

The Tangarakau River flows through North Taranaki's Waitaanga State Forest, a large part of which has a prospecting licence over it. Pictured here is the Tangarakau Reserve, downstream from where the licence has been granted.

Photo: Lands and Survey

Mt Egmont, the brooding peak punctuating the National Park and dominating the whole cape region, has suffered from countless numbers of people teeming over and around its accessible volcanic slopes during the last decade. The 1983 Egmont National Park Plan, recognising the problems that increasing visitors cause, suggested the park should not be the only place for recreationalists within the region.

The good news is that to the north-east of New Plymouth, between the Mokau River and the proposed Wanganui National Park, a vast forested hinterland has immense reserve potential. At present Government and local body agencies are investigating this potential. Some 50,000 hectares of rich and varied forest form an almost unbroken mantle between the bleached grey coastal cliffs of Tongaporutu and the deeply gorged Wanganui River terraces to the south.

Because management and control of these lands is split between private owners and government agencies, unprecedented co-operation will be needed to achieve a measure of protection over the forest. The Society's principle that "forest life knows no man-made boundaries" is surely relevant here.

It is already well known that the area supports an abundance of wildlife, including kokako, kiwi and bats. This wilderness of precipices, deep ravines and waterfalls has a varied and fascinating forest structure. Almost pure stands of buttressed pukatea, grey columns of miro and matai, fresh green tawa and kamahi, giant kahikatea and shaggy rimu and rata compete for space in the valleys and on the slopes, while mountain totara and black and hard beech crown the steep and narrow ridgetops.

The Mokau River has been nominated for the list of protected wild and scenic rivers. Already the river is much used by boaters, rafters and whitebaiters. Recreational use of the adjoining forest is currently limited, although further linked tracks and huts are planned.

However, proposals to reactivate mining within North Taranaki cast a shadow over the fate of these superb natural resources. The 10,500 hectare Mokau coalfield, between the Mokau and Awakino Rivers, is now being investigated in earnest by the Ministry of Energy as a supply for a large thermal power station.

It is envisaged that an estimated 100 million tonnes of coal will be mined, both by opencast and underground methods. Just to the south a further 20 million tonne resource within a similar



NOTHING OF NOTE IN NORTH TARANAKI?

by Terry Fitzgibbon

sized area is owned by Ohura Timber and Coal Products Ltd, who intend to mine it. A prospecting licence has just been granted to the Ohura Coal Co Ltd over a large part of Waitaanga State Forest. They envisage spending \$200,000 so it may be assumed the company is reasonably confident of finding economic fields.

What would be the effect of these major projects?

Chairman of the Taranaki National Parks and Reserves Board, Mr Neville Davies, says the Board "is gravely concerned when such development has the potential of being indiscriminate in relationship to other values, and particularly with potential of severe environmental contamination of the adjacent reserves and watershed."

The forests are a protective mantle over this geologically unstable country. If the forest is damaged or removed, severe catchment problems will arise as

the rivers already carry heavy amounts of sand and silt in wet weather. Much else in the forest would be affected. All these impacts need to be assessed in a far less cursory manner than the replies to the EIR questionnaire appended to the Waitaanga prospecting application.

To the question "Present land use?", the answer given was "State Forest — no land use." Another question: "Birdlife, wildlife and ecology: anything of note?" The answer: "The usual native fauna but *nothing of particular note.*" (Author's italics).

The Wildlife Service, on the other hand, has rated the area "outstanding value habitat." Obviously, the usual checks and balances are insufficient.

Let us hope the inter-departmental survey will do more than just an "inventory and balance" — firm recommendations for reserves must be made so that the community and nature don't take back seats around the negotiation table.

