

Whirinaki



A FOREST STILL AT RISK

by John Morton

When logging is halted in Whirinaki — as it must soon be — that great forest will offer an interesting section of history. It will show us stage by stage, each of man's pretensions at timber extraction: and how each was improved and refined or then abandoned altogether, as environmental conscience and public pressure got stronger.

With a certain time lag, Forest Service have been gaining in conscience too: so that native timber extraction has got more and more expensive per unit, as the demand has become less and less.

Whirinaki will show how timber extraction went on even when it ceased to be economic: and why it took Forest Service so long to stop exploiting the forest, long after this had become pointless, whether for the economy, for timber supply or for employment.

It will illustrate how, far more than being a rational animal, we are still a rationalising one.

Stage One: Felling and burning of native forests

The first attacks on our native forests, a century and more ago, were by cutting and

burning to get fields and pastures. There was not much thought for the timber itself, which was burned or used as corner posts. Whirinaki escaped much of **Stage One**. Though Maoris had cleared patches in it for over six centuries, it was to the white man a remote and bush-sick country, with a bad winter and long unwanted for farming.

Stage Two: Indiscriminate logging

It could wait for **Stage Two**, that began here with the 1930s: indiscriminate logging for total extraction of prime podocarps. Rimu, totara and matai (with also kahikatea and miro) were at Whirinaki the finest and tallest and densest in the world. Precious bits of this lowland forest are still left, on the rich lowland alluvium of volcanic ash in the fertile Whirinaki Basin.

Native timbers were cheap and could be used for anything. Before the Kaingaroa pines had matured, rimu logs and some totara went to the mill at Minginui, for the cheap supply of the New Zealand building and joining industry.

Whirinaki has big salients of pine today that were planted after natives had been clear felled. A few people knew and lamented all this, but contracts for

indigenous logs had been let by Government; and — even to Forest and Bird — before the 1970s, it seemed this was something that had always been, and would go on being, give or take a patch or two of reserve.

Stage Three:

Maintaining a forest cover

Real conscience about New Zealand's indigenous forests was first aroused only in the '70s, notably by the Moyle proposals for clear-felling of South Island beech for chipping and pulping. Royal Forest and Bird became active at a new level, and membership climbed. Beech Forest Action Committee was born in Nelson.

A few radicals began asking why native forests had to be felled at all. Was not the success story of pine-planting from the 1930s on, about to change our whole basis of production and export forestry?

But not even conservationists — as a whole — were yet thinking of total indigenous protection. Progress to **Stage Three** went only as far as the Government's new indigenous forest policy, announced after the Forestry Conference of 1974–75. Clear-felling — at least in virgin forests was to stop, though