

One of the “forgotten corners” of New Zealand though it may be, South Otago’s Catlins leaves an indelible memory on those fortunate enough to visit it — tall rimu, miro, totara and rata forest leads to spectacular beaches, rocky coastlines, giant sea caves, flocks of native pigeons, shy yellow-heads, and home of the yellow-eyed penguin.

There, on 16-17 November last year, began a new era of Forest and Bird Council meetings, as our councillors gathered from all over New Zealand for a stimulating conference on topics as diverse as the cultural importance of the Catlins, nature protection on private land, threats to the disappearing habitat of the yellow-eyed penguin, and the proposed south-west New Zealand World Heritage Site.

Arriving in the southern twilight, the councillors were welcomed by the call of the bellbird and the murmur of the surf. Our people relaxed in surroundings where they felt far more at ease than in the concrete jungle of Wellington’s Willis Street. Many were up with the dawn chorus the next morning, and almost all were down to the beach to walk, run, swim and take in the atmosphere. We were in our element, and nature conservation matters came to the fore very easily.

Straight after breakfast, in groups, we discussed the practical things that concern every branch committee — attracting more members, fund raising, and regional conservation issue. The nine discussion leaders from branches throughout the country all impressed us with their expertise, and many good ideas were stored away to take home.

By 10.30 am, three busloads of conservationists had set out to explore the Catlins with local experts. Councillors were appalled at bush clearance for chip-milling. In return for taking all the rata and kamahi logs, millers left the farmer with a block of cleared land strewn with branches and stumps, and an access road. With careful tending some eventually becomes pasture, although much was reverting to scrub.

Professor John Morton treated one group to the wonders of life below the high tide line when they visited awesome Cathedral Caves, and Professor Alan Mark led another group through the spectacular dune forest scenic reserve at Tahakopa Bay, where the dense podocarp forest covering old estuarine mud-flats and sand-dunes remains one of the few lowland stands on the east coast of New Zealand. About a thousand years ago moa hunters feasted here, and bones, shell-strewn middens and campsites have been found.

Opposite: The weathered skeleton of a totara in Tahakopa Bay frames councillors walking along the beach. The Tahakopa Scenic Reserve remains one of the few lowland podocarp stands on the east coast of New Zealand. *Photo: Terry Fitzgibbon*

Inset: The ironically named Progress Valley, scene of chipmilling operations in the Catlins. In return for an access road and partially cleared land, farmers give the millers all their rata and kamahi timber. However, many farmers are now unhappy with the state their land has been left in after the chipmill has done its work, and its days may be numbered in the Catlins. *Photo: Alan Mark*



Cathedral Caves are a star attraction for Catlins visitors, who should, however, proceed with caution as the tide comes rushing through the caves at its height.

Photo: G D Hutching



Councillors discussing conservation issues at the Tautuku Outdoor Education Centre.

Paul Every led another group to his favourite photogenic waterfall, and Graeme Loh delighted many North Islanders by showing them rare yellow-heads in silver beech forest alongside the Catlins River. Near the Society’s Tautuku Lodge and 550-hectare Lenz Reserve, another group discovered fernbirds in the flax edges of a wetland.

After a day in the fresh air, relaxing and listening to speakers often produces a compelling desire to nod off, but not here. A group of speakers gave us an evening which none of the councillors will forget in a hurry.

Alan Mark outlined the natural history of the places we had been visiting that day. John Darby, Otago Museum ornithologist, told us about the plight of the yellow-eyed penguin, now the world’s rarest, which needs extensive bush cover close to the sea for nest sites. The march of the chipmill over the land is spelling doom for these friendly birds.

Rangimarie Te Maiharoa and Marna Dunne, two trustees of the Waikawa-Tautuku Maori Lands, then spoke to us with eloquence and emotion of their love for these lands, and while wishing to share,

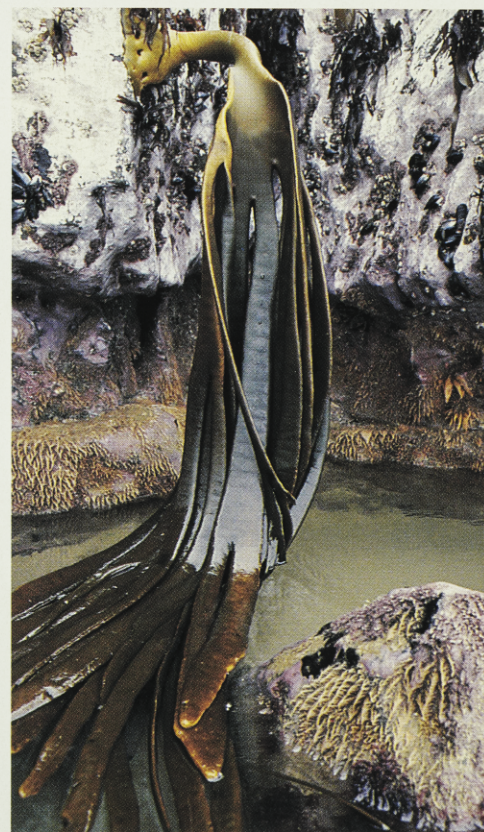
did not welcome the intrusion of pakeha rules and regulations. Julian Rodda, Commissioner of Crown Lands, then spoke with sincerity and concern of his Department’s efforts to create a Catlins Coastal Park which could remain unspoilt for all to enjoy in the years to come.

Everyone there began to get an insight into the patience, tolerance and sensitivity needed behind the scenes to finally achieve the protection of a piece of natural heritage for all to enjoy.

Dawn chorus and beach patrol again set the scene for Sunday’s formal Council meeting. Reports given showed the Society to be alive and working well, and councillors focussed their concern on full protection for the kea, and renewed efforts to protect the habitat of the yellow-eyed penguin. Sanctioning of a new branch at Whangarei, branch assistance with staff employment, and the development of a new Society camping ground in Northland rounded off a very satisfactory meeting.

A briefing session by staff members, on the current issues of conservation (South Pacific rainforests, South-west N.Z. World Heritage, environmental administration, private bush protection) gave councillors a glimpse of the high powered and professional way in which the staff work. Members can be reassured that our Society is being very well served by a team of devoted, highly-qualified and effective people who, in turn, are guided by an executive committee comprising some of New Zealand’s outstanding environmentalists.

Farewells and thanks were fond and sincere, as councillors departed, some to catch aeroplanes, some to continue holidays, and some to spend another day looking at albatrosses, nesting shags, penguins and seals around the Otago Peninsula. 🐧



The Catlins is rich in marine fauna and flora. The common bull kelp, Tahakopa Bay.

Photo: Terry Fitzgibbon