

Forces Unite To Protect Wild Rivers

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While political debate centres on claims to water ownership, environmental and recreational groups are spearheading a campaign to raise awareness of Water Conservation Orders (WCOs) which protect some of the country's most outstanding rivers for all New Zealanders.



Fish & Game NZ, Forest & Bird, Environmental Defence Society (EDS), Whitewater NZ, Federated Mountain Clubs and other environmental and recreational NGOs have teamed up to highlight the importance of WCO-protected waterways - 15 throughout the country - and push for the protection measures to be strengthened.

Bryce Johnson, Fish & Game chief executive, says although there is wide recognition of New Zealand's network of National Parks, very few Kiwis are aware that WCOs provide similar high-level protection status to some of the country's most precious rivers.

"Over the past two decades we have experienced a significant decline in water quality, and New Zealanders now identify this as their biggest environmental concern," notes Mr Johnson.

"Freshwater management is the issue of our time, and it has been and will continue to be a highly contentious topic.

"This campaign, however, represents a great opportunity for all Kiwis to set aside their differing views and celebrate WCO waterways - jewels in the crown of this country's natural landscape which have been protected for all New Zealanders to enjoy and which are vital to our '100% Pure, clean green' brand."

Campaign initiatives include the launch of the WCO website, erecting WCO signage and unveilings at key locations around the country to identify these waterways of national significance, and raft and kayak flotillas down WCO-protected rivers.

Former All Blacks captain Anton Oliver is fronting the campaign in his role as WCO ambassador.

EDS chairman Gary Taylor says the timing of the WCO campaign is right, given the host of controversial water-related issues presently at the fore. And like the other organisations involved, EDS strongly supports moves to strengthen WCOs.

"Water conservation orders are the only effective mechanism available to protect freshwater," says Mr Taylor. "EDS particularly supports moves to examine how land use adjacent to wild and scenic rivers can be better regulated to limit its impact on water quality.

"New Zealand's WCO rivers are part of our joint heritage with iwi and just as important as our National Parks, and they must be protected for their natural, scenic, wildlife and recreational values."

He says with our freshwater resources under significant pressure from hydro and irrigation demands the dangers of over-allocation and pollution have never been greater.

Forest & Bird conservation advocate Nicola Toki says the organisation is pleased to push for greater recognition WCOs and strengthening of the legislation.

"New Zealand's wild rivers provide crucial habitat for endangered native species like the whio, or blue duck, which inhabit fast-flowing rivers and streams like the Manganui-o-te-ao River in the central North Island, protected by WCO in 1989."

Along with Fish & Game and the other organisations behind the WCO campaign, Forest & Bird has been at pains to emphasise that urgent steps are needed to safeguard the country's remaining wild rivers: "Most of our lowland rivers and almost half our lakes are now polluted. Where will our kids be able to swim if this continues?"

"WCOs are a robust and tried legal measure which has worked to safeguard some of our most iconic rivers," Ms Toki says. "We now have a national policy statement on freshwater that says we must protect outstanding water bodies, and Water Conservation Orders are a legal tool that can achieve that requirement."

Dr Doug Rankin, conservation officer for Whitewater NZ, says the status afforded to a river by a WCO is of "immense value" to his members and the wider New Zealand public.

"WCOs recognise the values of our rivers, whether it's cultural, scenic, fishery, whitewater, ecological or recreation values - and afford a measure of protection against future development and exploitation."

"Only one other country in the world, the US, offers similar protection to its outstanding rivers, through its Wild and Scenic Rivers Act."

Since the granting of the first WCO on the Motu River in 1984 (primarily for its whitewater recreation and wilderness and scenic values), Whitewater NZ has actively worked alongside Fish & Game and Forest & Bird to obtain many of the WCOs now in place, including those on the Ahuriri, Rangitikei, Mohaka, Grey, Buller, Kawarau, Motueka and Rangitata rivers.

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment Dr Jan Wright recently called for broader protection of wild and scenic rivers. Those behind the WCO campaign want the Government to act on that recommendation.