

*'A virgin kahikatea forest affords one of the most striking sights in New Zealand forest scenery. Straight unbranched trunks rise one after the other in endless series . . . ; The naked symmetrical shafts tapering almost imperceptibly, appear to form dense walls which completely shut out every glimpse of the outer world.'*

## Only 2% of the original forest remains

Few New Zealanders alive today would recognise this scene for it is kahikatea forest itself which has been shut out from most of the country. Only on the narrow coastal plains of South Westland do mature kahikatea forests still survive. Most of these remnant forests, which amount to no more than 2 percent of the original extent of kahikatea forest, are unprotected. South Westland's remote setting and surrounding physical barriers have so far largely protected these forests from exploitation. Timber millers, who know the tree somewhat derisively as white pine, are now seeking to log these forests as they rapidly exhaust available supplies of indigenous timber to the north.

Fortunately, kahikatea forest has a determined ally in the forest conservation movement. Conservationists are seeking permanent legal protection for all the kahikatea forests of South Westland. They want them included along with the other publicly-owned natural lands of South Westland in the South-West New Zealand World Heritage area. This is the major forest campaign of 1987 when the Government will decide the future of these forests.

## Food basket of the forest.

Kahikatea forest is at its best in the autumn. Female trees may bear an extraordinary abundance of lush purple and orange coloured fruit. In a good season, a fruiting kahikatea – called "mapua" by the Maori – can produce up to 800kg of fruit containing about 4,500,000 seeds. Fruit-eating birds such as pigeon, tui, bellbird and parakeet flock into the forests whose seeds are widely dispersed in their droppings.

The highly delicious fruits were also keenly sought by the early Maori. In daring feats of strength and skill they climbed the tall trees to collect fruit in baskets which were lowered to the ground by a cord. The Maori people made use of the kahikatea in other ways too; soot obtained by burning the hard resinous heartwood was used as a fine pigment for tattooing and spears were also fashioned from the strong heartwood known as mapara.

## New Zealand's most primitive podocarp

Scientists have an equally fascinating account of the origins of kahikatea which they know as *Dacrycarpus dacrydioides*. Like rimu and most of our other big timber trees, kahikatea belongs to the Podocarp family (seed suspended on a fleshy foot or carpel). This is an ancient Southern Hemisphere gymnosperm family of mostly forest trees whose evolutionary lineage can be traced back to the Gondwanaland forests of the Mesozoic.



Kahikatea fruit.  
Photo: Mary McEwen

*"It was as straight as an arrow, and tapered but little in proportion to its height . . . the finest timber my eyes ever beheld . . ."* — James Cook writing in his journal, 1769. Sadly, this tall tree and its companions below the Franz Josef glacier were clear felled in early 1986 despite conservation protests against the transfer of this former Crown land. Photos: Gerry McSweeney

Kahikatea is the most primitive of New Zealand's podocarps. Fossil pollen grains from *Dacrycarpus*, of which kahikatea is the only modern day representative in New Zealand, occur in 110 million-year-old deposits found in Fiordland and the south Nelson district.

Today's kahikatea swamp forests probably closely resemble the forests of ancient times before mountain building commenced. These are truly dinosaur forests — nothing as ancient occurs anywhere else in the world. Before settlement, kahikatea forests spread across most fertile lowlands

