

PUNAKAIKI:

This fortress built by nature for herself

by Nicky Hager

Anyone who spends time around the Western Paparoas cannot help but develop a special affection for the curious jumble of landscapes in this relatively small area. From the sculptured coastline and spectacular coastal bluffs through to the limestone canyons and out into the wide forests and mountains beyond, a visitor can discover a beautiful and unexpected world during a day-walk from the main coast road between Westport and Greymouth on the West Coast.


The limestone geology is the key to the landscape. Limestone provides fertility for the rich forests; it has dissolved to form a landscape of sink holes, disappearing streams and marvellous caves; it has been cut away forming the towering canyons which make the area so accessible; and, where the sea has worn into the stratified limestone on the coast, it has formed into the remarkable Pancake Rocks at Punakaiki for which this area is best known.

The limestone has also served to protect its own domain. In an area where most native forest was lost as early as the gold mining days, the tall limestone coastal escarpments have so far held back the loggers from the forests behind. This is why the area is the centre of much discussion at present: it not only provides an opportunity for the creation of New Zealand's 11th national park — a park based on lowland country to complement the various mountainous parks — but is also viewed as a possible source of timber for the nearby Tauranga Bay sawmill.

The idea of a national park in this region first surfaced in 1976 and immediately met with controversy. While conservation and recreation groups strongly promoted the proposal, other groups denounced it as an unjustified "locking up" of much needed West Coast resources.

The current proposal is for a 28,000 ha Punakaiki National Park, a reduced version of the original plans.

From the point of view of national park supporters, it has always been possible to justify a park by its *national* importance. But from a West Coaster's point of view, the question "what's in it for the local people?" has remained unanswered. The answer to this now seems to be tourism.



Looking out from the entrance to the Fox River Caves and over to the bluffs on the opposite side of the river. A 2 km long passage extends from here.

Photo: Derek Shaw