



If accepted by the Government, the proposed Tawhai extension to the Big River ecological reserve will be New Zealand's prime reserve of hard beech. It will also be an important stronghold for the declining kaka, which still thrives in this extensive low hill country. Photo: Mark Bellingham



The future of the Ahaura Gorge's superb rimu forest — and other Central Westland podocarp forests — is still uncertain. Earlier this year public protest resulted in logging gangs being pulled out of this proposed reserve which also forms part of the wildlife corridor. Photo: Hugh Best, Wildlife Service.

Central Westland Podocarp Forests

Centred on Hokitika, this region has borne the brunt of 120 years of exploitation on the West Coast. The former dense podocarp forests of the river plains and lower terrace flights have been almost entirely cleared. Only a limited number of the originally wide range of forest types are well represented in the sizeable Lake Kaniere Scenic Reserve. Most of the podocarp hard wood forest on the hills and higher terraces has been extensively logged. Wildlife populations are impoverished compared to the other regions with robin, kaka and parakeet all scarce. The State Forest reserve system is almost non-existent. The 42,300 ha of State Forest in the Hokitika Ecological District, more than half of which is in production forestry, contains no ecological areas.

Four representative reserves have been proposed for the best remnant forest stands in the area and to ensure the wildlife populations are not further depleted.

North Westland Wildlife Corridor

To ensure the survival of healthy wildlife populations in North Westland, the Wildlife Service has recommended linking the key reserve areas with continuous protected forest corridors. The corridor extends from the upland forests of the eastern Paparoas across the Reefton Saddle hill country through to Tawhai Forest and upland forests along the Southern Alps. This is the only remaining forested link between the Paparoa Range and Southern Alps. From Tawhai Forest, the corridor extends southwards linking key lowland wildlife habitats of Harata, Flagstaff, Ahaura Gorge and Hochstetter.

The corridor proposal recognises the reality of forest management in North Westland. Strong competing proposals from the timber industry exist for the use of the region's lowland forests for sawlogs and chipwood. This means that the reserves and their linking corridors must be able to sustain viable wildlife populations of the more sensitive species largely on their own.

Research has shown that native bird densities are sharply reduced in managed beech forests with their patchwork of slowly regenerating clearfelled areas. Kaka, parakeet and robin populations reduce to zero after logging; only introduced birds increase in abundance. In sum, the wildlife corridor is needed for several key reasons: to maintain species diversity by allowing wildlife populations to mix between reserved areas; to permit seasonal movements of birds and other fauna to lower altitudes; and to provide additional habitat for species like kaka and parakeet that need large areas of relatively unmodified habitat. The corridor also provides a reservoir of species to recolonise any adjoining modified forest areas.

The Wildlife Service believes that, in the absence of wildlife corridors, a series of forest reserves separated by modified poor quality habitat will not guarantee the survival of all North Westland's indigenous forest fauna.

Reinstatement of Original Reserves

Conservationists are also seeking the reinstatement of original reserve areas deleted by the 1979 Officials Committee. The largest area is an 1800 ha tract of regenerating rimu forest excised from the Greenstone Ecological Area on the Greenstone Plain west of Lake Brunner. Also included is the last unlogged silver pine stand in North Westland which should be added to the Flagstaff Ecological Area.

Forest Service amenity reserves, which seek to preserve North Westland's scenic backdrop, should also be given legal protection.

Important choices face the Government on the future of West Coast forests. Their decision will be a test of our maturity as a people as it will irrevocably determine the fate of a large portion of this country's forest heritage. Opportunities exist to establish an unrivalled network of forest reserves that will be treasured for generations to come. Instead of symbolising despair and a lost past, the kaka can become a symbol of hope and confidence in the future. 