

# STEWARDSHIP *an idea whose time has come*

by Gwenny Davis, President, Native Forest Action Council

The fine concept of stewardship expresses the aspiration of a community to retain resources unimpaired for future generations.

As originally intended, the new Government's proposed Department of Conservation was to exercise a stewardship function over large areas of natural New Zealand — especially native forests, shrublands and tussock grasslands. The idea was that these lands (most of which lie outside existing parks and reserves) would be managed as a "holding category", offering choices for the future, and protection from modification for the time being.

To draw a line around the "stewardship lands" and safeguard them from piecemeal encroachment and development was the most important idea behind the environmental reorganisation. It was a major departure from the frontier policies of the existing departments of Forest Service and Lands and Survey, which recognized only two land uses, preservation and production, and zoned for the latter whenever possible.

## Halfway house

Stewardship represents a halfway house, protecting land and resources **for the time being**, and placing a high value on the protection of choices for future generations as to how they use natural resources. It is a concept which conservationists have always upheld strongly.

Sadly, the original intention to promote stewardship has been eaten away by officials within the government. When the legislation establishing the Department of Conservation is introduced into Parliament — after this issue of *Forest and Bird* goes to press — it seems likely that the concept of stewardship will have disappeared entirely.

That will mean that conservation leaders have failed in their behind-the-scenes efforts to improve the draft legislation. There will then be no choice for us but to take our case to the public in a bid to raise hundreds of submissions to Parliament, seeking the restoration of the original vision.

Make no mistake: the philosophical base on which the new Department of Conservation is established will be crucial. Nothing else will have so much influence on the management of natural public lands for the remainder of this century. If we can get it right, the Department of Conservation will be a powerful force for good, a bastion of hope for all those who care about the relationship of human beings to nature on these islands.

The original thinking for the environmental reorganization was expressed in the *Environment 1986* report, published in June 1985. This report proposed two central but distinct functions for the new department: **protection** (for existing national parks and reserves) and **stewardship** (de-



A vast expanse of broken bush country extends from the Matemateonga walkway east to Mt Ruapehu. Apart from a narrow reserve strip along the Wanganui River, much of this forest is unoccupied Crown land needing stewardship. Photo: A Nicholl

fined as management for the time being of public lands for which no end use has been determined). Included in the stewardship category were the Crown lease lands, under which heading the report's authors had in mind mainly the leased tussock grasslands of the South Island high country.

## Stewardship under attack

It is in the nature of things that a concept like stewardship for the future will come under attack from those in the present who want commodity production, and want it now. And that is what has been happening to the *Environment 1986* proposals.

The first setback came in the initial package of Government decisions on the Department of Conservation, announced on 16 September 1985. The Cabinet seemed clear in its intention to endorse the stewardship concept, for besides the national parks and reserves it decided to include in the new Department a range of public lands not being used for wood production, nor being used "mainly" for agriculture, and whose long term future use has really not been decided. Forest parks were a specifically mentioned example.

But in that same announcement, the Government — influenced by Treasury argument — decided that Crown leasehold land should be the responsibility of the Land Development and Management Corporation.

This cut across the stewardship concept and created an implication that the fragile and dearly-loved landscapes of the South Island high country would be managed with single-minded commercial intent. Understandably, that is a notion that has been roundly criticised by conservationists.

Yet if lasting solutions are to be found, it will be important to understand the concerns of the Treasury — of which more below.

A second setback for the concept of stewardship came when committees of officials began drafting briefs for the legislation which will establish the Department of Conservation. The announced mission statement for the new department is to be:

"the promotion of conservation values in the management of New Zealand's natural resources and historic places together with the application of those values to the management of the protected and other resources entrusted to it."

That sounds fine until one looks up the definition given for "conservation values" and finds that these include the **utilization** of resources. And to reinforce this, one of the specifically drafted functions for the new department is to be "conservation management", defined in this phrase —

"consistent with the principles of conservation and any legal protection status, **to manage for productive purposes the resources vested in the department**"

What that means is that any land or resources not legally protected in reserves or national parks will be managed for productive purposes. Examples given in official documents include the production of wood and minerals. Under these definitions, the "promotion of conservation values" which the department is to undertake must mean the promotion of commodity production — presumably on a sustainable basis where possible, although this is hardly possible with minerals. Under these