

'Decades of denial': major report finds New Zealand's environment is in serious trouble

Nation known for its natural beauty is under pressure with extinctions, polluted rivers and blighted lakes

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The report presents a sobering summary of a country starkly different from the 'Pure New Zealand' marketing campaign. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

A report on the state of New Zealand's environment has painted a bleak picture of catastrophic biodiversity loss, polluted waterways and the destructive rise of the dairy industry and urban sprawl.

Environment Aotearoa is the first major environmental report in four years, and was compiled using data from Statistics New Zealand and the environment ministry.

It presents a sobering summary of a country that is starkly different from the pristine landscape promoted in the "Pure New Zealand" marketing campaign

that lures millions of tourists every year.

It found **New Zealand** is now considered one of the most invaded countries in the world, with 75 animal and plant species having gone extinct since human settlement. The once-vibrant bird life has fared particularly badly, with 90% of seabirds and 80% of shorebirds threatened with or at risk of extinction.



'Their birthright is being lost': New Zealanders fret over polluted rivers

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/04/their-birthright-is-being-lost-new-zealanders-fret-over-polluted-rivers>

Almost two-thirds of New Zealand's rare ecosystems are under threat of collapse, and over the last 15 years the extinction risk worsened for 86 species, compared with the conservation status of just 26 species improving in the past 10 years.

The scale of what is being lost is impossible to accurately gauge, as only about 20% of New Zealand's species have been identified and recorded.

Kevin Hague from the conservation group Forest and Bird said the report was chilling reading and captured the devastating affects of "decades of procrastination and denial".

"New Zealand is losing species and ecosystems faster than nearly any other country," he said. "Four thousand of our native species are in trouble ... from rampant dairy conversions to destructive seabed trawling – [we] are irreversibly

harming our natural world.”

The minister for the environment, David Parker, said the report offered “no big surprises” but reinforced the importance of cleaning up the waterways and becoming carbon neutral by 2050.



The kea, one of New Zealand’s endangered native birds. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

“If, with all our advantages, New Zealand can’t overcome its environmental problems, then the world won’t,” Parker said.

A massive rise in the country’s dairy herd over the last 20 years has had a devastating impact on the country’s freshwater quality, a key area being targeted by the government for improvement. During her election campaign, the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, pledged to make the country’s rivers and lakes swimmable again for the next generation.

That could prove challenging, with the report finding that groundwater failed standards at 59% of wells owing to the presence of *E coli*, and at 13% of the wells owing to nitrates. Some 57% of monitored lakes registered poor water quality, and 76% of native freshwater fish are at risk of or threatened with extinction. A third of freshwater insects are also in danger of extinction.

Forest and Bird said the main culprits for worsening freshwater quality were the intensive use of fertilisers, irrigation and cows.

The Green party co-leader James Shaw, who is also the minister for climate

change, said the environment was taking a further hammering with the effects of global warming starting to be felt, including sea-level rise, increasing land temperatures and warming ocean temperatures.

“All the issues in this report are made worse by climate change and that is why this government is so determined to take strong action,” Shaw said.

“The introduction of climate change legislation, establishing an independent climate change commission to guide emissions reductions, and the just transition to a low emissions economy are vital.”

Hague said while the findings were sobering, the reality was far worse as the report missed “dangerous marine heatwaves” and the inadequacy of marine protections, with less than half a per cent of New Zealand’s sea area protected by marine reserves.

“We must not waste any more time in fundamentally changing the way we interact with nature,” he said. “We need an economy that nurtures and restores our environment, not one that trashes it.”