

Tongariro Forest Park: The people's proposal



by Gerard Hutching

King Country people see their bush areas as a growing tourist attraction and are fighting hard to retain them. View south from S.H. 41 across Tongariro State Forest.

Photo: G Hutching

Tongariro State Forest is no longer the hub of the southern King Country timber industry. Here rimu, matai, totara and kahikatea are no more sacrificed to the needs of man, and the sawmills at Raurimu, Owhango, Erua and Taurewa are silent. The piles of native logs stacked alongside radiata pine at the surviving sawmills at Mananui and National Park have been taken from bush remnants on private land, for the accessible areas of the State Forest have been completely logged out.

The 25,703-hectare forest is regenerating. Logging scars have been disguised by kanuka, toe toe, kamahi, five-finger, mahoe, wineberry and *Coprosma*, while saplings of their more stately bretheren assert themselves through the low canopy.

Some of the forest was logged only lightly or not at all: kaikawaka-totara-matai forests grow on the waterlogged Ngauruhoe ash of the cold uplands; mountain beech forests crowd down the Whakapapa River and tawa-rimu forests mantle river banks. Apart from a few tracks, it is difficult to detect that logging has even occurred here.

The magnificent heavy stands of totara-matai growing on Taupo pumice have been worked over, although many matai remain, in part because of their defective timber, in part because the market for matai was poor.

In 1977 logging in Tongariro Forest ceased, but in the few years since then native plants have swiftly begun the process of restoration.

A unique group of King Country locals is determined to defy Forest Service plans to clear native forests in their region

Like the forest, the sawmilling towns close by are also being restored — this time as tourist and holiday centres. Strategically located near the ski fields of the Tongariro National Park, the mill and railway houses have been transformed into holiday homes, ski lodges and school camps to which people flock from throughout the North Island.

These visitors are capitalising not just on the towns' proximity to the ski fields. They are also making increasing use of the old roadways, the hunting opportunities, the bush walks and the magnificent fishing rivers of the Tongariro Forest.

However the respite for the native plants of the Tongariro Forest may be only brief. Since 1951 the Lands and Survey Department has cleared over 3,000 hectares of the southern part of the forest to create marginally economic farmland which has been beset by problems of a severe climate, high development costs and bovine tuberculosis. Over a thousand hectares of exotic trees have been planted

in patches through Tongariro by the Forest Service.

Now that the millable timber has gone, the second wave of the onslaught is underway.

A December 1983 Land Use Study produced by the Forest Service identified much of the forest as suitable for conversion to pines or pastures. Public comment was invited on this study but even before the deadline for submissions had closed, an interim zoning map was produced by Forest Service for the area. This zoned approximately 7,000 hectares of the forest for conversion to pines and a further 3,000 hectares for conversion to farmland. The remainder of the forest that was not already pines or pastures was zoned for a range of uses including indigenous management, recreation, scenery protection, ecological areas and soil and water protection.

Of particular concern to local people, was the zoning for exotic conversion of Owhango townships' new water catchment area and native forests around the popular Outdoor Pursuits Centre.

Their response to the Forest Service proposals was to form a group unique in New Zealand conservation history — the first time an organisation outside the Forest Service has taken the initiative to push for the creation of a forest park.

The Tongariro Forest Park Promotion Committee was formed after a major