

Lessons from the Past

The arguments for and against preserving indigenous species do not have to be traversed on this page, for most if not all readers of this magazine will be convinced of the aesthetic and scientific need for preservation of our unique plant and animal life.

Nor by now, after years of repetition, should there be any doubt that habitat protection is vital to the preservation of species. The Society recognised this early on in its history when it changed its name from the Native Bird Protection Society to the Forest and Bird Protection Society.

Unfortunately, out in the wider world there are people who do not understand, or more likely choose to ignore, the importance of habitat protection. Thus, decisions over who controls the habitats of our native plants and animals – so many of which are either endangered or vulnerable – are crucial. The “great carve up” is now underway, and it is to be hoped that the Department of Conservation will take responsibility for most of our natural lands.

One decision has already been made – over the administration of the vast South Island high country pastoral leasehold lands. It is too soon to gauge how effective the mechanisms that are now being developed to implement the joint responsibilities given to the Lands Corporation and the Conservation Department will be in protecting native plants and animals and guaranteeing access to the high country. Landcorp, which will administer pastoral leases and licenses, “must consult with and have regard to” the advice of the Department of Conservation over conservation issues on leasehold land. Will this be any different from the “consultation and regard” that has been given to the Wildlife Service’s advice by other government agencies in the past? Only time will tell whether the complex formula for administering 2.6 million hectares of New Zealand will work in the best interests of the kea, black stilt, Armstrong’s hebe, Otago giant skink and other unique high country inhabitants. High country farmers also have grave reservations about the sensitivity of a narrow commercial corporation to the traditions and difficulties of high country pastoralism.

Meanwhile, the Government has made the dramatic announcement that it wishes to solve “once and for all” the future of West Coast forests by November this year. If the pioneering ethic could be said to be alive anywhere in New Zealand, it would be strongest on the West Coast, despite the efforts of a growing number of conservationists there who see the best future for the West Coast in using its magnificent forests for tourism, particularly nature-based tourism, rather than destructive logging. An article this issue by our West Coast conservation officer, Kevin Smith, outlines the conservation case for setting aside sufficient habitat to preserve our precious indigenous species.

The rare and endangered birds singled out for attention in the magazine bring into sharp focus all the reasons why we would be poorer off without them. But, as Murray Williams’ and Kevin Smith’s articles show, our main efforts should be directed at making sure bird and plant populations do not plummet to the critical, endangered level. That should be a clear lesson learnt from the past.

Dr Alan Mark, President



Contributors to *Forest & Bird* may express their opinions on contentious issues. Those opinions are not necessarily the prevailing opinion of the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society.

C · O · N · T · E · N · T · S

Articles

- 2 The future for West Coast forests**
- 7 Endangered species — a personal view**
- 10 Kakapo — will it survive?**
- 14 Good prospects for takahe**
- 17 In the Rainforest**
- 19 Nature photography**
- 24 Unique Moawhango district**
- 28 Voyage to the southern seas**



Departments

- 32 Junior Section**
- 34 Society officers**
- 36 Bulletin**
- 37 Conservation Update**
- 38 Index**
- 40 Society lodges**

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