

# THE SOUTH WEST PACIFIC

## Objectives and aims

The major objectives of the expedition were to carry out surveys of endangered species and threatened habitats. The knowledge gained from the expedition will be used to draw the attention of the authorities in the islands to local conservation problems.

Preliminary studies have already been carried out by Dr Arthur Dahl for the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme. However considerably more information is needed, so that a list of conservation priorities for the South West Pacific can be drawn up.

A series of reports containing appropriate comments on conservation needs have been prepared and sent to those people who are concerned with conservation and environmental matters in the various island governments.

In many cases conservation awareness, such as we see in New Zealand is just non-existent in the Pacific Islands. It has been only during the past few years that several terrestrial and marine reserves have been created. However these reserves will almost certainly need more effective long term protection; eg in Western Samoa,

encroaching slash and burn agriculture, and native gardening methods still threaten the recently created O Le Pupu Pu'e National Park.

Since many of the natural communities on the islands are small, they are very vulnerable to over exploitation and irreparable damage. The well documented high extinction rates of organisms on islands in various parts of the world certainly illustrates this.

There has been little consideration in the past for the obvious long term values of establishing nature reserves — not only for their prime function of preserving unique and diverse natural systems — but also to provide an important and renewable source of income as centres for the growing market of nature tourism. This aspect must surely appeal to government planners and decision makers.

In many cases the tourist dollar is a very important source of revenue for the small island economies. Thus the Pacific Island states have much to gain from the prudent use of their relatively undisturbed open spaces.

Today many of these potentially valuable areas are at risk; especially on the larger

islands, where several big multi-national companies have recently acquired timber concessions — eg the Unilever concessions in the Solomon Islands.

Unilever has already wrought irreparable destruction on some of the islands, eg New Georgia and Gizo. The latter island is where Charles Darwin carried out some of his pioneering evolutionary studies last century. Recently, a new company, IFI, which has some American backing, has obtained harvesting rights for the whole of San Cristobel Island. It appears that there has been no thought for conservation needs.

Another unique forest type that is rapidly disappearing is the *dakua*, or Fijian *kauri*, on Vanua Levu. It seems that at the present rate of cutting that the entire resource will have vanished by 1990. It is also likely that the Vanua Levu form of Fiji's unique bird, the *silk-tail*, will have gone with it. At present the Fiji National Trust is having difficulty raising even \$50 000 to secure a token 100 ha remnant of this before it is too late.

It is surely time for the New Zealand conservation organisations to look further afield — and we need look no further than our closer Pacific island neighbours.

## A GENERAL ACCOUNT OF THE SOUTH WEST PACIFIC EXPEDITION

*Derwent* set sail from Whangarei on 17 May 1982 with a crew of eight aboard for the first leg of the voyage to Tonga, sailing via the southern islands of the Kermadec Group.

Aboard for this first ocean passage was the permanent crew of six; Andrew Davis, Stephen Dawson, Tony Crocker, Gillian Eller, Tim Lovegrove and Chris White, and two other short-term crew members, Anthea Goodwin and Colin Miskelly.

Four days out from New Zealand we sighted Curtis and Cheeseman Islands, the two rather little known southern outliers of the Kermadec Group. Since it is very difficult to anchor safely in the deep water near these islands, we stood off the northern side of Curtis while Colin and Tony were put ashore for a few hours.

Even during this brief foray on the island they made several exciting discoveries. In a small rock crevice they found the downy chick of a white-bellied storm petrel. This was the first confirmed record of this species breeding at the Kermadecs.

Little shearwaters were found ashore amongst the dense sedge in large numbers. The birds were taking part in pre-breeding activities. The exact breeding place of this species in the Kermadecs was hitherto unknown. They had escaped notice previously, mainly because earlier parties had visited the islands during summer, and thus missed the winter-breeding little shearwater.

Another find was a phoenix petrel, which was soaring about over the high ridges of Curtis and attempting to land. There is an early record of this species ashore on Raoul Island, but we still do not know whether this tropical species does in fact breed on the Kermadecs.

Black-winged petrels, wedge-tailed shearwaters, red-tailed tropic birds, blue-faced boobies, white-capped noddies and

grey ternlets were all seen on and near Curtis and Cheeseman Islands.

The following day was spent at Macaulay Island, about 60 kilometres northwards. It was here that the Wildlife Service eradicated the goats during the early sixties — over 3000 animals were removed from the island. Today much of Macaulay is covered with a rank grassland, the few woody *ngaio* shrubs are confined to the inaccessible western cliffs. We managed to get Colin and Andy ashore onto the rocky shore platform at the south eastern tip of Macaulay.



This island is the only known breeding place for the distinctive Sunday Island or white-necked petrel. These handsome seabirds were quite numerous at sea around the island. Later we were to encounter them northwards through the Tonga Group and near Samoa.

Young wedge-tailed shearwaters were just leaving the island on their northward migration. Some of them still had traces of down, and they flew awkwardly. By day there was a continuous stream of black-winged petrels coming and going to feed well grown young.



A white-necked petrel, which flew aboard during the night off Macaulay Island in the Kermadecs.

The landing place on the northern side of Curtis Island, Kermadec Group. Two of the crew can be seen scaling the ridge on the skyline, and three others are in the inflatable just offshore.