



Aramoana

Path to the Sea

Aramoana — “The path to the sea.” Shaping the entrance to Otago Harbour, the beautiful ocean beaches and sweeping salt marshes of Aramoana lie opposite Taiaroa Head and the important Maori community of Otakou.

Photo: Ralph Allen

by Ralph Allen, Dunedin botanist, who reports that the Save Aramoana Campaign is not yet over.

The ill-fated Aramoana smelter proposal, the flagship onto which the National Government pinned its “Think Big” hopes in 1980, could not have been more of a developer’s headache.

The unsuitability of the site, its high natural values, the poor economic returns for aluminium and the fierce resistance of the local people all mitigated against heavy industry sitting alongside the entrance to Port Chalmers. By the end of 1981 the consortium South Pacific Aluminium Ltd had bowed to the inevitable and the threat to one of the more memorable of our coastline areas had been averted.

But had it? To this day, despite its avowed intentions to make the salt marsh — next to the site of the proposed smelter — a reserve, the Otago Harbour Board still says it has “decided to defer the establishment of firm reserve boundaries until industrial development or zoning is a reality.”

The latest in a long series of attempts to defer protection of the internationally-recognised biological values of Ara-

moana, this excuse confirms a misdirected philosophy which often prevails: only protect that which has no obvious economic value. A cynic might interpret it as a case of sour grapes, in light of the fact that the Board was a firm smelter supporter.

The saga really begins in the late 19th century when the Board was given control of Aramoana. In the early part of this century, it helped establish a holiday settlement by leasing land at a very low rental and assisting with road access, and over time a close-knit family community of 70 cottages and upwards of 400 people settled at the road end under the shelter of low dunes.

Quiet backwater

For most of this century, Aramoana has remained as its residents preferred: a quiet backwater with no pretensions of being anything else. However, a more commercially-oriented Harbour Board took a different view, and inspired by ex-

amples of heavy industry in other parts of the country in the late 50s and early 60s, it published a widely circulated brochure “Ready and Waiting for Big Industrial Expansion.”

Visions of steel mills, pulp mills, nickel smelters, zinc smelters, car assembly plants, petrol refineries and other industrial juggernauts dominated the imaginations of Board members. In the heady rush to join the 20th century, rational consideration was as lacking at Aramoana as in many other industrial proposals of the times.

Nevertheless, it was not long before the limitations of the site became evident. Certainly, it was adjacent to a deep water port and encompassed several hundred hectares of flat land. However, access was poor with only a winding, unsealed and periodically inundated road. There was no ready or inexpensive source of electricity or water to supply an industrial complex. And over half the area was subject to tidal flooding. Not surprisingly, no industrial proposals were forthcoming.