

pared to summer (O'Donnell and Dilks, 1986).

Fernbirds, crake and bittern abound in the open swamps associated with the swamp forests. Just on half the bat records from South Westland are from kahikatea forests, suggesting they provide vital habitats. Soft kahikatea wood is full of holes, ideal as bat roosting sites. It is therefore no surprise that loss of kahikatea forest elsewhere in New Zealand is paralleled by the disappearance of native bats.

Kahikatea forests also provide crucial swamp and forest stream habitats for a number of declining native fish, including several of the galaxiid species that make up South Westland's famous whitebait fishery. Most notable of these is the giant kokopu which is scarce outside the region, but survives in good numbers in South Westland's swamps and meandering lowland rivers.

To protect these species and 15 other native fish in the region, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is seeking the protection of the wetland and swamp forest complexes of Ohinetamatea and Mataketake forests.

For all these reasons the Wildlife Service has recommended the protection of all the kahikatea forests of South Westland.

### Preservation or production?

Given the irreplaceable natural heritage values of South Westland's kahikatea forests, it is not surprising that government scientists, conservation groups and other environmental agencies are seeking their complete protection. The case for further logging or clearance for farmland is particularly weak and cannot be supported on economic or social grounds.

Kahikatea has a pale and featureless timber which has no importance as a decorative material and no essential specialist

uses. Large quantities of kahikatea from private and leasehold land in South Westland have been used as boxing around concrete poured on the Waitaki power project. Otherwise, the major use of kahikatea is in weatherboards, fasciaboards and scaffold planks. There is a Japanese interest in kahikatea panelling because of its bland featureless appearance.

The Forestry Corporation, West Coast Sawmills and Westland Country Council are expected to lobby strongly to open these forests up for logging, possibly at a low level of cut. Yet despite years of costly and destructive logging trials foresters have been unable to find a workable sustained yield logging technique for the South Westland podocarp forests. They have also completely failed to examine the economics of sustained yield timber production from these remote forests. Joint Forestry Campaign researcher, Dr Peter Grant, contends that the bulk of the timber could only be logged at a loss. Moreover, no sawmills operate in these southern state forests at present. Mills interested in logging the kahikatea forests are located far to the north in the Whataroa and Hokitika districts.

Agricultural economists have shown that forest clearance for land development in the region would be uneconomic and contrary to the national interest.

### Tourism far exceeds forestry

Kahikatea forest can make a major contribution to the regional economy through tourism. Kahikatea, if given the protection and promotion it deserves, could attract tourists just as kauri does to Northland and the Coromandel. Yet ironically, at present, there is not a single track through South Westland kahikatea forest. Tourism is al-

ready big business in the West Coast. For the year ending 31 March 1986, 465,000 tourists visited the West Coast with a direct income to the regional economy of \$91 million. The value of tourism to the region far exceeds the \$61 million contribution from the timber industry — a fact that is helping to win West Coast support for conservation.

The Government has set up a committee chaired by the Secretary of the Environment, Dr Roger Blakeley, to make recommendations on the future of these kahikatea forests and other natural lands of South Westland. This committee has invited public submissions on the future of these forests. The outcome of this exercise will be entirely dependent on the amount of public support there is to give full legal protection for the kahikatea forests in a South-West New Zealand World Heritage Area. This is perhaps the greatest conservation opportunity this country has ever seen, and it is an opportunity that will never come again.

Kahikatea! May the feathers of Tawhaitari bear fruit forever in the midst of the waters of South Westland. 🦅

### References

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### Speaking for the trees — a personal statement.



My interest in South Westland and its great podocarp forests dates back to when I was a boy in a small King Country sawmilling town of Owahango. I was keen on nature and was given Cockayne's *New Zealand Plants and their Story*. This contained a couple of John Johns' marvellous black and white photos of South Westland's forests including one of a dense stand of kahikatea at Harihari. Those photos sparked my interest in West Coast forests and helped set me off on a career

in forest ecology.

Later, after working with the Forest Service in the West Taupo forests, I jumped at the chance of research work on South Westland kahikatea forest. I fell in love with the place on my forest field trip and soon shifted over to Harihari with my wife, Barbara Devery. We have been here now for 10 years and are enjoying watching our children grow up full of delight in the natural world around them.

I vividly recall our first experience of kahikatea forest: wading through knee deep water beneath incredibly tall trees, meeting a friendly robin that perched gaily on our heads, then breaking out on to the riverbed and being overwhelmed by the panorama of forest, river and mountains. But a trip to a logging site in Ianthe forest brought us back to earth with a thump. The destructive wasteful logging there was no different to that of the King Country or West Taupo. Ecology soon merged into conservation as we joined the long fight for Okarito, Pureora, Paparoa and the kahikatea forests. Barbara took to pos-

sum trapping to supplement my meagre research grant and I soon followed out of necessity. For five years I chased possums in Saltwater and Okarito forests and spent each spring deer shooting in the kahikatea and beech forests of Mataketake forest. During these long periods alone in the forests, they became part of me and I gradually learnt to live by nature's rhythms.

Every spare moment it seems was spent on conservation until three years ago when Forest and Bird gave me the opportunity to work full time on conservation. For Barbara and I, life has not always been easy as conservationists on the West Coast but we are sustained by the tremendous energy generated by thousands and thousands of people throughout New Zealand determined to protect their precious nature heritage. Our greatest satisfaction has come from watching more and more courageous West Coasters speaking out in support of conservation. For if we don't speak for the trees, who will, if not now, when.

**Kevin Smith** 18.3.87