

Summer Camp at Tuatapere

Unusual rock sculpture on New Zealand's "premier coastal walk" — the track to Port Craig.

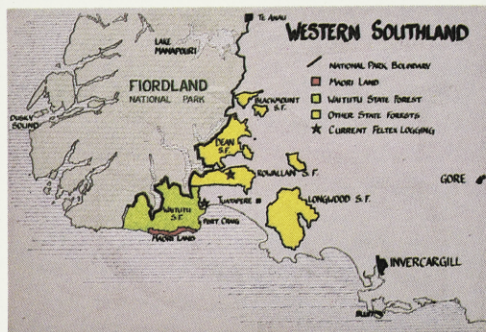
Photo: G. Hutching

Waitutu Forest, the controversial wilderness that everyone wants but no one has yet taken responsibility for, was the main attraction for 60 environmentalists who gathered at Tuatapere, the "timber capital of Southland," in early January for a Forest and Bird/NFAC summer camp. In actual fact, we only managed to skirt the fringe of this famous forest; David Bellamy may be able to fly in and jet boat down river, but for the rest of us it was satisfying enough to gaze across the forest, and to be assured it is still there, much as it has been for thousands of years.

Tuatapere itself provided a quiet setting — the annual New Zealand holiday period lulls even the giants of production. The domination of Feltex and the timber industry in the town seems a figment of the imagination of forest owners and sawmillers. The growing town is a service centre for the prosperous farming district, with a big future in exotic forestry and excellent prospects as a tourist centre.

Doubtful weather is no encouragement to those embarking on a day trip to the Hump for a view over Waitutu, when low cloud obscures the panorama and makes for unpleasant conditions on the tops. So a poor outlook early in the week caused us to postpone the Hump trip, until one day dawned fine and clear, and we set out.

Waitutu's attractiveness extends from the west, eastward past the ridge, and reaches out to the visitor with increasing appeal the closer one gets. The cliffs for which Bluecliffs Beach are named are full of fossils, which for our licensed fossil collector were an endless source of fascina-



The view from the Hump looking across to Lake Hauroko.

tion. Low forest close to the beach makes way for large forest trees such as the southern rata, and the colour and finery of the tui, bellbird and tomtit are set against the bright red flowering of mistletoe, perched in a solid mass above the road.

A whole new perspective on visiting forests is gained when one uses logging roads. The Te Wae Wae Maori land presents a wasteland, logged out and left, accentuating the beauty of the forest that remains. A long slog uphill for two or three hours leads through fine silver beech forest and patches of bog pine forest to the Hump Hut, and thence to the top from where one can view the mountains of Fiordland to the north, the ocean to the south, and the rivers and forests of Waitutu in between.

Lake Hauroko can also be seen, on the very edge of the rugged Fiordland landscape. A day trip to this allowed us to take in a boat trip to the outlet of the Wairaurahiri River.

Looking from the Hump to the east are the state forests — Rowallan, Dean and Longwood. Here we observed the Forest Service experimental beech management areas, looked at giant totaras, walked beside rivers and glades, and saw the fringes of the enormous exotic forests.

Ten kilometres from Tuatapere is Clifden Ranger Station, from where rangers are responsible for the southern section of Fiordland National Park. Ranger Russell Montgomery spoke to us about the values of the park and about projects for the future, which should include Waitutu. As a sideline, he guided us through the famous Clifden Caves. These are directly accessible from the road, and a large group of us armed with torches ventured into glowworm grottoes, through narrow gaps, up and down rocky steps, past stalactites and stalagmites.

Mark Sutton of the Acclimatisation Society addressed the camp on wetland conservation, and later took us to Redcliffs, a showpiece for the Society. This is a created wetland where a small dam, planting and careful management have enhanced a swamp so that now it is a valuable habitat for a wide range of game, fish and non-game species.

The track to Port Craig and further on around the coast has been described as "without a doubt our premier coastal walk" by Federated Mountain Clubs, and the keener members of the camp made sure of testing the truth of this claim.

Those who were fast on their feet managed to see the viaducts and remains of the Port Craig enterprise, as well as to explore Sand Hill Point and the beaches and forest on the fringe of Waitutu. The most attractive route to Waitutu is also the proposed route of yet another logging road — right through historic remains and regenerating or virgin forest.

What did conservation gain from our camp? Firstly, 60 people got to see some of the things that western Southland has to offer, although in this case their appetite could have only been whetted, so much more was there to see.

Secondly, it's important to note that the camp was a joint Forest and Bird/NFAC effort. It was not the first of its kind, as Easter gatherings have always been this way. But at Tuatapere it was impossible to say which group had organised the camp, because in Dunedin most active conservationists are members of both organisations, and our branches continue to cry out for more co-operation.

by Carolyn Munro, Otago Councillor