

Permits must not be granted to moor at the Snares Islands

THE SNARES ISLANDS are a small group south-west of Stewart Island, of which they are regarded as an outlier only 113 km distant. They are uninhabited, and a strict control on landings has been enforced up until recently. Seals, sea lions, muttonbirds, petrels, and unique plants are in an undisturbed balance, which makes the islands of outstanding world significance. Last summer the granting of permits for the first time for fishermen to moor at the islands brought a real threat to the wildlife there. In this article Ronald M. Lockley, co-vice-chairman of the Auckland Branch, discusses the gravity of the threat for birdlife in particular if permits are granted again next season.

IN JANUARY the Department of Lands and Survey (with the approval of the Minister of Lands, Mr Jonathan Elworthy) announced in a Press release that fishermen could moor at the Snares Islands.

In earlier correspondence with the Minister, dating back to October, I had strongly objected, as a conservationist who has visited the Snares (in March 1981), to Mr Elworthy's giving permission to just one fisherman to moor at that time.

In his latest letter to me Mr Elworthy said that four fishermen had been granted permits to moor, but under certain conditions which were intended to lessen the risk of rats getting ashore from these boats moored in the Snares harbour. These permits were intended to last "for the current season to 28 February". It is understood, I believe, that during the winter the Department of Lands and Survey will be calling for public submissions on the future of the Snares.

This freedom to moor boats at the Snares, despite the precautions mentioned by Mr Elworthy (discussed below), brings too great a risk to the unique wildlife and rare

species for which the group is internationally renowned. It is quite inexplicable that, for the sake of commercial profit by a handful of Southland lobster fishermen, the objections of thousands of conservationists the world over and nearer at home, including the 36 000 or more members of the Society, should be overruled.

Description of islands

The Department of Lands and Survey's booklet *The Sub-Antarctic Islands* gives the area of the islands as 242.8 ha.

Discovered in 1791

The Snares Islands, home to millions of sea and land birds, were discovered independently on the same day — 23 November 1791.

Captain George Vancouver, in HMS *Discovery*, sighted the island in the morning, and Lieutenant William R. Broughton, of HMS *Chatham*, saw them in the afternoon.

Vancouver named the group The Snares because of "their lurking situation and appearance".

There is one large triangular island (North East Island), a smaller island off to the south-east (Broughton Island), and several off-shore islets, pinacles, and reefs.

They were reserved in 1961 for the preservation of flora and fauna and are situated 209 km south-west of Bluff (113 km south of the southern extremity of Stewart Island).

The booklet says: "Because of the complete absence of introduced mammals and the virtually unchanged natural vegetation and animal life these islands form *one of the most important sanctuaries in the world.*" (The italics are mine.)

The Department of Lands and Survey description further notes that the islands were not discovered until 1791 by British naval explorers (the Maori never visited them and seemed unaware of their existence so far south in the wild latitudes of the Roaring Forties).

The booklet adds: "Four species of birds are found nowhere else in the world—the Snares black tit, the Snares fernbird, the Snares snipe, and the Snares crested penguin. The islands are the breeding ground for vast numbers of sea birds—uncountable (but now believed to be nearly 3 million pairs of sooty shearwaters) muttonbirds, endless thousands of Snares crested penguins, up to 5000 pairs of