



Honorary Wardens

Description

Honorary wardens (the term honorary ranger is also commonly used) provide a direct, community based means of conveying messages [interpretation](#) to visitors, including persuasive messages and enforcement. They operate in addition to formal wardens, rangers and officers with a legal mandate such as police, fisheries officers, conservation staff and local council staff.

Honorary wardens are volunteers, usually based in or near the area they are involved with managing, providing an important link with the host community. Often these volunteers are locals with their ears and eyes to the ground, in other instances they are international visitors operating as hut wardens for a period and gaining work experience. In some instances they wear uniforms, parts of uniforms or identification badges, and they may receive some assistance with expenses such as uniforms, accommodation or vehicle costs.

How and when the tool is used

The honorary warden's main roles are observation, education and in some cases enforcement. Some have an administrative role such as managing huts and checking on hut passes and camping fees. They may also have various levels of involvement in local environmental management or research, including biological recording and monitoring of impacts in fragile ecological areas, such as where plants are regenerating or birds are nesting. Some are directly involved in tourism related activities, giving talks and leading guided walks or similar activities, and some are operators of tourism businesses and have concessions to operate in the conservation estate.

Usually, honorary wardens educate visitors about laws and enforcement issues and use persuasion rather than legal powers like fines or arrest. Although they may have a warrant to use legal powers, enforcement is generally considered too difficult or dangerous for honorary wardens working in isolated areas, who could face a threat of bodily harm. When involved in enforcement they usually require back-up and support from enforcement personnel such as rangers or police, working in tandem with these officers to provide local intelligence.

Honorary wardens can be the ears and eyes of the conservation agency or local council. At an informal level they can advise staff of the management agency of damage, vandalism and graffiti, and in some cases they donate time to maintenance and repair of damage. They can observe and report changes in visitor behaviour such as pressure from increased recreational use on walkways, to assist with planning. Overall, honorary wardens can help create a sense of ownership of laws and regulations by visitors.

Monitoring and evaluation of honorary wardens is the responsibility of the lead management agency. Evaluation should be based on monitoring of realistic outcomes and expectations because honorary wardens cannot solve all problems. Their success may be measured in direct ways such as numbers of infringements; it may also be subtler, such as an observable change in the level of community support for rule breakers. Where possible, monitoring should be based on diaries and simple record keeping, and more technical systems, if suitable support is provided. Support from the management agency can include regular training and debriefing opportunities. Community input is also necessary for thorough evaluation.

Application

Compliance with laws and management regulations has become a major issue in the management of natural areas as visitor use rises. Damaging and risky behaviour may arise in the absence of law enforcement. The cost of enforcing compliance can be high, especially in remote areas with low levels of formal staffing, which are often the very places where wildlife and wilderness experiences attract visitors. So there is a very practical side to using voluntary personnel, who are on the spot, to bolster compliance. With thorough training and close supervision they may also bolster conviction rates for prosecutions.

Direct provision of information by knowledgeable individuals is acknowledged as an important form of interpretation. Therefore honorary wardens play an important part by providing a range of information to visitors from a reputable source on the ground.



Hands-on interpretation by voluntary wardens is often essential to shaping behaviour before compliance becomes an issue. Non compliance can result from a lack of awareness and “don’t care” attitudes. Some areas have a culture of “beating the system” or rules, and community members typically cover for each other and work out how to do this. Locally condoned illegal behaviour develops and continues. This behaviour can result from a feeling of disempowerment as new conservation regulations are put in place, such as rules against hunting or fishing particular areas or species, or restrictions on off-road vehicles. There is also a need to be sensitive to local traditions and the effect of rural poverty on needs for food gathering. The top down, big stick approach is not always successful compared with empowering and involving the local community.

Honorary wardens are a way of involving the community in management of natural areas, particularly community leaders of standing who have the interest and capacity to assist. Careful selection is required. Suitability for the role includes a genuine concern for wildlife and conservation, capacity to communicate with official machinery, local standing to be effective, and ability to communicate with a range of people (by ethnicity, age, sex, level of skill, etc). The volunteers must have sufficient commitment and time, experience, health and a personal record clear of activities detrimental to nature and wildlife conservation.

There is a need to define duties and powers clearly. Honorary wardens should be appointed officially for a specific time, have training, carry a card or badge for identification, be reviewed annually, and have a booklet setting out official procedures. A hierarchy of voluntary wardens based on experience may be appropriate. Support is needed for wardens dealing with relatives or friends, and sometimes for those dealing with members of the opposite sex.

A particular issue arises around volunteers who have a commercial involvement in visitor activities, including concessionaires. Often these people have the very knowledge and interest required for the warden’s role and regular contact with visitors. They also often live nearby and are regularly in the locations concerned. Their involvement as wardens may require specific guidelines, training and supervision. Experience shows a fear of potential abuse of positions by operators is not upheld in practice.

While salary level is not an issue with volunteers, consideration of cash grants may be possible or appropriate in some circumstances. Local and central government should recognise outstanding work by letter of commendation, certificate or community awards. Another means of recognising effort is through membership of advisory boards or similar mechanisms. Infrastructure such as a phone or a vehicle are not usually provided but the volunteer should be able to call on the organisation they work with for support and resources, and actual expenses such as tolls and petrol costs may be recovered. Some volunteers may benefit from the experience for future career development, and the volunteer might enhance their business, especially in eco tourism ventures.

Our evaluation

Even though there is a long tradition of honorary wardens and rangers in management of New Zealand natural areas there is limited use of this tool today. Some current wardens are elderly and there appears to be no effective system for involving new ones. Greater use of iwi members as honorary wardens could be a very useful form of involvement and source of cultural interpretation as well as understanding of customary methods of conservation. A small payment or honorarium can be considered to support voluntary wardens in remote or low-employment areas. If the honorary warden tradition is to flourish, there is a need to boost the concept with formal guidelines, training and support, and a clear role in the overall systems of compliance and visitor interpretation.

Use of voluntary wardens will build on volunteer involvement in conservation management in general, and voluntary wardens can assist with integration between host communities, tourism operators, visitors and conservation management.