

Silencing the Stihls in the Ahaura

By Gerard Hutching

FOR SALE

12,000 cubic metres of virgin rimu forest, growing on top terrace of an outstanding sequence of podocarp-beech forest river terraces, unrivalled in the region. Site adjacent to the Ahaura River gorge, inland from Greymouth. River is ranked as one of the five exceptional South Island rivers on scenic and recreational grounds. Forest is home to large populations of kaka and parakeet (birds increasingly rare elsewhere.)

Though the letter that the Forest Service sent to the Kopara Sawmilling Co in December last year in which it offered the above Sale Area 628 for sale was couched in more prosaic terms, conservationists knew what effect logging would have on these magnificent forests. Trees more than 500 years old and more than 30 metres high, part of a vital wildlife corridor allowing birds to migrate from the Southern Alps to lowland forests, would be destroyed in minutes, undoing the work of centuries.

Further north at Giles Creek and Slab Hut Creek, a separate beech woodchipping sale would endanger the wildlife corridor linking the Paparoa range and the Southern Alps at two key points. This galvanised the conservation movement into action in a desperate attempt to salvage the fragile corridor.

The Ahaura Gorge forests had been earmarked for reserve by the Wildlife Service in 1976 and 1977, and supported by the DSIR in 1981. It was part of a reserve package that conservationists had been pressing for — others include Mt Harata, Tawhai, Doctors Hill, Oparara, Ngakawau, Atbara-Nile and the Paparoa National Park. In addition, some of these reserves are also referred to as "wildlife corridors", allowing birds to travel from one forest to another.

The following account is by no means exhaustive, but highlights the key moves taken by conservationists to rescue these magnificent forests.

August 26 and October 10, 1985 — Letters sent to the Forest Service sought an assurance that there would be no "pre-emptive" strike against the recommended — Ahaura Gorge reserve. No assurance

The Ahaura River has carved a deep gorge through a sequence of six forested terraces. Logging has here cleared the forest right to the top terrace edge. *Photo: Kevin Smith.*

Kevin Smith.

was forthcoming however.

November 1 1985 — Reserve proposal sent to Forests Under-secretary David Butcher. Later Butcher is to say that he was unaware of the corridor's existence until it was too late.

December 13, 1985 — The Forest Service writes to the Kopara Sawmilling Co, advising it would sell them 12,000 m³ out of the proposed Ahaura Reserve alongside the Ahaura River. By April, Butcher makes the astounding admission that this offer was "the prize cock-up of the lot."

December 18, 1985 — The Government announces that an estimated 30,000 beech trees from North Westland-Buller will be sold for woodchipping in the first year. The upshot, says Guy Salmon, is that forests will be devastated, wildlife killed and most of the jobs created will be in Japan. This separate sale will later involve conservationists in rescue attempts on two wildlife corridors just north of the Ahaura Gorge — Giles Creek and Slab Hut Creek. Figures released later by the Forest Service point to the economic futility of beech woodchipping. It expects to lose \$43,000 in its one year operation, but NFAC show even this figure is unrealistic, and that the real loss might amount to \$1.7 million.

December 20, 1985 — Then-Society President Dr Alan Edmonds sends a strongly worded telegram to the Government, protesting at the woodchip sale and the Ahaura Gorge (Sale Area 628) sale. "Conservation and recreation groups appalled by this shattering of mutual trust. Request immediate announcement of compensatory reserves or review of decision." Fortunately for the Government the Christ-



Inset: Logging started last February in Sale Area 628, the highest of the six Ahaura Gorge terraces, and involved clearfelling of all merchantable trees — mainly rimu, the olive green tree in this aerial photo. *Photo: Kevin Smith.*

mas break intervenes, and no action is taken.

February 3, 1986 — Forest and Bird gears up for a major public battle to pull the logging gangs out of the wildlife corridors/proposed reserves. West Coast Forest and Bird branch releases a statement charging the Forest Service with being "needlessly provocative" in allowing the Ahaura Gorge and Doctors Hill (near Hokitika) logging. The Forest Service says it is simply following plans approved by the Government.

March — Attention focuses on the upcoming JFC Easter gathering, this time held in Murchison. Conservation Under-secretary Philip Woollaston, who is to play a pivotal role in the drama, is invited to the gathering. On a tour with a busload of conservationists, Woollaston helps push a huge log aside blocking access to view woodchipping in the wildlife corridor.

April 10 — Conservation Director Gerry McSweeney sets out a detailed proposal to Woollaston with alternative logging sites for the three key remaining controversial sites — Giles Creek, Slab Hut Creek and the Ahaura Gorge. This was the first of a number of letters sent to the Government over the following six weeks.

April 23 — The Government announces a halt to logging at the Giles Creek and Slab Hut Creek wildlife corridors. No job losses will occur as the beech logs will now be obtained from "environmentally less sensitive areas." The Ahaura Gorge is the remaining immediate large problem.

April 24 — An 800-strong meeting in Christchurch calls on the government to halt the Ahaura logging. Speaking at the meeting, David Butcher says the Forest and