

most of us did not know the results of the polling until long after midnight.

A group of people experienced in kiwi catching came from Otorohanga bringing with them two labradors, but they met with no success. With them came farmer-environmentalist Arthur Cowan. "If they farmed the land they've got properly there'd be no need to clear more," he muttered.

I took my cattle dog with me on my next visit, but she was quite unable to decide what was required of her. She raised her hackles and emitted a challenging growl to something in the wet darkness, but did not react to kiwi calls. I was indignant, but too polite to complain when one of my companions decided he had more right than her to space out of the rain under my tent fly.

Uncanny skill

One of the party on this very wet night was a newcomer. He left us to go up the ridge "for a look around". During the night I watched the progress of his torch through the valleys and across the ridges. He did a wide circuit and shortly after midnight I saw him pass beneath us along the track back to

Left: This area near Aotuhia, inland from Stratford, was earmarked for a reserve and walkway in 1978, but flattened in 1985 by a crusher as part of the ill-directed farm expansion programme. Photo: Terry Fitzgibbon

Right: North Taranaki branch deputy chairman John Clark has a close encounter with the crusher used so effectively on the Poarangi farm block. Photo: Peter Winter

the cars. None of the rest of us possessed such uncanny skill at travelling across steep, unfamiliar shrubland in the dark.

He was drinking tea from a thermos when I reached the vehicles. I went over to express my admiration for his bushcraft.

"Gee, I was lost!" he admitted.

We asked permission to be present at the time of the burn-off to take photographs and assess for ourselves the life expectancy of kiwi or for that matter of other birds.

Understandably we were not informed. It was a wet autumn and the operators had to take their chances when they came. Besides, burn-offs are exhilarating occasions with helicopters and napalm-type accelerants. No one wants the spectacle marred by questions about what is dying in the flames.

I returned in 1983 to photograph the orchids. It was a dismal scene. Blackened manuka stems interlaced across the hillsides in an impassable tangle, an abandoned utility vehicle was rusting out in the stream below the waterfall, but the orchids survived on the ridges where the fire found nothing to burn.

I returned again in 1985. There were fences now and mustering pens, but the manuka skeletons still littered the ground. There was a yellowhammer or two and some chaffinches, but no bush birds. The orchids had gone, but manuka seedlings were enthusiastically beginning the cycle all over again.

By the spring of 1985 when questions were being asked about kiwi in the Aotuhia farm settlement block I had made a personal decision that relocating kiwi was not an option. The wise course was to preserve both birds and habitat.

Bitter argument about kiwi being burned in shrubland clearance was unresolved. I sought permission from the Commissioner of Crown Lands, Alistair McIlroy, to camp out and listen. His only stipulation was that I get the consent of the farm managers.

I had my doubts about the Aotuhia telephone number. The manager's house was new and I had a notion the link was by radio-telephone. However I found the number in the directory.

"You're one of those greenies. I'll cut everything I can. You blokes give me the shits. I wouldn't waste my time talking to you." He cut me off. It was not Pat Ford, manager at Aotuhia. As I suspected, his number was new and unlisted.

Under the circumstances I decided against Aotuhia for that weekend. However, the next block due for crushing was at Poarangi, a part of the Aotuhia settlement

plan. Nick Hendricks, the manager, gave his consent freely.

We could not have chosen a more pleasant day. After a walk of two kilometres along the old Whangamomona Road we reached the 25 hectares chosen for clearing. As soon as we entered the shrubland we were greeted by birds. North Island robin, pied tit, grey warbler, fantails in dozens and silver eye. In the distance a bittern boomed. A morepork came to our camp at dusk and bellbirds supplied the dawn chorus.

On the ridgetop two bulldozers and a huge roller were poised ready to recommence crushing operations.

By midnight not one kiwi had made its presence known, but by morning we had identified calls from five birds. The last was at daybreak.

After our next monthly meeting we sent a telegram signed by all to the Prime Minister. The DSIR did a three-day kiwi check and estimated a population of one pair to 10/15 hectares. A more extensive survey was planned for the winter months, but this has not taken place. ♫



A Society View

There is still controversy at Aotuhia. Any further development depends on public reaction to a management plan long promised for the Aotuhia and Poarangi blocks which lie 70 km to the east of Stratford amidst rugged hill country.

Our Taranaki branch sees no sense in further clearance at Aotuhia. It is economic nonsense today to proceed with a scheme planned under unrealistic subsidised farming of the late 1970s/early 80s. The present realistic farming climate should prevent further clearance, particularly when existing cleared land closer to Taranaki population centres and markets has had no fertiliser in two years and is reverting.

Equally important, as Peter Winter's article shows, Aotuhia's shrublands are not a biological wasteland but rather a haven for wildlife.

Future shrubland clearance depends on those who will control these natural lands — the Department of Conservation or Landcorp (although one would hope that even the commercially accountable corporation would not undertake clearance at Aotuhia either). Indigenous forest surrounding the farm settlements will go to DoC, with some placed in the new Whanganui National Park. The balance of the blocks covers about 5000 ha, 1100 of which is presently farmed.

Preliminary land allocation for the remaining 3900 ha of shrublands, zones 2300 ha for crushing and burning and 1650 ha for erosion control and wildlife purposes.

All natural areas should go to DoC, and only the presently farmed lands to Landcorp. Any subsequent division of the shrublands between Landcorp and DoC must take into account: *the results of the DSIR's shrubland kiwi survey; *the Government's 1985 revised indigenous forest policy precluding the clearance of seral shrublands regenerating into high forest; *a review of the economic viability of Aotuhia farm development; *the Aotuhia management plan and public comment on this.

Until then the politicians on the Government's state owned enterprises Cabinet committee should not pre-empt due process by carving up Aotuhia and handing title over to Landcorp. We will be waiting and watching . . .

Germy McSweeney, Conservation Director