



Plastic – not so fantastic

Take a walk around any of our coasts, especially close to major cities, and you will be sure to see one of the prime scourges of our modern consumer society – plastic debris. This appears in a variety of forms from plastic granules, polythene films and bags, detergent and other containers, chunks of polystyrene, lost or discarded monofilament and polypropylene fishing nets and floats, to synthetic strappings and ropes.

Our awareness of the dangers posed by plastic has been raised by Fisheries Research Division scientists Martin Cawthorn (a biologist) and Robert Mattlin (fisheries), who have documented a number of cases where plastic has harmed birds and sea mammals. In one instance a juvenile minke whale died near Wellington and was discovered to have had a polythene bag in its oesophagus. The scientists also report on fur seals seen with plastic strapping around their necks.

Late last year a visiting American scientist, John Twiss, said that as many as 50,000 fur seals a year were being lost through becoming entangled in such rubbish, and anywhere between 300,000 and 700,000 seabirds a year were being killed.

This issue has placed the Society in a dilemma over the packaging of its magazine. A shift was made to plastic wrapping because it keeps the magazine in better condition, especially in rain, and because it is a good deal cheaper than manilla. If you feel strongly about this matter, please write to the Editor at PO Box 631, Wellington, with your views.

Northern branch shows the way

Our new Northern Branch at Whangarei has already emerged with two conservation initiatives to its credit. They successfully negotiated with a major trucking company to stop reclamation of an important stretch of mangroves on the city edge. Notices have now been erected prohibiting illegal dumping and the Harbour Board has been approached to revoke its approval for the reclamation over the sensitive area.

The branch has also joined with local Maori tribal elders and the Historic Places Trust in a bid to gain better management of a now heavily grazed 50-hectare island in the middle of the Whangarei Harbour.

A draft proposal from the groups has been put to the Harbour Board who own the island, seeking reserve status with a view to a community-sponsored restoration programme. This will involve protection of the island's numerous historical and archaeological features, and revegetation of the remainder for a public reserve.

Molesworth – who profits?

On January 22 the Deputy Prime Minister, Geoff Palmer, Conservation Minister Russell Marshall and Lands Minister Koro Wetere visited the 182,000 ha publicly-owned Molesworth Station in Marlborough to take a first hand look at this controversial area. Featured in our November 1986 magazine, Molesworth was one of a number of areas over which the Department of Conservation and Landcorp were vying for control. At the time of writing (mid January), it appeared that all but Molesworth were in the hands of Landcorp.

Recently the Society employed a professional accounting analyst to look at the financial overview for Molesworth, published in the Molesworth Strategy Plan and claiming a \$6 million accumulated profit for the station.

The analyst described the overview as a "flight of financial fantasy" which was one of the "worst examples of creative accounting" he had ever seen. In claiming the \$6 million profit, the overview was considered to break the golden rule of prudent accounting by anticipating profits on unrealised gains. It includes in its so called "profits" an increase in the value of the station itself, despite the fact that Molesworth is supposedly not for sale. If this is disallowed, the profits are more than halved.

Sinking feeling

In secret negotiations in December the last unprotected area of the Kaimaumu Swamp, in Northland, was handed to Landcorp and lost from public ownership.

The 600 ha block is an important part of the wetland complex, linking the internationally important Rangaunu Harbour with the Kaimaumu Scientific Reserve. A survey this summer has found a high density of the rare Northland green gecko in the block, the largest population left outside the Te Paki Farm Park. The block also has:

- the largest New Zealand colony of the rare duck orchid;
- an internationally unique wetland that grades from mangroves to gumland bog vegetation;
- populations of fernbird, marsh and spotless crane.

The block is semi-tidal, and if drained the peatland would shrink down. Most of this potential Landcorp farmland would then be below sea level!

Biological treasure trove

In January a scientific expedition to Southland's Eyre Mountains was led by Society President Dr Alan Mark and included Conservation Director Gerry McSweeney. Focusing on the 34,000-ha Eyre Creek-Canaird Crown land block, the expedition discovered an extraordinary biological treasure trove. Unfortunately, unless there is major public protest, the area will soon be under the control of Landcorp.

The greywacke Eyre Mountains are sandwiched between Otago's schist mountains and Fiordland, and have long been regarded as home to unusual plants and animals, but have been little explored scientifically.

A large population of rock wrens, one of the few recorded away from the Southern Alps, has been discovered, a large number of dotterel are present in the tussock lands and parakeet have been discovered in the extensive beech areas of the property. Rock wrens in particular are a species which are becoming increasingly rare.

Some of the plant distributions are rare; the mountain daisies *Celmisia philocremna* and *Celmisia thomsonii* are restricted to the Eyre Mountains within the Crown land block.

More than 60 percent of the block, which extends up to 2000m altitude, is severely eroded and eroding land where Government policy precludes grazing, while much of the balance has significant natural values. No land allocation should be made until all the area's values have been assessed.

Coromandel mining deal reneged.

A crisis has developed again over mining on the Coromandel Peninsula. The mining companies group, the Mineral Exploration Society, has repudiated an agreement to restrict mining north of Thames and Tairua.

This agreement late last year between conservation groups, the Mineral Exploration Society, Mines Division and the Thames-Coromandel District Council sought to control mining in environmentally-sensitive areas on the Peninsula. Forest and Bird's Coromandel branch has actively supported the stand by the district council to control mining, through the district scheme.

With the breakdown in the agreement, Coromandel conservation groups have resolved to use passive methods to physically prevent mining in sensitive areas. The present inability of the Mining Act to take account of environmental problems is being exploited by the Mineral Exploration Society.

Conservation Staff