

Young Conservationists

by Gordon Ell

There is a popular image of Forest and Bird as middle-aged and middle class, secure in its Royal title and comfortably engaged in a mildly-eccentric concern for "our twigs and tweets." The real image is more appreciated in the power lobbies of Parliament and business where the face of Forest and Bird is clearly seen as a well-briefed and determined advocate for the natural environment.

Yet the image of silver hair persists among our active committee people (most middle-aged plus ourselves) and many are seriously concerned about where the next generation of conservationists will spring from. This is the impetus for the Society's growing interest in "youth activities." Without more younger members, it is argued, conservation will lose some of its edge.



A conservationist of the future? Fears have been expressed that insufficient young people are joining conservationist groups like Forest and Bird and that the Society should actively secure more young members. Photo: G Hutching

That particular generalisation is unfair. Older people form the powerhouse behind most New Zealand lobbies. They usually have more time and better means to give to public service: often their longer view of change provides the very spur to taking action. Concern that there are "not enough younger people coming on" is, however, common in many of New Zealand's clubs and societies. The fact is younger people are frequently under pressure to do other things.

Friends of the future

Forest and Bird is not alone in wanting to



Young parents are often too hard pressed by family and work commitments to devote time to conservation. Later, however, they come into their own when they become the "powerhouse" behind the conservation lobby. Photo: A Bryant

secure its next generation of activists. The more immediate point though is to win more interest in preserving the environment. Young people are the obvious friends of the future for tomorrow they will be the trustees of what is left. Forest and Bird wants to secure their interest now.

To do this the Society has been debating a campaign to secure and extend its younger members. There has been considerable support for the appointment of an education officer. Branch councillors contributed a raft of ideas at a recent meeting in Napier, showing how many branches have involved the interests of younger people. Gathering together the successes from many branches, and learning the lessons from some failures, it seems the Society already has a broad pool of experience with

special youth groups. Instead of re-inventing the wheel, the Society may well turn the experiences to advantage in developing a national approach to broadening its membership among the young.

The matter is more critical now than a generation ago. Then most of us were but a generation or so "off the farm". In a rural country most people had some direct experience of the outdoors and how it responds to bushfire and clearance. Now New Zealand has become a much more urban country. With such distancing from the environment how will people learn to care, let alone respect it? This is a challenge for Forest and Bird. We need an electorate of people who care for conservation, for increasingly the arguments over the natural environment are decided by politics — not