both the intersectional nature of the drivers of climate and landscape change and the need to create holistic responses that draw on transdisciplinary expertise. Current institutions, structures, and systems that obstruct sustainability and integrated approaches to holistic cooperation need to be transformed. This systems-based perspective is central to minimising unwanted outcomes.

6. *Are there any other leverage points you think should be included?*

Five important leverage points were not included:

- a. We recommend restructuring government funding pathways to directly support long-term sustainability investments in core research and development. Presently, funding overseen by several ministries (e.g., MBIE, MPI, MfE..) each have priorities that are not necessarily driven by the ethos set out in the draft. In principle, they could align with the transformational vision set out. However, deeper and concerted commitment to realizing the vision put forward requires dedicated effort. In order to make evidenced-based decisions, it is crucial that institutions and funding support

science-based learning and outcomes that holistically consider the entire system.

- b. Adapting the concept of land ownership is central to transforming New Zealander's relationship with the environment. If we consider ourselves custodians/guardians of the land rather than property owners, we can reshape our understanding of how we might use, invest in, and protect that land while emphasising a future-focused relationship.
- c. Aotearoa New Zealand cannot address the environment without tackling the economic structure and the centrality of the agricultural industry openly and honestly. This must include economic diversification and corporate reform that recognises New Zealand innovation, supports all livelihoods, and makes fair, evidence-based decisions that ensure the livelihoods of future generations.
- d. Addressing misunderstandings about science, the environment, politics and society is necessary to forward meaningful policy and action. Building informed and engaged societies is essential to support this end.
- e. Solving problems related to singular drivers in isolation will inhibit our ability to address others and potentially worsen outcomes in all areas. Rather than understanding the drivers as discreet contributors to environmental degradation, understanding their interdependence in the overall system will enable more comprehensive solutions. Yet a consequence of avoiding the intersectional consideration is that fragmented solutions themselves risk perpetuating a model for change that fails to reduce overall environmental impact. A systems approach that recognises that structures for change must include incentives (via economic or other value means, including social and community mana) toward sustainable activities, practices, and policy, and guide expectations for ethical social norms. This highlights the need for transforming legal, political, economic and business structure in a way that is holistic and builds on successful models of evidence-based systems approaches.

Additional comments from Ngā Ara Whetū

Time pressures

Any document addressing future coordination on environmental issues must acknowledge the imperative time pressure to act. Ngā Ara Whetū believes in humanity's positive ability to uncover and enact solutions. However, we are fast approaching the point at which the decision not to act decisively toward combatting climate change and the biodiversity crisis will lead to a point of no return. Local and international events indicate the impacts of climate change are increasing at an unpredictable rate and with devastating consequences.

Leading on environmental values

Aotearoa New Zealand holds a unique position in this activity on measures including the following: from a biodiversity perspective, as an island nation within the Pacific, as a developed nation that relies on agricultural sectors, and due to its pluralistic society. We are positioned to demonstrate that environmental sustainability is achievable in the context of a just transition to a low-carbon future where native biodiversity can flourish.

Bold goals

The briefing needs to set bold goals. It fails to be ambitious enough – despite its future focus. In order to address urgency and position itself as a leader, Aotearoa New Zealand must have bold goals to match and give meaning to the ambitious vision for our environmental future.

Ngā Ara Whetū recommends the following goals:

- a. Commit to a zero-waste future and prioritise the reduction of landfilling, re-use, recycling, and new technologies that can aid in this transformation.
- b. Change business models so that companies are legally and meaningfully evaluated on sustainability rather than purely deliverance of profit to shareholders.
- c. Agricultural reform focussing on regenerative farming, diversification and the creation of sustainable food.
- d. Inspire pro-environmental values and lifestyles.
- e. Diversify the New Zealand economy so there is less reliance on damaging industries.

- f. Recast the meaning, rights and responsibilities of land ownership.
- g. Commit to building world-class public transportation that supports all people to go where they need in absence of owning cars.
- h. Support additional renewable energy sources through investments and incentive programmes that complement those already in existence.
- i. Reimagine legal and political structures toward long-term, holistic, evidence-based systems that sustain the environment, incentivise positive change, and recognise our interconnectedness and mutual reliance on one another and our environment.
- j. A positive plan for New Zealand's role and contribution to the international environmental effort that goes beyond responding to unpredictable global forces.

Assertion of Support from Ngā Ara Whetū

To conclude, we would like to confirm our overall support for the Ministry's briefing. Many of the goals and principles guiding the briefing match those of our research centre. We strongly support the focus on equity and the importance of tangata whenua and kaitiāngatanga. Prioritising equitable solutions leads to enduring policy and contributes to a more just future.

We wish to reiterate three key points:

Firstly, the necessity of underpinning action with science, specificity, and holistic thinking, which may require a blending of responsibilities previously overseen by different ministries (MPI, MBIE, MfE, for instance). Decision-making must be evidence-based, detailed, and consider the whole in order for us to take effective action that recognises the potential consequences.

Secondly, we must reform our understanding of land ownership. Finding ways to meaningfully adopt a relationship with the environment built on the idea of stewardship will do much work in reshaping incentives, structures, and activities to better match our environmental goals.

Thirdly, we encourage shifting legal and political structures to enable long-term thinking and incentivise sustainability across all sectors.

Ngā Ara Whetū wishes to support the ministry and Aotearoa New Zealand in addressing environmental issues. Our centre is outward-facing and enthusiastic about engaging in innovative and specialist research that can contribute to long-lasting effective policy. We

believe in our responsibility to provide high-level guidance that is accessible and focused on a positive future for Aotearoa New Zealand. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the ministry in implementing its long-term vision.