

Perhaps the story of this park, like that of all life on the planet, should have begun rather than ended with the sea. But there is a technical hitch. Although it may come as a surprise to many people, Abel Tasman National Park does not include any sea. Nor does it include much in the way of beaches, estuaries or inter-tidal sections of the rocky shore. The reason for this is that the present park boundary is drawn to the mean high-water line, and accordingly the park excludes all sea and seabed as well as those sections of the coast which are covered and uncovered by the rising and falling tides. In the estimation of most people these places are not only an integral part of the experience of visiting this coastline, but are in fact the key features of it. In terms of the total physical (and indeed spiritual) environment they are inseparable from the land behind. But in terms of legal boundaries they do not presently belong within Abel Tasman National Park.

A casual glance at a map which shows park boundaries can be misleading, since south of Separation Point an area of sea some 2.4 km broad appears at first to be included in the park. But closer inspection reveals that except where pockets of private land remain, the true park boundary ends at the coastline, and this apparent seaward extension embraces only "islands, islets, rocks and reefs", and is again confined to those offshore bits of land which have some part clear of the water at mean high-tide.

This obviously unsatisfactory state of affairs reflects the fact that while our thinking on terrestrial reserves in New Zealand is on a sound footing, extension of this kind of ecological vision into the marine environment is very much in its infancy, although changes do now seem to be imminent. For its small land area New Zealand has a vast amount of coastline (something like 10,000 km) yet along the whole of this critical zone of ecological interaction, there exist only two small marine reserves, both of which are found north of Auckland. At present the great wild South Island coasts have no marine reserves at all, and even in the Marlborough Sounds Maritime Park no areas of sea or seabed are included, although in this case some sections of foreshore do form part of the park, usually however only on sanctuary islands where public landing is prohibited. When it is remembered that something like 13% of New Zealand's total land area is "protected in perpetuity" the claim made in the handbook of the Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park that "present thinking on marine reserves lags some 50 to 100 years behind that for land reserves" highlights the urgent need for action to close that gap.

The reasons for including areas of the marine environment in reserves are similar to the arguments for setting aside land as terrestrial reserves. Indeed the seas adjacent to the park coastline have a tale to tell which is very much a mirror image of what has happened on the land, with the recent rapid decline of the once good snapper and scallop fisheries reminding us of the earlier fate of farming and saw-mill-

ing on shore. Closer investigation of the causes of the loss of fish stocks has revealed that large beds of bryozoan "coral" (small reef-forming animals which both look and behave like true coral) and sponges off Torrent Bay have been virtually destroyed, while similar coral beds off Separation Point have also suffered serious damage. Catches taken on or near these beds have always included a high percentage of immature fish of commercial species like snapper and tarakihi, indicating that the coral zones operate as an important nursery environment. The damage caused to these coral beds by gear used for trawling and dredging has had a severe impact on an important marine environment, and at the same time seriously reduced the local coastal fishery. And in the declining catches of snapper and scallops there is surely an echo of abandoned sawmills and reverting hill pastures on the adjacent land?

Increasingly the long-term commercial sense of conservation is being recognised, but it is still ecological and moral principles which usually start the ball rolling. We owe it to other living things and to future generations to leave some parts of our common heritage wild and unspoilt, and there appears to be no logical reason for separating the sea from the land in fulfilment of these aims. Wetlands (including estuaries and coastal swamps) are at last receiving the attention they deserve as a hugely important but greatly diminished natural habitat. But progress is still creakingly slow in respect of the greatest wetland of all — the sea. This is a great pity, especially since there are some areas where seaward extension of existing reserve or park boundaries would not seem to be bound up with too much bitter controversy.

When national parks were created a tendency was to seek boundaries which were "convenient for efficient administration" and "where possible, follow physical features". But somehow a high-tide boundary which may have seemed logical in 1942, is no longer satisfactory. At present it excludes from this particular park some of the most intriguing and beautiful landforms (estuaries, foreshore and seabed) and life systems (marine, intertidal and estuarine plants and animals). But altruistic reasons aside, most people regard the estuaries, beaches, rocky shore and sea as being an integral part of Abel Tasman National Park, and in this case anyway, it is surely time that public administration caught up with popular expectation. ✎

Andy Dennis has just completed a new handbook for Arthurs Pass National Park and should have a Mount Cook National Park handbook published by the end of the year. He remains itinerant although he is rumoured to have acquired a section at Punakaiki.

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