

Heritage or Harvest?

1987 heralds the centennial of our national parks. It also heralds the establishment of the Conservation Department to safeguard our heritage, and the year when decisions will be made on the great southern forests within the proposed South-West New Zealand World Heritage Area.

The concept of protecting the public lands of New Zealand's South-West as a World Heritage Area has been championed by conservation, recreation and tourism groups since November 1985 when New Zealand signed the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. It makes sense to give our largest remaining intact natural area (stretching from Okarito to Waitutu) international recognition and protection.

The first cautious step towards the grand concept came in November 1986 when the Government announced UNESCO's acceptance of Fiordland and Mt Cook/Westland national parks as New Zealand's first two World Heritage areas.

Three key tests are now imminent of the integrity of the South West concept. At Waitutu, Longwood, Dean and Rowallan forests in western Southland, survival of the endangered yellowhead and a remarkable coast to mountains forest sequence depend on DOC advocating the preservation of the remaining virgin forests. Scientific studies show that yellowhead cannot survive in logged forests. Although Waitutu remains zoned for protection, Dean, Rowallan and Longwood presently form part of a small scale (6,000m³ pa) uneconomic beech industry. Should these virgin forests be protected, the industry can immediately switch to the region's burgeoning exotic supplies.

In the centre of the proposed World Heritage area, public submissions have overwhelmingly supported adding the Red Hills and surrounding state forests to Mt Aspiring National Park. The Red Hills addition should proceed forthwith, ending more than 10 years of indecision.

However, the greatest test of our commitment to heritage protection will come over the next six months when politicians decide the future of the great kahikatea forests lying south of the glaciers of Westland National Park. This tract of unmodified lowland forests, wetlands, sea coast and mountains is primeval New Zealand at its finest. The mosaic of kahikatea, kowhai, mistletoe and beech is also the stronghold of kaka, kiwi and blue duck and the nearest we come to the primitive forests of ancient Gondwanaland. Celebrated in our 1987 calendar and a soon-to-be-published Society book, these forests will be the focus of our campaigning efforts up to 30 June this year, when Environment Secretary, Roger Blakeley, reports to Government on their future.

At present there are no sawmills cutting in these publicly-owned forests. Rather the few scattered communities from Fox Glacier to Jacksons Bay are nurtured primarily by tourism, grazing, fishing and hunting. Outmoded concepts such as multiple use native logging have been overwhelmingly rejected by the public through the Maruia Declaration and campaigns for Okarito, Whirinaki, Pureora and Paparoa. The West Coast accord assures the nation of a sustained supply of native timber from North and Central Westland. Therefore logging — even salvage logging of so called 'overmature and senile' trees — has no place in the South-West wilderness. The whole area deserves protection, firstly to safeguard its intrinsic natural and wilderness values and secondly to promote sensitive tourism use from the Haast highway.

Many Society branches and members have expressed concern that former logging advocates from Forest Service have taken key jobs in DOC and they will be seeking reassurance that the 'poachers have turned gamekeepers'. However, DOC's new staff are committed to change and in 1987 will be able to demonstrate this. The beech forests of western Southland and kahikatea forests of South Westland will be a fitting test of the commitment both of DOC staff and you, the people it serves, to foster national pride by promoting the World Heritage Concept.

I can think of no better way of celebrating our National Parks Centennial.

Dr Alan Mark, President



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Issue Number 243
February 1987
Volume 18 Number 1

Forest & Bird

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Journal of the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Inc.

ISSN 0015-7384

Forest & Bird is published quarterly by the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Inc.

The Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society is a member of the International Union for the Protection of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP).

Head Office: Seventh Floor, Central House, 26 Brandon Street, Wellington.

Postal address: P.O. Box 631, Wellington

Editor: Gerard Hutching.

Registered at P.O. Headquarters Wellington as a magazine

Design & Production: Creative Services Ltd
Typesetting: Computype
Photoprocess: Spectrascan
Printing: Lithographic Services