

# NATURE TOURISM — in Harmony with Nature

by Gerard Hutching

**T**he face of New Zealand tourism, both domestic and overseas, is changing. In the last few years a psychological shift has taken place.

Tourism advertising used to focus on luxury hotels and coach tours — passive holidays which no longer appeal to the sophisticated tastes of today's traveller.

People now want to *do* more rather than *see* more. A landmark 1980 tourism survey by Professor Brian Henshall of Auckland University pointed the direction in which tourism was heading: it showed that the most popular activity for both overseas and New Zealand tourists was to visit a national park. For 70 percent of those surveyed, this came at the top of their list. Next highest was to visit a museum and a botanical garden.

In response to these preferences, tourist operators have been starting to cater for those who are prepared to pay to be guided around New Zealand's natural areas. The last few years has seen a proliferation of tours, some organised by traditional operators and others by do-it-yourselfers who have entered the field through being already involved in it in some way.

## Special interest era

The era of the special interest operator has arrived, offering action packed adventure holidays, farm visits, photography and garden tours.

However, companies which solely run high quality natural history tours are few and far between. The Tourist and Publicity Department keeps a list of 69 companies under the broad heading of "Outdoor Holiday", some of whom employ guides specialising in natural history.

Dunedin-based botanist, Mark Hanger, and birds expert, Rodney Russ of Southern Heritage Tours, are possibly the only people in New Zealand making a full time living from leading natural history tours. Others may hire specialists to carry out the guiding or guide only in season; Southern Heritage directors lead the tours and the company operates all year round.

Mark and Rodney, along with their wives Marina and Shirley, formed the company in 1985. Prior to that their work with Government departments — the Lands and Survey Department for Mark where he organised summer nature programmes and the Wildlife Service for Rodney — convinced them there was an opening for high quality, specialist tours exploring the South Island's natural history. The emphasis was to be on quality; they did not want to emulate package bus tours which tend to cram in too much into too few days.

From the start they were fully committed to the business, buying a specially outfitted minibus which plunged them immediately into the red. They first advertised three trips — South Island alpine wildflowers, Southern Parks and Otago's Gold — and the good response to these encouraged them to branch out to include Stewart Island, north-



**Mark Hanger:** "I prefer to see quality tourism. We must ensure people come away with a greater appreciation of the environment."

ern South Island alpine wildflowers and rare birds.

Mark says that he felt before starting the company that New Zealand's natural history was not being interpreted to its full potential and that he could offer more than what people saw on, for example, the National Parks and Reserves Summer interpretation programmes.

"The Park's programme is more aimed at a middle of the road interest. We explore a subject in depth, like alpine wildflowers, by spending 10 days visiting different alpine areas," he says.

"The southern alpine wildflowers trip, for example, starts in Arthurs Pass, down through Peel Forest, the Hooker Valley, Ben Ohau Range, Old Man Range, Key Summit and finishes in Waituna Wetlands near Invercargill where alpine plants occur at sea level.

Because the minibus takes 12 passengers at a maximum, friendships can easily form and blossom until by the end of the trip a group of strangers have formed into a close knit "family." Mark says he takes a relaxed

approach to guiding so that his clients relate to him as a friend. Both he and Rodney Russ, his partner, enjoy working with people.

The typical Southern Heritage client is female, over 50 and a North Islander — "not necessarily wealthy but enthusiastic and very inquiring, not passive like your usual tourist."

Unlike large bus tours, the highlights of which tend to be the tea stops, the Southern Heritage bus takes to the road only in the early morning, driving for perhaps an hour to a destination where the botanising or birdwatching is done until late afternoon. Any long distance travelling is then done in the cooler evenings.

## New partnership

For those interested in pursuing a subject in greater depth, Southern Heritage provide a natural history library on the bus, deliver entertaining slide talks on several evenings and can provide a wide selection of videos for viewing in the comfort of hotel rooms.

The cost of a typical tour is approximately \$120 a day. This compares favourably with package bus tour costs of \$100 a day, considering the smaller number of people and the quality of guiding, says Mark.

Much has been made of the new partnership between conservation and tourism. The partners in Southern Heritage Tours are acutely conscious of the fact that their survival depends on the survival of our natural areas, and it is a message which they subtly impart to their clients in the course of a trip.

For example, Mark sees the changes occurring in the great tussock of the Mackenzie Basin as an ecological tragedy. Seedlings of *Pinus contorta* are spreading at such a rate that the traditional breathtaking vista of tawny tussocks stretching to the horizon will be a thing of the past in a few decades. Sweet briar is also making tremendous inroads into the high country.

A company which has been in the field longer than most is Venturetreks, run by Walter Romanes. Originally started as a part time business in 1971, it became full time by 1974. At this time it was dealing with overseas tours for New Zealanders, but began New Zealand treks in 1975 in the Ureweras and Wanganui. By 1980 the company had expanded, enabling it to build a lodge at Ohakune, to where people go for week-long stays. Walter Romanes employs well known "names" in the natural history field such as John Morton, Geoff Moon, Ewen Cameron and Gerry McSweeney to act as guides.

Venturetreks stopped running 5-day treks some years ago in favour of providing more of a learning experience at the Ohakune lodge. "About five years ago I began to see a subtle change. Now people come to New Zealand to see the people and the plants rather than just the scenery. They want to become involved in the country," says Walter Romanes.