

Contents

Articles	
2	South-west New Zealand for World Heritage
6	Islands pictorial
8	Rats: ecological anarchists
10	To the Hauraki Gulf and beyond
12	The last possum on Kapiti?
14	Rangatira Island — a key reserve
17	Saddleback transfer to Motukawanui
20	Northland dune lakes come under the spotlight
23	Aramoana salt marsh needs protection
26	Tasmania — treasure isle under threat
30	Forgotten habitats—challenge for the future

Departments	
5	Conservation Update
32	Society lodges
33	Bulletin
34	Junior Section
36	Society officers
39	Mail Order service

Cover caption: The Society is pressing for the inclusion of Mt Aspiring National Park in an all-encompassing "South-west New Zealand World Heritage site." (article page 2). Here the beautiful symmetry of the mountain itself (3027 metres in height) is captured in a late March evening. The Bonar Glacier is in the foreground and Mt Cook can be seen in the far distance to the left of Mt Aspiring. Photo: Lloyd Homer

Journal of the Royal Forest & Bird
Protection Society of New Zealand Inc.
ISSN 0015—7384

Forest & Bird is published quarterly by the
Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society of
New Zealand Inc.

Head Office: Seventh Floor, Central House,
26 Brandon Street, Wellington.

Postal address: P. O. Box 631, Wellington.

Editor: Gerard Hutching.

Registered at P.O. Headquarters, Wellington
as a magazine.

Typesetting by Bryce Francis Ltd and printed in
association with Commercial Print Ltd.



Department of Conservation — An historic turning point

In 1937, the founder of *Forest and Bird*, Captain Val Sanderson, first advanced the notion of a separate "Department of Conservation" to look after all protection forests. Sanderson's pleas, however, fell on deaf ears, and it was not until the 1970s that the concept of such a department was taken up with vigour.

The Government's historic decision of September 16 to set up a Department of Conservation should signal the beginning of the end of more than a decade of uncertainty and conflict; for too long conservationists and developers have been at loggerheads over the best way to protect our public native forests and other natural areas. The Society congratulates the Government, and particularly the Minister for the Environment, Russell Marshall and his Parliamentary Under-secretary Phillip Woollaston, for making a decision which will not be universally popular, but which will prove to be a turning point in our relationship with our environment.

From now on, all the energy that has been expended on conflict can be channelled into protecting natural areas and running efficient commercial corporations. Both departmental staff and the public will welcome the new move — staff because they will now have a clear mandate for conservation, and the public because it will end the confusion over all the different natural lands managed by a range of Government agencies.

Lands in the new department will not be "locked up" but will be in demand for a whole host of uses — water and soil protection, outdoor recreation, tourism — and of course as a legacy for future generations.

Important too is the close link between our culture and our natural heritage which has been recognised, especially as it relates to Maori people whose interests will in part be looked after by the new department. The department will also have a key role in safeguarding New Zealand's cultural heritage through having the Historic Places Trust included in it.

But is the battle over? Obviously not, since major decisions still have to be made over which lands are to go into the new department. Presumably most state forests will be in the department, but what is to be the fate of Te Pahi farm park in the Far North, the huge Molesworth Station or the kiwi-rich shrublands of the Waitere and Aotuhia land development blocks? There is also likely to be considerable future debate over the division of South Island high country pastoral lands into farming and protection areas. Many of these Crown lands are areas that Society members have fought hard to protect; it will be a bitter pill to swallow if they are placed in a commercial corporation.

Finally, the new Ministry for the Environment will find itself "toothless" unless it has a planning and control role. The Government has left open the possibility of change when the Town and Country Planning and the Water and Soil Protection Acts are overhauled. Meanwhile, the ministry remains the "Clayton's Ministry" that its critics have dubbed it.

Dr Alan Edmonds, President

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