

Wildlife reserves in Maniototo wetlands are urgently needed

THOUGH wetlands have not attracted the sort of conservation effort accorded to New Zealand's native forests, there has been a rapid change in the public's perception of wetlands in the last few years, with a torrent of articles, in a variety of publications urging wetland preservation, and a veritable mudslide of policy statements from resource management agencies.

PUBLIC awareness of the value of swamps and bogs has never been higher and with this has come an acceptance that wetlands are:

- Highly productive ecosystems which sustain a diverse flora and fauna.
- Important scientific and recreational areas.
- A rapidly diminishing resource.

And that they can have other values in:

- Maintaining base flows in

rivers and streams during summer by storing and slowly releasing rainwater or snow melt.

- Ponding flood waters and mitigating flooding.
- Protecting downstream water quality by sieving off nutrients in run-off from agricultural land.

What comes through from the mass of information available supporting wetlands preservation is the need to act immediately to protect what little wetland remains.

The Maniototo wetlands from the air in winter. The regular flooding replenishes oxbows and lagoons adjacent to the river. This reach of the river is a magnificent example of a scroll plain.

P. R. Henriques photo



What is happening, in practice, is quite the reverse. The loss or degradation of swamps, bogs, and estuaries is continuing unimpeded throughout the country.

The drainage and development of wetlands for agricultural purposes has, without question, played a major role in New Zealand's growth and prosperity. There was nothing wrong with carving farms out of the extensive swamp land which confronted the early settlers. But now there is so little natural wetland left that the development of the remnants of what was once so common must be seen as being closely akin to vandalism.

The upper catchment area of the Taieri River, in Central Otago, provides a good example of how difficult wetlands are to protect.

Much of Central Otago is characterised by tussock-covered, block-faulted mountain ranges separated by sediment-filled basins on which have developed fertile soils and which contribute much of the area's agricultural production.

The course of the Taieri River's upper reaches has been dictated by the pattern of block faulting — first flowing north out of the western side of the Rock and Pillar Range down through the Styx Basin, then north and east across the Maniototo Basin, and then