

A BOOM & BUST AGAIN? AOTUHIA

*Conservationists and government farm developers are still at odds on the question of retaining high value shrublands on **publicly owned lands** earmarked for farm settlement. Society Conservation Officer Terry Fitzgibbon reviews the Lands and Survey Department's proposal to create 12 farms in the remote eastern hinterland of Taranaki.*

"A huge, shaggy and lonely land

....

No smoke of settlers' fire gave
civilised touch to the silent
expanse

Valley and hill and glinting stream
and dark solemn forest lay
bathed

In soft blue haze, myserious,
unpeopled; as untouched by
man as it might have been a
thousand years ago."¹

(James Cowan [1892], one of
Aotuhia's earliest settlers.)

Aotuhia's remote "bridge to nowhere" was again re-opened in May this year with a flourish and a parliamentarian's earnest prayer that history wouldn't repeat itself. The story of the Aotuhia hill country echoes the saga of other New Zealand pioneering forest clearances — this tangled web of bushclad valleys has been cleared, and has reverted on a number of occasions since the first European settlers pushed their way into the Wanganui River hinterland with axe and flame. After several hiccups Lands and Survey are again proposing to "tame" these strongly regenerating shrublands with grandiose plans of 12 farmblocks and a projected \$10 million budget. Immense effort and cost has already been expended despite repeated cautionings from economists and conservationists. To what end?

Vivid accounts tell of the hardships encountered by the first European settlement around and after the 1890s. A pioneering determination to subdue nature was squarely challenged by the obstacles of steep, forest-clad ridges, persistent rain, slushy tracks, slips, fogs and swollen rivers.

A ghost town

Most of the region's earliest hopeful settlers arrived by way of the Wanganui River, the only means of communication and transport until the Whangamomona Road and bridges were opened. By the early 1920s the district supported some 40 families with the township of Aotuhia boasting a schoolhouse, post office and community hall. The cycle of problems then began

— floods and slips, strong hill country reversion, low produce prices, skyrocketing loan and rent charges and stock losses all took their toll.² Almost all the settlers walked off their land during the 1930s depression and Aotuhia quickly became a ghost town.

Lands and Survey tried to "recondition" some 2,000 hectares of abandoned lands in the 1940s only to be thwarted by further extensive flooding. Since then various groups have lobbied to have the area developed, culminating in the 1979 Land Settlement Board decision to develop some 4,300 hectares into a dozen farm-ballot units. More than a million dollars has recently been spent on roading, buildings and shrubland clearance.

One glance at a topographical map of the North Island confirms the remoteness of the Aotuhia district. Wedged midway between the volcanic massifs of Ruapehu and Egmont, the area is surely the last vestige of misdirected pioneering optimism. Today, once again the prospects for hill-country farming are particularly grim. Escalating interest rates, costs of transport, farm establishment and maintenance are causing concern. Poor returns on produce, the Government's "more market" emphasis, budget cuts and the call to concentrate Land Settlement schemes on intensifying production on already cleared land paints a bleak picture for hill country farming, particularly in isolated areas. Taranaki farm block ballots were withdrawn from sale last year. Clearly, the whole proposal needs to be re-evaluated.

Moratorium needed

It is also timely that a nation-wide review of Land Settlement programmes is underway, sparked by Treasury's "Economic Management : Land Use Issues" report in July last year. This report queried the wisdom of continuing marginal farmland expansion, and suggested a redirection of efforts into more economic avenues. It is the Society's view that Treasury's "10 percent guideline" for giving the nod to farm development programmes should be supplemented by wide-ranging

environmental evaluations. In the case of Aotuhia this has been sadly lacking; only now is a management plan being put together. This document could in fact be merely a "window dressing" unless the fundamental question of options is also addressed. A moratorium is needed until these matters are evaluated.

Recent visits to Aotuhia by Society members have prompted further concerns. A large catchment has been crushed and burnt destroyed a walkway entrance and a proposed reserve of steep, strongly regenerating shrublands. The latter was earmarked for reserve in the Department's 1978 *Land Use Study*³ and is part of a network of forested lands requiring protection. Some 5,000 hectares of uncommitted Crown lands were then identified for reservation, but to date the Department has failed to initiate any change in land status. The official word, echoed in the Wanganui National Park report, is that "formal reservation will be delayed pending finalisation of the Aotuhia farm development boundaries". The Society has also been advised that this "expedient" measure avoids the cost of resurveying prior to fencing farm unit titles. Our research has shown that almost 2,000 hectares could be reserved immediately, and much of the balance protected by bringing the survey of fringe and shrubland areas ahead of any pasture development.

Reserve shrublands now

The Society has no quarrel with a decision to continue farming on already cleared lands. Much of the fertile valley floors are well grassed. If pasture improvement was confined to these lands and most of the shrublands fenced and reserved, the Department could usher in the long-awaited change of emphasis for its development programmes. Thus, conservation and development would be integrated, a theme the Land Settlement Board has firmly embodied in policy but not often in practice.

The management plan being drafted clearly needs to resolve the conflict between retaining the important regenerating shrublands and the desire to clear them to make the units economic.