Ōtepoti/Dunedin is moving positively towards being a city that both people and wildlife can thrive in. Our unique wildlife makes a significant contribution to the economic benefits of tourism in the city, with many wildlife-based businesses also involved in the conservation of threatened species. The changes to George Street represent a great move into how enhancing nature can enhance our lives, even in urban spaces. We commend the council’s support for predator free initiatives in the city which do enhance biodiversity and allow native species to thrive. We note however, that the council provides significantly less support is given to carrying out important conservation work that returns lost to the city. The equally important work of conservation advocacy, which inspires and motivates our communities to take action for the environment is also not well-funded by the council. and engaging our young people and communities with the precious taoka/treasures of Ōtepoti.

Orokonui ecosanctuary has been protecting biodiversity in the city since 2007 and is one of the largest and most ecologically significant biodiversity projects in Otago. It is responsible for the return of breeding populations of many species including kākā, kiwi, takahē and tuatara to the city, and is a stronghold for many species found nowhere else in the region, , allowing local residents and visitors to experience these taonga species in the natural habitat This work contributes to the council’s biodiversity strategy, particularly Goal 3: "Reverse the decline and enhance Dunedin’s unique indigenous biodiversity" and Goal 3.6: "Encourage opportunities for regeneration and re-establishment of species lost from the city, including species of regional importance to Kai Tahu". Orokonui works closely with Kai Tahu rūnaka, with mana whenua representation on its governing board, and many of the species returned to, and protected by, Orokonui (including at least 24 species of birds) are taonga species as listed in the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998.

Not only does Orokonui work to ensure these taoka thrive, it also works to educate and inspire rangatahi/young people, and the wider community, to learn about and protect our native species and ecosystems. The sanctuary hosts more than 5,000 ākonga/students annually as part of its education programme and carries out a wide variety of community engagement programmes, throughout the city. For many ākonga visiting Orokonui is the only chance they have to engage with these species and may be the spark that puts them on a path of lifelong learning and environmental conscientiousness. Our programmes also engage ākonga on important and relevant issues that will affect their lives, including freshwater health and climate change. Again, this work by Orokonui supports the council’s biodiversity plan particularly Goal 1: "Increase community involvement and responsibility in biodiversity conservation." This work also fosters the environmental responsibility and sustainability identified in the DCC's Young Persons' Strategy Implementation Plan, educational components of the DCC's emissions management and reduction plan, and Te Ao Tūroa, Dunedin’s Environment Strategy.

Orokonui is a not-for-profit organisation, and funding the important conservation and advocacy work that we do can be challenging, especially over the last few years with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on visitor revenue, the impacts of inflation, and the recent loss of long-term funding from the Ministry of Education. These financial challenges mean Orokonui can deliver less in terms of education and outreach, as well as limiting our conservation aspirations.

Orokonui Ecosanctuary currently receives very little funding from the Dunedin City Council to support its work. Over the last 5 years, this has been limited to four grants from the DCC Biodiversity Fund: $5,000 towards the construction of volunteer quarters in 2019; $4,054 to support the construction of kākā nest boxes in 2020; $4,000 towards the construction of a jeweled gecko enclosure in 2021; and most recently, a $1,000 grant towards the cost of translocating a new threatened species (Tīeke/Sadleback) to the sanctuary next year. While we appreciate these grants, they represent a very small fraction of the c. $1 million annual operating costs of the sanctuary. As a comparison, Wellington City Council provides $1 million of funding to Zealandia annually and has done for over a decade.

Even a modest amount of long-term funding from the Dunedin District Council would support Orokonui Ecosanctuary to deliver the significant biodiversity restoration and conservation advocacy outcomes that it has achieved over the last 16 years – and will continue to deliver for decades to come. At a time of climate crisis, where the protection of the environment is absolutely critical to the survival of many species (including our own), and connection to nature is so important for the wellbeing of our communities, we believe that the council should recognised and support our work in a more meaningful way – preferably in the form of a regular annual contribution to our operational costs.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak with councillors about the significant contribution that Orokonui Ecosanctuary makes to biodiversity restoration and conservation advocacy within the city and beyond.