



 Peter Harris at the opening event in Auckland. by Supplied

A Rocha International co-founder Peter Harris, Discusses Conservation and Faith

[A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand](#) / Mar 26, 2024

At a recent series of events throughout Aotearoa Peter Harris, shared words of wisdom with audiences eager to weave together their Christian values with the urgent call for environmental stewardship.

People participated in *A Conversation with Peter Harris* at venues in Auckland, Wellington, Dunedin and Christchurch, where they explored the intersections of faith, conservation, and caring for creation.

Presentations attracted over 270 people — many who have been involved and supported A Rocha in Aotearoa NZ,, along with new friends — all keen to glean insights from a man whose life's work has been dedicated to bringing together faith and conservation. Peter spoke with authenticity and passion and attendees came away inspired with renewed motivation to care for creation.

Peter and his wife, Miranda, started A Rocha 40 years ago as a practical response to a growing conviction that the issue of our times was going to be the collapse of the biosphere. "My understanding of caring about what God cared for – which is what mission is – would have to include some sort of a response to that situation." That response was a bird observatory where "people of all faiths and none could gather around the table at the end of the day, discuss their field work, discuss their motivations for conservation, and we could find out what it meant to bring a distinctively Christian approach to conservation."

That bird sanctuary was in south Portugal at Quinta de Rocha, and so A Rocha ("The Rock" in Portuguese) was born. From the mid-1990s, Peter and Miranda helped set up other national projects in Lebanon, Kenya, France, Canada and the United Kingdom. A Rocha is now present in over 20 countries on six continents, including Aotearoa, and in many other countries through the Friends of A Rocha network.

The worlds of conservation and Christianity have not always overlapped, and there were times when Peter and his friends felt more synergy with the conservation world than with Christians. A deep faith in God has always been the “why” of conservation for Peter. “At the heart of conservation is one major question, and that’s ‘why does nature matter?’... When you’re in creation as somebody who is prepared to recognise that Jesus is Lord, you’re sharing that with the Lord of creation and you’re drawn into something which is healing.”

“Many conservationists are desperately trying to save the world, but we released ourselves in A Rocha a long time ago from that compulsion because the world has a saviour and it’s not us. We’re not going to save the world. But we are going to do our utmost to do the right thing and to serve the Lord in what we’re doing.” The motivation makes a subtle difference, “but it’s noticeable when you drag yourself out of bed at 4am to put the nets up and get eaten by leeches!”

Peter suspects a hesitancy of the Christian world to get involved in conservation is the fear that we’ll get distracted and lose our attention of the needs of people. Yet he encourages us that “from the very beginning, what it means to be human in Genesis is expressed in that command to *‘shamar’** and *‘abad’** – to keep and tend and look after the creation. We’ve forgotten how to read creation.” *(in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament).

He urges us to live in God’s world “in a more attentive way for what it’s telling us. Jesus said: Look at the signs of the times.... Creation is telling us a lot in its groaning now. You have got to be deaf not to hear it.”

When asked what gives him hope, Peter says, “I think hope is a practice; you practise hope.” Peter lives a liturgical life, practising hope while waiting for the resurrection of the body and the coming renewal of creation. The practical conservation work of A Rocha also gives him hope. “I think we are supposed to feel a certain joy in seeing the fruit of good work over a long amount of time. It’s nice being old in one sense because an amazing amount changes in 40 years ... If I go back to the original Portuguese centre now, the acorns we put in the ground are 40-year-old trees!”

A Rocha began in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2007 and participates in numerous biodiversity restoration projects across the country, mobilising hundreds of volunteers to roll up their sleeves and actively participate in practical conservation.

In the coastal town of Whāingaroa Raglan A Rocha is involved in a landscape-scale biodiversity restoration project on and around the Karioi maunga. The project, Te Whakaoranga O Karioi, aims to restore the mountain's lush coastal ecosystem and to revive a remnant seabird colony – the grey-faced petrels, or *ōi*. Volunteers of all ages, backgrounds, and skills have come together to reestablish the once-thriving *ōi* seabird colony. Sustained community efforts in predator control and seabird monitoring began in 2009, and in 2017 the first *ōi* chick fledged from Karioi. Karioi now has a mainland breeding colony and has fledged 63 *ōi* chicks.

The Eco Church Aotearoa project, is another A Rocha initiative, working across the country to encourage church communities to embrace care of

creation and active engagement in the restoration of nature as part of the life and mission of the church.

James Beck, Eco Church programme coordinator says churches are engaging with this message. "Churches are becoming hubs of eco-conscious activities, embodying the principles of environmental stewardship." Some Eco Churches do regular practical conservation work, some have embraced solar energy, others have implemented waste reduction measures, or cultivated community gardens to nourish both body and spirit. Discussions about conservation and restoration are becoming an integral part and expression of faith in Eco Churches, inspiring whānau and individuals to practise care of creation and adopt eco-friendly habits in their daily lives.

Any church can become an Eco Church. It is a declaration that says as a community, we are on this journey of working out how to couple spirituality with sustainability.

Watch a Peter Harris conversation presentation:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glltDz0_qM

For a more in-depth and longer conversation, listen to a special podcast episode that Peter Harris recorded with James Beck for *Ngā - The Many Connections*.

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3WvoRjf4db5dBnjia75kyg>

Peter Harris connected with media during his visit. An interview with NewstalkZB's *Real Life with John Cowan*:

<https://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/on-air/real-life/audio/peter-harris/>

And Radio Rhema with Dianne and Tom:

<https://www.rhema.co.nz/shows/show/article/caringforcreation>

Peter Harris will also be featured on NewstalkZB on Good Friday.

For more information about Eco Church:

<https://www.ecochurch.org.nz/>

Share Article    