BEFORE AN INDEPENDENT HEARING PANEL FOR

APPOINTED BY KAIPARA DISTRICT COUNCIL

Under	**Resource Management Act 1991**
And	
In the matter of	**Proposed Plan Change 85 to the Operative Kaipara District Plan**
By	Kaipara District Council

STATEMENT OF EVIDENCE OF AYLA SARAH WILES
(TARA ITI RANGER)
ON BEHALF OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF CONSERVATION
Dated 30 January 2026

Counsel for the Director-General of Conservation

Lisa Sutherland
Senior Solicitor
Department of Conservation
P O Box 842
Raumaunga
Whangārei 0140

Phone: 027 275 0826
Email: lsutherland@doc.govt.nz

Executive Summary

1. Tara iti is New Zealand's most threatened bird and is regarded as a taonga species. Tara iti has a national threat classification of 'Nationally Critical' and is prioritised for management in DOC's conservation planning system. There are only 10 breeding females remaining in the world. They only breed in four main sites within Auckland and Northland.

2. Investment in the Tara Iti Recovery Programme has increased in the last eight years in recognition of the critical status of tara iti. DOC, along with iwi, hapū and whānau, community groups, stakeholders and other partners have worked together to protect tara iti.

3. Mangawhai Sandspit is a key breeding site for tara iti with 6-9 pairs breeding there annually.

4. PPC85 is relevant to our work by potentially increasing the dog population in the area and thereby increasing the risk of dogs disturbing or harming the bird population we are trying to save.

Introduction

5. My full name is Ayla Sarah Wiles.

6. I am employed at the Department of Conservation/Te Papa Atawhai (DOC) as a Tara iti Ranger, Auckland Mainland/Tāmaki Makaurau. I have held this position since March 2022, supporting the implementation of the Tara Iti Operational Programme across Auckland and Northland. From 2019-2022, I held a position as a Biodiversity Ranger and led the Tara Iti Operational Programme in the Northland region. From 2016-2019, I completed three field seasons as a Tara Iti Site Ranger, monitoring and protecting tara iti nests at Waipū and Papakānui.

7. I am a trained conservation biologist with a Master of Conservation Biology, Victoria University, 2016. I studied lizard habitat-use in Wellington for my Master's degree.

8. I have over 10 years' experience in the field of ecology and wildlife management. I have experience working in a range of threatened species research and management programmes including tara iti, pāteke, kiwi and the kakerakau skink.

9. This evidence provides information about the Tara Iti Recovery Programme.

10. I have been asked by the Director-General of Conservation (DG) to provide evidence in respect of the applications for resource consents by Foundry Group Limited (Formerly Cabra Mangawhai Limited) and Pro Land Matters Company for activities associated with the proposed Private Plan Change 85 (PPC85) - Mangawhai East.

Code of Conduct

11. While my evidence provides a factual context rather than expressing opinion, I confirm that I have read the code of conduct for expert witnesses as contained in clause 9 of the Environment Court's Practice Note 2023 (the Code). I have complied with the Code when preparing my written statement of evidence and will do so when I present my evidence to the Independent Commissioners.

12. For the avoidance of doubt, in providing this evidence as an expert witness in accordance with the Code, I acknowledge that I have an overriding duty to impartially assist the Panel on matters within my area of expertise. The views expressed are my own expert views, and I do not speak on the DG's behalf.

13. Unless I state otherwise, this evidence is within my sphere of expertise and personal knowledge. I have not omitted to consider any material facts known to me that might alter or detract from the information I present in this statement.

Scope of evidence

14. I have been asked to provide evidence in relation to the DG's submission on the applications for resource consents by Foundry Group Limited (formerly Cabra Mangawhai Limited) and Pro Land Matters Company, for activities associated with PPC85.
15. My evidence addresses the following issues:
    a. Conservation Strategies to Prevent Extinction;
    b. Tara Iti Recovery Programme; and
    c. Operational context.
16. I have read the Evidence in Chief of Dr Beauchamp and the Mangawhai East Planning Section 32 report explaining the PPC85 proposal.

Conservation Strategies To Prevent Extinction

17. New Zealand is a party to the international "Convention on Biological Diversity 1992" (the Convention). Each party to the Convention is required to have a national biodiversity strategy and action plan. New Zealand has met this requirement through the creation of the "Te Mana o te Taiao – Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020". DOC has clear outcomes set out in "Te Mana o te Taiao – Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020", one of which is to have no species at risk of extinction due to human activities (Outcome 2).[1]

18. DOC has an established track record of recovering species from low population numbers. For example, the black robin was brought back from the brink of extinction. In the 1980s its population had been reduced to just five individuals. As a result of investment and continued high level conservation management by the New Zealand Wildlife Service and then DOC from 1987, the black robin population has recovered to over 250 individuals.[2]

19. Tara iti is currently New Zealand's most threatened endemic breeding bird with 50 individuals remaining and only 10 breeding females. Tara iti has a national threat classification of 'Nationally Critical' (Figure 1). Tara iti are a taonga species[3] and DOC has a Conservation Protocol with Te Uri o Hau under their Deed of Settlement that explicitly addresses tara iti management.[4]

20. Nationally Critical species like tara iti have prioritised management in the DOC's conservation planning system, with goals set by recovery groups and identified in species recovery plans to move the species out of the Nationally Critical category.

---

[1] Te Mana o te Taiao – Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy, Department of Conservation 2020 (Te Mana o te Taiao - Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020), page 43:
Outcome 2 – Indigenous species and their habitats across Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond are thriving
› *The mana of taonga species is restored*
› *All indigenous species are protected and secure, and none are at risk of extinction due to human activities*
› *Species' populations are healthy, genetically diverse and have increased resilience to future threats including climate change*
› *Migratory species and their habitats are secured across international boundaries*

[2] Karure / Kakaruia / Chatham Island black robin: New Zealand native land birds (doc.govt.nz).

[3] For example, tara (terns) are listed in Schedule 97 'Taonga Species' of the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998.

[4] Te Uri O Hau Deed of Settlement, Schedule 5.18, Department of Conservation Protocol, cl 9.3.

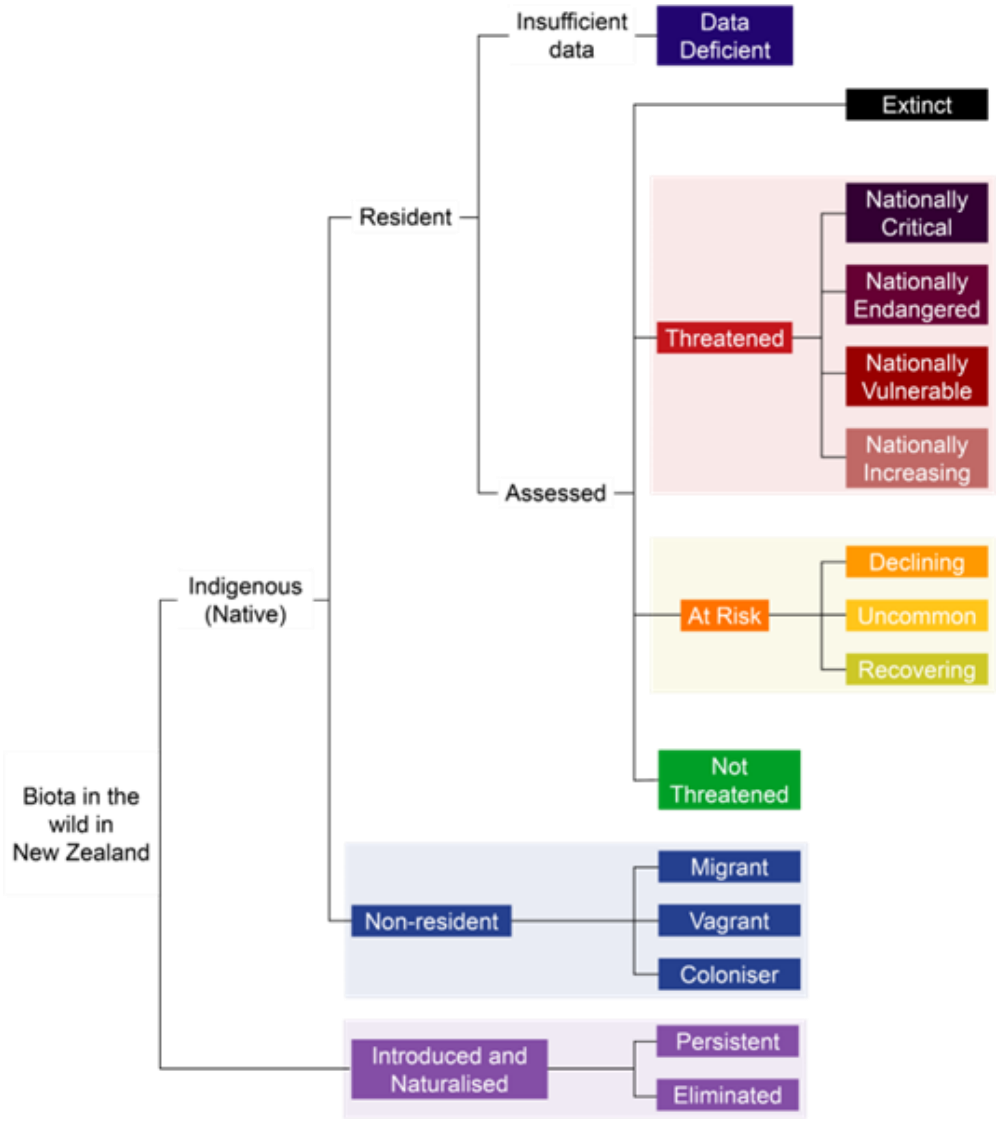

Figure 1: New Zealand Threat Classification System.[5]

Tara Iti Recovery Programme

21. Conservation management of tara iti has been ongoing since 1987 when DOC formed (community conservation efforts and the New Zealand Wildlife Service were working on tara iti conservation prior to this (1983-87)).

[5] Robertson, H.A.; Baird, K.A.; Elliott, G.P.; Hitchmough, R.A.; McArthur, N.J.; Makan, T.D.; Miskelly, C.M.; O'Donnell, C.F.J.; Sagar, P.M.; Scofield, R.P.; Taylor, G.A.; Michel, P. 2021. Conservation status of birds in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021. New Zealand Threat Classification Series 36. Wellington, Department of Conservation.

22. A review of DOC's Tara Iti Management Programme was carried out in 2017[6] to determine reasons for the continued critical state of the population. The review deemed there was a risk of extinction within 50 years and identified several critical issues preventing recovery of tara iti including a need for changes within governance, leadership, information management, research, and on-ground actions. In response, DOC embarked on a structured decision-making (SDM) process from 2017-2019 to determine an optimal management strategy for tara iti survival.[7]

23. The SDM process involved a facilitated working group of stakeholders (including DOC, iwi, non-government organisations, Auckland Zoo, New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF), universities and the community) as the first step towards developing a collaborative and inclusive plan for recovery.

24. From this process, the Tara Iti Recovery Group (TRG) recommended the development and implementation of a Tara Iti Recovery Plan for 2026-2036 which will cover methods to enable species persistence for the next 50 years.

25. The current approach DOC and its partners are taking to manage tara iti include:
    a. Full management of current tara iti breeding sites;
    b. Over-winter management of tara iti;
    c. Establishment of new suitable tara iti breeding sites;
    d. Development of a captive rearing programme for maximising tara iti productivity; and
    e. Considering removal of infertile males.

26. I outline the work undertaken by DOC and others to achieve this programme of work below.

Operational Context

27. Currently, DOC runs its on-ground management programme through two operations teams in the Whangarei District and Auckland Regional offices. The tara iti team consists of eight permanent operations staff, with five of those committing 100% of their time to the programme. This is bolstered by eight seasonal rangers who work full time during the breeding season from September-February.

28. The programme also draws on intermittent support and advice from a range of staff

---

[6] Maloney, R.; Seddon, P.; Steeves, T.; Cleland, S. 2017: Review of the Tara-iti / Fairy Tern Recovery Programme. Department of Conservation, Wellington (unpublished).
[7] McMurdo Hamilton, T.; Canessa, S.; Makan, T.; Ewen, J.G. 2021: A structured approach for the recovery of tara iti / New Zealand fairy tern (Sternula nereis davisae). Department of Conservation, Wellington. 37 p (A structured decision-making approach for the recovery of Tara iti/NZ fairy tern: Birds publications (doc.govt.nz)).

across the wider organisation. This includes, but is not limited to two Operations Directors, two Operations Managers, two Biodiversity Planners, one Media Advisor, and five Technical Advisors.

29. This work is supported at a national level through strategic advice from DOC's Biodiversity and Threats Unit and TRG. The TRG consists of members from DOC's Operations and Biodiversity groups, Auckland Council, and Auckland Zoo, along with members from our iwi partners and the community.

30. Volunteers from About Tern Mangawhai and Waipū, Birds New Zealand, DOC volunteers, and the New Zealand Fairy Tern Charitable Trust, monitor tara iti two days a week at most breeding sites during breeding season providing valuable post-season sightings.

31. Local whānau, hapū and iwi are involved with management of tara iti. For example, at Mangawhai, Te Ārai Te Uri O Hau kaitiaki undertake predator control across the site year-round and have assisted with habitat enhancement work. Further collaborations occur at Waipū, Pākiri and Papakānui where local kaitiaki help with habitat enhancement, advocacy and predator control. There is also an open invitation to iwi representatives to participate in the Tara Iti Recovery Group, and members participate in the annual hui and workshops from time to time. DOC provides regular updates to all whānau, hapū and iwi involved in tara iti recovery.

32. Management of tara iti nests is intensive and requires a variety of adaptive management techniques to be used. Eggs are collected when there is perceived risk to the nest (tide, storm or sand drift), they are exchanged for 'dummy' or fake eggs and incubated safely in an incubator on site or at Auckland Zoo (Figure 2). When the risk has passed, the real eggs are exchanged for the fake eggs at the natal nest (or on occasion, into another nest that may be deemed safer or better suited than the natal nest).

Figure 2: Tara iti eggs being delivered to Auckland Zoo. Credit: DOC.

33. Since 2020, captive rearing trials have been conducted in partnership with Auckland Zoo with learnings being carried over year to year. Very little is known worldwide about captive rearing of terns[8] and though this aspect of the programme is still in the early stages, successes in the 2023-24 season have now been replicated in the 2024-25 season (Figure 3). Long term, captive rearing has potential to be a useful tool to bolster the wild population of tara iti.

34. For the first 14-20 days, the chicks are reared at Auckland Zoo before being transferred to a purpose-built facility at Te Ārai. They are monitored seven days a week by Auckland Zoo birdkeepers, DOC rangers and volunteers.

Figure 3: Captive reared tara iti from the 2024-2025 season. Credit: Darren Markin.

[8] Tern Species in captivity: a global review, McMurdo 2020. Unpublished report.

35. New Zealand King Salmon, Manāki Whitebait and the Tongariro National Trout Centre in Turangi provide a source of fish for feeding the captive reared tara iti (Figure 4). A network of 10 fish tanks are set-up between Auckland Zoo, DOC Warkworth and Auckland Council facilities at Te Ārai to house the fish ready for consumption by tara iti at the different stages of development. In 2025, this totalled just over 20 kg of live fish to feed the eight captive reared birds.

Figure 4: Captive reared tara iti eating New Zealand King Salmon. Credit: Darren Markin.

36. Since 2019, a large-scale habitat creation programme has been underway to create safe raised shell patches at all current breeding sites to help protect tara iti nests from tidal inundation, sand movement and storm impacts. During the winter months shell patches are made using bulk quantities of shell that are either commercially sourced or sourced locally and are delivered via helicopter, unimog, utes or even by hand. For example, in 2021, the NZDF assisted at Mangawhai where they delivered 50 tonnes of shell (Figure 5).

Figure 5: NZDF dropping shell at Mangawhai in 2021. Credit: DOC

37. DOC funding for tara iti conservation has been provided since 1987. Over the past seven years, since the SDM process, DOC has increased its annual funding for the Tara Iti Recovery Programme from $133,000 in 2017 to $800,000 annually from 2025 onwards (Table 1), reinforcing DOC's commitment to recovering the tara iti population. The results are shown by recent successes in growing the wild population and having a captive reared individual bird survive for 12 months+ for the first time ever. This funding covers the on-ground management programmes at the four main breeding sites (Pākiri, Papakānui, Mangawhai, Waipū) and the over-wintering roost sites in the Kaipara Harbour (Manukapua, Bird Island and Papakānui Spit), as well as the captive rearing programme at Te Ārai.

38. Additional funding has also been provided through Species on The Brink (SOTB) and Cyclone Relief Funds (CRF), as well as the International Visitor Levy (IVL). There is also separate funding for the research programme through the Biodiversity, Heritage and Visitor (BHV) unit of DOC.

39. DOC also runs a research programme for tara iti totalling $130,000 per year. Additional projects funded by a partnership with The Shorebirds Trust include PhD studies and genetics work. Since the development of this partnership in 2017, this funding stream has totalled approximately $495,000 and has helped to develop future research capabilities in New Zealand.

Year	Core Funding Operations	Additional Funding Operations	Research funding BHV
2017 – 2018	$133,000		
2018 – 2019	$193,000		
2020 – 2021	$193,000		
2020 - 2021	$193,000		
2021 – 2022	$550,000		
2022 – 2023	$100,000	$450,000 (SOTB)	
2023 - 2024	$803,688	$150,000 (CRF)	$130,000
2024 – 2025	$800,000	$125,000 (IVL, CRF)	$130,000
2025 – 2026	$800,000*	$200,000	$130,000
2026 – 2027	$800,000*	TBD	TBD
2027 – 2028	$800,000*	TBD	TBD
2028 - 2029	$800,000*		TBD

Table 1. Department of Conservation investment in tara iti recovery programme 2017-2029.

40. The research programme is guided by the Tara Iti Research Advisory Group (RAG) which is made up of experts on ecology, biology, genetics and tara iti and includes Australian fairy tern specialist, Claire Greenwell. The funding has been used for a range of projects including recovery planning support, genetic research, juvenile behavioural development and dispersal, publishing of tara iti research and predator control best practice.

41. Management at breeding and over-winter roosting sites is undertaken by DOC, local iwi and community groups. The four main breeding sites (Waipū, Mangawhai, Papakānui and Pākiri) are intensively managed with on-site rangers present during the breeding season (September-February). The rangers conduct daily nest monitoring, undertake predator control, provide advocacy with the public and respond to compliance incidents. Tara iti have also previously bred at Te Ārai and Poutawa, with these sites managed year-round, with additional periodical monitoring during the breeding season to ensure that if birds are present, they can be suitably protected.

42. Known and well-used over-wintering roosting sites in the Kaipara include Manukapua Island, Bird Island and Papakānui Spit which have annual population surveys during February–April. Other significant roost sites such as the Tauhoa River and Port Albert in the Kaipara Harbour are intermittently monitored for tara iti presence as well. Further work is planned to identify other roost sites in the Kaipara for protection and will involve boat surveys, satellite tagging of adult birds and additional tracking studies.

Figure 6: DOC ranger monitoring tara iti at Manukapua island, April 2025. Credit: Helen Kettles.

43. The Mangawhai Government Purpose Wildlife Refuge Reserve is a 253 ha sandspit located in the Mangawhai Harbour. The sandspit is administered by the DOC to the Mean High Water Springs (MHW) and is a key breeding site for tara iti with between 7–10 pairs (Figure 7) breeding there each season. Mangawhai Harbour also provides a home and food source to many other shorebirds and migratory waders, particularly during the busy spring/summer breeding season.

Figure 7: Tara iti breeding pair feeding on the Mangawhai Estuary. Credit: Darren Markin.

44. Protection of tara iti from human related threats at breeding sites is complicated due to the multiple layers of land ownership, local and regional council bylaws and the need to protect both the direct nesting sites, but also the associated foraging areas.

45. DOC rangers monitoring tara iti nesting at Mangawhai respond to compliance incidents such as vehicles, dogs, horses or drones within the DOC reserve. They gather evidence such as location, offender details, time and date and forward this to the DOC compliance team for enforcement. They also approach the offenders (if safe to do so) and explain the importance of the site and the need to reduce disturbance to the birds.

46. Where applicable, compliance events associated with other governing bodies are passed onto their compliance teams for enforcement actions i.e. if a dog is on the sandspit beach below MHW the Kaipara District Council (KDC) Dog bylaw applies. However, KDC compliance rangers are often an hour away and are sometimes unable to respond so offences go unchecked.

47. At Mangawhai each tara iti pair has an associated foraging territory within the Mangawhai Estuary (refer Dr Beauchamp's evidence, para 18, Figure 1). Due to the size and scale of the sandspit and estuary it is not possible for DOC rangers to completely cover all these areas from a compliance perspective.

48. DOC's annual site-based reports for the Mangawhai tara iti breeding season record all compliance incidents. There are several examples from 2010-2025 of dogs being noted in the estuary and causing disturbance to roosting birds. In 2019-20 rangers reported that "[d]ogs were a regular nuisance to birds attempting to feed at low tide on the far side of the estuary. This was an issue throughout the season and peaked

during the busy Christmas holiday period." (Drew & McCool, 2020).[9]

49. The KDC Dog bylaw has parts of the Mangawhai estuary margin as a dog permitted area (on lead, with some areas off-leash outside of 10 am-5 pm), but most of the sand flats are not classified, and there dogs can be off-leash, so if there are dogs present DOC rangers can only take an advocacy-based approach to protect tara iti and other shorebirds from disturbance. In some cases, dog owners will continue to have their dog present amongst roosting birds, despite the messaging from the DOC ranger.

50. The above example refers to observations from Tern Point looking across to the Lincoln Street reserve (off-leash outside of 10 am-5 pm) which as mentioned in Dr Beauchamp's evidence (paragraph 20) is one of the high dog activity areas.

51. The decision by dog owners to let dogs off leash, in on leash areas, commonly occurs and a highly concerning example of this occurred in 2024 where an off-lead dog was observed chasing a female tara iti (RM-KpG) who was roosting on the estuarine mudflats near the Tern Point subdivision (Mead & Courtenay, 2025).[10] In this instance the DOC ranger was able to talk to the dog owner who was very apologetic and put her dog back on the lead, luckily the tara iti was unscathed, but the outcome could have been a lot worse, especially if there were fledglings present (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Tara iti fledglings roosting on the Mangawhai Estuary. Credit: Jacob Ball.

52. In severe cases where direct disturbance of wildlife (i.e. birds being harassed, injured, or killed) is observed, a compliance incident can be recorded under the

[9] Drew, K & McCool, F. Monitoring and Management of New Zealand Fairy Tern/Tara iti and other shorebirds at the Mangawhai Sandspit Wildlife Refuge Reserve for the 2019-2020 breeding season. Department of Conservation, Unpublished report.
[10] Mead, L & Courtenay, S. Monitoring and Management of New Zealand Fairy Tern/Tara iti and other shorebirds at the Mangawhai for the 2024-2025 breeding season. Department of Conservation, Unpublished report.

Wildlife Act 1953, but it is often difficult to be at the right place at the right time to record these incidents.

Conclusion

53. A significant and increasing financial and in-kind investment is being put forward to save tara iti from extinction by DOC, and the wider tara iti community.

54. Mangawhai sandspit and estuary are important breeding habitat for tara iti. To ensure the maximum breeding success they require as little disturbance as possible.

55. The population in Mangawhai is ever growing, with more humans and dogs moving into the area each year. Reducing the number of interactions of humans and dogs with wildlife on the Mangawhai estuary is critical to protecting this important breeding habitat for the tara iti.

56. Although the recent population increase provides hope for the future, the survival of this bird is delicately balanced. Any reduction of breeding success at Mangawhai could unravel years of dedication, hard work and investment in the conservation of New Zealand's rarest endemic avifauna taonga.

Ayla Sarah Wiles

DATED 30 January 2026