



The dramatic contrast between ultramafic rocks and schist is demonstrated in this photograph, showing silver beech on schist (left) and ultramafic scree (right). Photo: Les Molloy

mafic rocks, soils and vegetation.

The park also insufficiently represented the grasslands of the main valley floors and the diverse lowland forests of the western slopes. Subsequently significant areas of montane beech protection forest were added however, and brought the park up to 287,000 ha by 1971; but the park board and the departmental administration were still dominated by the thinking of Otago mountaineers, for they were still slow in getting the park extended to the extent that it protected the full range of ecosystems and

habitats in NW Otago and Westland south of the Haast River. 'Scenic grandeur' was still considered to be the predominant criterion in deciding whether or not to confer national park status. Unfortunately, the board and the department lacked the scientific resources to document the case for an ideal park, truly representative of the landforms, vegetation and wildlife of this remote corner of the South Island.

Nevertheless, there have been some valuable piecemeal additions to the park since then:

- a small 2000 ha sector of the mineral belt around Fiery Peak in 1972;
- the compulsory resumption from the Mt Earnslaw pastoral run of the magnificent Mt Earnslaw and the Forbes Range in 1973 (9250 ha);
- the west bank of the Dart in 1982; and
- the Haast Range (only down to 200m, thereby excluding the floor of the Arawata Valley) in 1986.

The Red Mountain/Northern Olivine Range Proposal

With the passing of the new National Parks Act in 1980 the emphasis shifted from scenic grandeur alone, to also include scientific importance and ecological representativeness as criteria for additions to existing parks. The way now seemed clear for the new National Parks and Reserves Authority (NPRA) to evaluate the earlier Red Mountain/Olivine Range addition proposals which had been put to the former National Parks Authority (Molloy 1977, 1979). Additional support was provided by the release of the Mt Aspiring National Park management plan in 1981, for the plan supported the extension of the park to the west. But once again the idea began to founder on the rocks of mining industry intransigence, regional/central government rivalries and Ministerial ineptness (Molloy 1983a). Eventually the NPRA called for a full investigation of the addition proposal at its September 1982 meeting; this "section 8 investigation" was of some urgency and was to involve the public fully in the evaluation of the proposal.

Departmental Resource Report

Once again, however, the Red Mountain saga had to involve another chapter, with the main characters having to journey off into the wilderness of more urgent, and controversial, national park issues — particularly Okarito/Waikukupa, Waitutu and Paparoa/Punakaiki. Now, over four years later, the resource report on the Red Hills addition proposal has been released for public comment (Lands and Survey, 1986). Although the report is fairly balanced it is

The Call of the Wild

In addition to the spectacular red mass of Red Mountains, the proposal includes some outstanding mountain and valley scenery:

- the rocky spine of the northern Olivine Range between the Retreat Pinnacles and Bald Mountain;
- the wild upper reaches of the Cascade River, including its source in the Limbo Glacier, the Cascade Gorge and the impressive Durward Falls where the entire river plunges 50m over an escarpment formed by the Livingstone Fault;
- the rolling tussocklands of the Gorge Plateau at the northern end of the Red Hills Range; the plateau is covered with tarns and parallel slumps caused by fault movement along the adjacent Alpine Fault which can be seen as a great rent in the landscape running south from the escarpment along the Duncan River.
- the hanging valleys of the Trinity, Sealy, Crescent, Barrier, Diorite and Olivine tributaries of the Pyke River.
- the tall podocarp forest and wetlands of the middle reaches of the Pyke River (including Lake Wilmot).

Olivine Wilderness Area

Most of the area has superb wilderness character and is an integral part of a long-standing proposal for an Olivine Wilderness Area. This wilderness area was first proposed in 1959 by the NZ Alpine Club and FMC, and eventually incorporated into the Mt Aspiring National Park management plan. The full proposal for a 44,000 ha Olivine Wilderness Area (approximately 50:50 inside/outside the current park boundaries) was formally proposed by FMC at the 1981 Wilderness Conference (Molloy, 1983b).

The proposal has wide support in recreation, park management, and government circles; it is centred on the Olivine Ice Plateau and is well buffered in the west by the middle reaches of the Cascade and Pyke valleys. The boundaries of the proposed Olivine Wilderness Area are shown on the map. This is one of a small number of wilderness areas which have been proposed to try and keep at least about two percent of New Zealand's landscape in as primeval a state as possible. People are free to recreate in wilderness areas — but on nature's terms, without huts, tracks, bridges and mechanised transport.