

Pulling the plug on West Coast wetlands

by Kevin Smith, Society West Coast conservation officer



Graphic supplied by the Commission for the Environment

Giant kokopu by the bucketful! Several years ago that was the haul when Fisheries scientists sampled deep, flax-shrouded pools on the edge of the huge Rotokino Swamp in South Westland. However, this event will only be remembered in Fisheries folklore. In 1982 a heavily subsidised Westland Catchment Board drainage scheme drained these pools and much of the remainder of the 400 hectare swamp.

Rotokino was an important habitat for the giant kokopu. Arguably the most beautiful of our native freshwater fish, its body mottled by delicate gold markings, the endemic giant kokopu is one of the whitebait species and the largest galaxiid in the world. Because its preferred home, lowland swampland, has been destroyed on a massive scale throughout New Zealand, it is now regarded as a potentially threatened species. It has vanished almost entirely from developed parts of the country; the West Coast is its last stronghold. But

Right: This ditch through the heart of the Rotokino Swamp was largely funded by taxpayer subsidies. Wetland drainage is often unsuccessful, as is noted by Minister of Internal Affairs, Peter Tapsell: "In these, the wildlife values have been destroyed . . . and the inability to successfully develop for agriculture is equally evident. They are now neither wet nor dry and may be truly described as 'wasted land.'" Photo: Bob Simpson.

even there it is at risk, for generous taxpayer-funded drainage subsidies have led within just the last seven years to the loss of 1000 hectares of fertile West Coast swampland. During this period 15.6 percent of the fertile swamps of Buller-North Westland were lost.

Sadly the problem is not restricted to the West Coast. Between 1979 and 1983 the Wildlife Service in Northland found that 3176 hectares of freshwater wetlands were drained — 14.4 percent of these type in Northland. Most of these, too, were the victims of taxpayer-funded drainage subsidies.

Exceptional Rotokino

Westland's Rotokino Swamp had exceptional natural values. Along with giant kokopu, its waterways contained an abundance of inanga, the small galaxiid fish on which New Zealand's world renowned whitebait fishery is based. Hidden amongst the dense swamp vegetation were good numbers of three declining wetland birds: bittern, fernbird and spotless crane. White herons from the nearby Waitangiroti nesting colony used the swamp as an occasional feeding ground. And travellers on the adjacent South Westland state highway enjoyed glimpses of the swamp's dark waters, especially in early summer when the surrounding flax battalions raised their spearlike flowering stalks.

The Wildlife Service sought the complete reservation of Rotokino which they rated as a high value wildlife 'habitat of note'. They managed to buy the bottom corner of the privately-owned swamp for reserve but were unable to prevent drainage of the remainder. Obviously their reserve is jeopardised by adjacent development.

Although the drainage was subsidised with public money, no environmental assessment was prepared; a comprehensive fishery survey was conducted only after the kokopu areas had been destroyed; the

controlling authority, the Westland Catchment Board, did not even bother to obtain the legally required water right!

Wetland conservation ignored

Sagas of this kind have been all too prevalent in New Zealand. Wetland conservation has been ignored here to an unforgiveable degree. Over 90% of our natural wetlands have been destroyed since European settlement. Vast swampy plains, once such a distinctive feature of the landscape, no longer exist. Swamp drainage may well have been justified in the pioneering era as these plains yielded some of our richest farmland. Over the last 30 years, however, as swamplands have been eliminated in some regions and reduced to pathetically tiny remnants in others, the wisdom of expanding agricultural production at the expense of the remaining wetlands has increasingly been brought into question.

Numerous seminars, field trips, reports, inventories and policies have focussed public concern on the plight of wetlands and the specialised plants and animals dependent on them for their survival. This outpouring of concern by scientists, officials, politicians and wetland conservationists has achieved only stuttering progress towards legal protection for the remaining wetlands. But then it has hardly been a fair contest: the few environmental controls have been ineffective in checking the subsidy-fuelled drainage mania of agriculturalists, water engineers and farmer-dominated Catchment boards.

Surveys show that 160,000 ha of wetland, most of it freshwater swampland, was drained between the mid-1950s and 1960s. Since then, despite the steadily worsening economics of land development, the rate has probably increased because of the introduction of a variety of land development subsidies by Governments keen to boost agricultural production and appease rural constituents. Even when the new Labour Government came to power in 1984 and quickly slashed

