

The Government holds the key to reserving Abut Head, one of the most important stretches of privately-owned coastline in New Zealand. Saltwater Lagoon lies at top left, with Abut Head sandwiched between the Tasman Sea and the Whataroa River.

Photo: Guy Salmon

West Coast. One of the few small reserves retained by the Kai Tahu covered the Poerua Kainga — the residence of Tae Tae — and an adjacent burial ground. The Abut Head freehold land borders this 'native reserve' and the adjacent lagoon.

To the Poutini Kai Tahu, a semi-nomadic people, the Poerua kainga was a favourably-sited summer residence. The dark waters of the lagoon yielded waterfowl, inanga and tuna (eels) in abundance. Kuku (mussel) were plentiful along the rocky coastline; kaka, kereru and other forest birds were readily available in the lush forests embracing the lagoon.

Little has altered since the time of Tae Tae. The lagoon and bush-clad hills remain superbly pristine; birds, fish and seafood still abound. In fact, the Saltwater area is now widely recognised as a place of extraordinary beauty and of outstanding conservation value. All the publicly-owned land along the Saltwater coastline is set aside for permanent protection either as the Saltwater Lagoon Scenic Reserve or the Saltwater SF Ecological Area. But the forest on the rolling hills stretching from the lagoon to the tip of Abut Head is doomed unless more vigorous attempts are made to seek its protection.

Dramatic landforms

Abut Head is one of the most dramatic coastal landforms on the West Coast, its total splendour best revealed by scenic flights. Its sinuous moraine ridges are composed of rock debris dumped here over 14,000 years ago by successive advances of massive ice sheets which spread down the Whataroa Valley. Centuries of pounding by storm driven seas have cut sheer coastal cliffs along the moraine's coastal edge. Boulders won from the cliffs litter the coastline and provide a refuge for lazing fur seals. Gentler hills, scarcely altered since their ice age creation, slope down to the Saltwater Lagoon and Whataroa River. A small flood plain terrace alongside the river supports a forest-fringed swamp.

Coastal podocarp-hardwood forest, tightly bound together by lianes of supplejack and kiekie, covers the moraine hills. Ancient rimu, often heavily laden with epiphytic growth, project over miro, kamahi, quintinia and other lesser trees. Seasonal splashes of colour from ephemeral clematis blossoms and the scarlet flowers of the winter rata vine brighten the dark forest greens. From viewpoints on the 100-year-old miners' trail that winds through the headland forest, tall feathery stands of kahikatea trees can be seen ringing the open

swampland of the river flat. The mountainous ramparts of the Southern Alps provide a distant backdrop.

On summer evenings, the primaevial appearance of the swamp is given voice when the male bittern booms out its resonant call. The surrounding forests of Abut Head are usually alive with bird-song. Together with the intact catchment forests of the Saltwater Lagoon, they support the highest abundance and diversity of bush birds recorded in south Westland. Kaka, kakariki, robin and falcon inhabit the forests. They are all declining native birds, gradually retreating from the chainsaw to the remaining tracts of untouched forest. In winter, when food is scarce elsewhere, tuis congregate on these coastal hills seeking out rata nectar and karamu berries.

The Wildlife Service have classed Saltwater Forest as an outstanding wildlife habitat and have specifically identified Abut Head as a wildlife habitat of note. In a 1981 submission they urged the Forest Service to acquire Abut Head for reserve purposes. Lands and Survey received similar advice in 1980 from Dr Peter Wardle, senior botanist with the DSIR. More recently the Nature Conservation Council and Commission for the Environment have called for the reservation of Abut Head.

Ministerial praise

Russell Marshall, Minister for the Environment, has backed this conservation quest. Writing to Christchurch NFAC, he noted that "the outstanding

ecological, recreational, scenic and scientific values of the Abut Head freehold forests are worthy of preservation and the addition of these forests to the Saltwater Lagoon Reserve — Saltwater SF Ecological Area would make the combined area one of the finest lowland reserves in New Zealand".

For its part the Forest Service has identified the coastal portion of Saltwater forest as an important recreational and historical area. An as yet unpublished report tabulates the area's rich Maori and European history. A concentration of historical sites and artefacts, from Maori middens to water race tunnels, are identified around the Saltwater Lagoon. The track along Abut Head is noted as having historical and recreational values.

The Forest Service says that the Abut Head freehold land would be a national asset if retained in its natural state and would complement the nearby dedicated reserves. However, the key to reservation lies in the Forest Service offering the sawmiller alternative timber in exchange for the cutting rights, then negotiating either for the purchase, lease or covenant of the freehold land.

Uncommitted timber resources are located nearby in Lake Ianthe State Forest. This heavily modified forest contains about 80,000 cubic metres of "surplus" podocarp timber in deteriorating, partly-logged stands. The timber is not needed to meet existing contracts and is more than double the volume required for an exchange. But the Forest Service opposes the release of this timber for reserve purposes, saying it should be included in a sustained yield logging circle after 1990. Yet this volume would add only an insignificant 100 to 150 cubic metres per annum to the assured annual cut of 8,000m³ from North Okarito State Forest and the inland portion of Saltwater State Forest. A timber exchange would suit the sawmiller as it would avoid expensive roading.

Agreements for reservation should also be possible with the owners of the land. Dr Barrie Donovan of Christchurch says that his family, which owns two of the freehold sections — the sawmiller owns the other — does not wish to see Abut Head devastated and would consider reservation proposals.

The Forest Service's reluctance to release timber for reserve purposes is a familiar scenario to conservationists. Despite its professed change of direction, the Forest Service seems once more unable to pursue the protection of native forests with even a fraction of the energy and resources it expends in the pursuit of timber production from native forests.

If Russell Marshall's vision is to have any chance of success, the Government must override the Forest Service's objections and make a meaningful offer to the sawmiller and landowners. Otherwise, the forest of Tae Tae, which have endured since the ice age, will be lost.

