

occurred. There is now a national awareness that West Coast forests, once only looked on as a timber resource, possess diverse ecological, educational, recreational and natural heritage values. West Coasters, too, increasingly value these forests both in their own right and for the role they play in the regional economy through tourism.

Cossetted industry

During the last decade constraints on reservation have not applied to the West Coast timber industry. Cossetted by long term contracts signed in the 1960s, the industry has remorselessly devastated vast tracts of fine forest. Even today the opportunity to select representative reserves from the remaining forests is severely restricted by timber contracts that in most cases run on till 1990. An enormous 450,000 cubic metres of mainly rimu timber must be felled to honour them. Fortunately, the timber resource is large enough to enable the creation of a network of reserves covering the key conservation areas.

For the northern portion of the West Coast from Karamea through to the Hokitika region, proposed reserves have jointly been put forward to the Government by the Wildlife Service, the DSIR and Joint Campaign on Native Forests. In addition the National Parks and Reserves Authority has recommended a Paparoa National Park.

Decisions on West Coast forests have been repeatedly postponed by successive governments. Few politicians have comprehended their crucial national and international importance. As a people, we have been slow to recognise that New Zealand's indigenous forests are unique in the world. They are of international scientific, conservation and tourist interest because of the distinctiveness of their life forms, whose evolutionary lineage extends back 100 million years to the Mesozoic forests of Gondwanaland, and because of their world class scenery.



This picture sums up the typical inadequacy of the existing system of reserves in North Westland: the lowland forests in the foreground are zoned for production, while the Fletcher Creek ecological reserve is squashed up in the mountains behind. An extension of the reserve across part of the lowlands is now being proposed by conservationists. Photo: Hugh Best

Nature's stronghold

In this context, the West Coast holds pride of place as nature's last great stronghold in New Zealand. Here, tracts of magnificent natural landscapes still occur in very nearly primeval condition. These virgin lands offer our last opportunities to preserve a range of natural habitats and species that have long since been lost elsewhere. In Buller and North Westland these opportunities are rapidly diminishing as destructive logging progressively exhausts the once bountiful forest resource. It is the lowland forests, which are under the greatest pressure for timber production, that are vital for nature conservation. They possess the richest assemblages of plants, support the most abundant and diverse populations of native birds and offer habitats for many species of plants and animals that cannot survive in upland habitats.

Existing reserves in North Westland and Buller are grossly inadequate. They comprise a patchy scattering of mostly small scenic reserves and a series of State Forest ecological areas established in the mid 1970s. However, the political climate of that time was hostile to conservation. Only minimal reserve areas were put forward by the Forest Service and its scientific advisory committee. They largely ignored the recommendations of the DSIR and Wildlife Service, and the reserves were whittled away even further when an officials committee selectively removed podocarp dominant communities.

The inadequacies of the existing reserve network were highlighted by a recent report on future options for West Coast forests by the Secretary for the Environment. This report notes that the existing reserves have a strong bias towards upland and steep land areas. Lowland forest set aside are in the main non-merchantable or previously logged forest types (7 of the 12 North Westland reserves have had the bulk of the merchantable timber logged out of them). High volume podocarp forests and alluvial forests are poorly represented. From a wildlife viewpoint, the reserves are too small and dominated by high altitude and poor quality habitat.

Major new representative reserves have been promoted to rectify this imbalance. If approved, they will significantly increase the reserve representation of lowland forest communities. This, in turn, will enhance the ability of the reserve network to support viable wildlife populations, particularly of sensitive species such as kaka, parakeet and robin. They also have important amenity values and these form a crucial part of their justification.

Buller reserves

In the Buller, eight representative reserves have been proposed along with the Paparoa National Park and the Atbara-Nile park addition. The Buller forests have several nationally unique and distinctive features, the most outstanding being the forests of



The proposed North Westland wildlife corridor follows these forested hills across the grass-covered plains of the Grey and Inangahua valleys. The narrow forested link over the Reefton saddle (in the distance, left of centre) provides a vital connection for the movement of forest birds between the Paparoa Range forests and those of the Southern Alps. Photo: Hugh Best