



OIA 20-E- 0503 – DOC-6424597

4 September 2020

M Hill

[fyi-request-13434-b68ef1e9@requests.fyi.org.nz](mailto:fyi-request-13434-b68ef1e9@requests.fyi.org.nz)

Dear M Hill

I note your Official Information Act request to the Minister of Conservation, dated 31 July 2020. As the request is more closely connected to the functions of the Department, your request was transferred to the Department for response.

You requested the following:

*What scientific evidence do you have tahr damage native fauna?*

### **Context**

I note your use of the term 'fauna' generally meaning the animals of a particular region, habitat, or geological period.

#### *Himalayan tahr*

I have taken the view that by 'tahr', you mean Himalayan tahr (tahr).

In New Zealand, tahr have established themselves over a feral range (the legal boundary of where tahr are allowed to be), which covers most of the central Southern Alps between the Rakaia and Whitcombe rivers (in the north) and the Hunter and Haast rivers (in the south).

#### *Control of tahr*

The management of tahr is governed by a statutory plan, the Himalayan Tahr Control Plan 1993, prepared under the Wild Animal Control Act 1977. I include a link to a copy of the statutory plan:

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/about-us/science-publications/conservation-publications/threats-and-impacts/animal-pests/himalayan-tahr-control-plan-1993/>

This statutory plan defined a feral range for tahr, identified exclusion zones on the perimeter of that range to prevent the spread of tahr, and divided the feral range into seven management units. These management units collectively comprise 706,000 hectares of land - 573,000 hectares of which is public conservation land and a further 133,000 hectares of private or Crown pastoral leasehold land.

A key element of the statutory plan is that it sets a maximum population of 10,000 tahr across all land tenures in the tahr feral range. The Department has no plans to eradicate tahr and is taking a phased approach to meet the statutory plan's objectives.

#### *Tahr programme – Integrated research and monitoring programme*

Aside from control, I note other (proposed) work in the tahr programme includes establishing the status of tahr populations off public conservation land; working with Ngāi Tahu to further implement the Treaty partnership in relation to tahr

management; and working with Ngāi Tahu, researchers and stakeholders to develop an integrated research and monitoring programme.

### *Classifications*

The New Zealand Threat Classification System is a decision-support tool that identifies the risk of a native species going extinct – making it a vital part of the Department's work toward sustainability and conservation.

I note the species that are determined as *Threatened* will vary from time to time.

Panels of experts assess the status of each species group over a five-year cycle.

I include links the New Zealand Threat Classification System (NZTCS) and to information regarding the New Zealand Threat Classification System and connected publications.

<https://nztc.org.nz/>

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/about-us/science-publications/conservation-publications/nz-threat-classification-system/>

## **Department's response**

### *Alpine ecosystems*

New Zealand alpine ecosystems evolved without mammalian herbivores, such as tahr. Consequently, many alpine plants have no defence mechanisms, such as toxins or spines, to discourage tahr from eating them. Some plant species, forming part of the tahr diet, are ranked as *Threatened* or *At Risk* by the New Zealand Threat Classification System.

Tahr feed primarily on alpine tussock grasslands and sub-alpine shrublands - including snow tussock and shrub species (which are the dominant vegetation in many of New Zealand's sub-alpine and alpine environments). Once these palatable alpine herbs, tussocks and shrubs are selectively eaten, they are replaced by unpalatable plants such as speargrasses (*Aciphylla* species), mountain daisies (*Celmisia* species), fescue tussock (*Festuca novae-zelandiae*) and bristle tussock (*Rytidosperma setifolium*).

As they are social animals and group together, large groups of tahr can also transform tall tussocks and sub-alpine shrublands to grassy turf or bare ground.

The tahr impacts outlined above affect the overall health/loss of the habitat and have a flow on effect on other plant and animal species within the sub-alpine and alpine zones.

### *Reports and papers*

I set out below links to some reports and papers relevant to your request:

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/conservation/threats-and-impacts/animal-pests/tahr/long-term-impacts-of-himalayan-tahr-in-southern-alps.pdf>

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/conservation/threats-and-impacts/animal-pests/tahr/impact-of-himalayan-tahr-on-snow-tussocks-southern-alps-2014.pdf>

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/conservation/threats-and-impacts/animal-pests/tahr/impacts-of-himalayan-tahr-on-snow-tussocks-2004.pdf>

A fact sheet summarising potential and alternative monitoring networks to assess the ecological integrity of subalpine and alpine vegetation exposed to tahr grazing is attached. This is accompanied by a copy of a report, prepared for the Department,

entitled *Potential of Tier One and alternative monitoring networks to assess the ecological integrity of alpine vegetation exposed to tahr grazing* [Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research: October 2018].

#### *Vegetation monitoring data*

There are 117 Tier One monitoring sites within the tahr feral range. The monitoring programme was augmented more recently to include specific plants. The types of plant species monitored at these sites include tussocks, speargrasses and herbs.

I attach a Department field protocol for Tier One vegetation monitoring. This document will assist you with interpreting vegetation monitoring data. It also outlines the methods used for monitoring the browse impacts of tahr on alpine and sub-alpine vegetation and the selection of sensitive plant species monitored.

The Department, by agreement, hosts all its vegetation monitoring data through the National Vegetation Survey (NVS), which is managed by Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research (MWLR).

In order to receive vegetation monitoring data, you will need to request the material held by MWLR. To support your request, please use the attached script to request the data from the NVS by emailing [nvs@landcareresearch.co.nz](mailto:nvs@landcareresearch.co.nz)

#### *Significance of biodiversity and need to avert decline in indigenous species*

In light of the subject matter of your request, you may also be interested in the following:

- *Te Mana o Te Taiao: Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020*

A link to this document is provided below:

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/conservation/biodiversity/anzbs-2020.pdf>

Tahr are referred to as part of the group of introduced browsers that have an impact on indigenous biodiversity.

- *Biodiversity in Aotearoa report*

The report provides a stocktake of the biodiversity crisis in New Zealand by describing the state, trends and pressures on indigenous biodiversity across marine, freshwater and land. Developed by the Department, with input from other agencies and external experts, it is a compilation of existing data and published information on indigenous biodiversity, supplemented by examples from a mātauranga Māori perspective.

Tahr are referred to in this document as an introduced invasive species of mammalian browser that has an adverse impact on New Zealand's native species.

A link to this document is included below:

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/conservation/biodiversity/anzbs-biodiversity-report.pdf>

In making decisions around the extent to which information has and/or documents have been provided in (or as part of) the Department's responses, I have relied on and applied one or more of the reasons available under the Official Information Act (OIA).

Where I have withheld information under section 9 of the OIA, the public interest in its release has been taken into account. After carefully considering each of those reasons, I have decided to withhold that information as in each instance the reason for withholding it is not outweighed by public interest in its release.

You are entitled to seek an investigation and review of my decision by writing to an Ombudsman as provided by section 28(3) of the OIA.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ben Reddiex".

Ben Reddiex  
Director, National Operations – Issues & Programmes

<b>Item</b>	<b>Document description</b>	<b>Decision</b>
<i>1</i>	<i>Fact Sheet: The effects of tahr in alpine and subalpine ecosystems</i>	<i>Released in full</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>Potential of Tier One and alternative monitoring networks to assess the ecological integrity of alpine vegetation exposed to tahr grazing [Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research: October 2018]</i>	<i>Released in full</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>Department of Conservation – Field Protocol for Tier 1 Vegetation Monitoring – Tahr Browse Impacts</i>	<i>Released in full</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>Script to request data from the National Vegetation Survey</i>	<i>Released in full</i>