

# Parks of the People

## New Zealand's Natural Heritage

by David Thom, Chairman, National Parks and Reserves Authority

The national park idea had its birth in the United States, with the declaration of the Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Just two years later the idea was imported into New Zealand, to become the basis of an historic action in 1887. Over the century which has followed, New Zealanders have created their own national park ethic, an approach to administration, and a national park system of international standing.

The journey of the national park idea in New Zealand is very much a journey of discovery about the real nature of New Zealand. For the major part of the one hundred years of the journey, the focus has been on scenery; areas where beauty and drama captured the imagination of European settlers, without any need to ponder the reasons for beauty and drama. Another very important factor has been land protection; initially an important influence in the formation of Egmont National Park, and the most important aspect in the formation of Urewera National Park.

### Park origins

The origin of Tongariro National Park was a very special and unusual story from the mainstream of our history, and springing from the very different cultural values put on land by Maori and European: the one, protection of sacred heritage; the other, to safeguard the mountains against the sort of exploitation that impelled the Yellowstone decision. New Zealand's second National Park, Egmont, in 1900 followed a more

conventional pattern. The Provincial Government of Taranaki laid the foundations with the reservation of a radius around the mountain in 1875. Much of Taranaki was at that time covered with forest that was swept away in the 1880s and 90s by the rapid development of dairy farming which followed the successful application of refrigeration.

The great scientist Leonard Cockayne was a major influence in the formation of Arthur's Pass National Park. Cockayne understood and pointed to the significance of unique evolution in New Zealand, and regarded Arthur's Pass as an important example of trans-alpine floral transition. Cockayne's classical ecological survey of Tongariro National Park in 1908 with E Philips Turner eventually enlarged Tongariro National Park to something approaching the area it is today.

Initial reservations in Fiordland which followed soon after the early Arthur's Pass reservations were promoted by arguments for tourism values, largely by Thomas Mackenzie, later the foundation president of the Native Bird Protection Society. Science as a justification for national park formation submerged, after Cockayne, although the New Zealand Institute and the later Royal Society were strong advocates for scientific protection, and promoted, year after year, the special circumstances of natural history in New Zealand. It was branches of the New Zealand Institute that in the 1880s pressed successfully for the establishment of Resolution and Little Barrier Islands as



sanctuaries for native birds.

By the 1880s decline in native bird populations was very marked. From the 1840s on, acclimatisation, with very little consideration for consequences, had been pursued with astonishing zeal, with an even more astonishing number of importations of animals and plants. The first rabbit plagues led to the introduction of stoats, weasels, and ferrets, which increased the attack on native birdlife. While burning of forest increased steadily from the 1840s, forest destruction by fire reached a new and terrible level in the 1880s and 1890s, as by this time a railway and road system had greatly extended access inland.

Even at this time, however, a large area of the central North Island was relatively unaffected. Development, European-style, had

A tourist party on the Franz Josef Glacier, 1906. Photo: Canterbury Museum