

They admit their small, scattered population cannot undertake these projects on its own. Local tourist operators believe one of the best ways this can be achieved is through a partnership with Forest and Bird and the Department of Conservation. However, they are keen to ensure their environment does not suffer through over-commercialisation. In a report to the South Westland Working Party they noted that: "The Haast area appeals to those who are compatible with and sympathetic to untamed areas and we want it promoted as such."

Life has never been easy in untamed Haast. The isolation, climate, poor soils, heavy forest cover and extensive wetlands have made this a difficult area for human settlement. However, recent archaeological work has revealed an unexpected series of major pre-European Maori settlements in the region. It seems that Jackson Bay (Okahu) was once the centre of a major trading network in greenstone whose source lay in the inland ultramafic belt of the Red Hills. These settlements had all but vanished when Europeans arrived in the 1800s.

After South Westland's gold mining boom collapsed in the late 1860s, special government-funded settlements were founded at the unlikely sites of Jackson Bay and Smoothwater Bay to reverse the population decline. These soon proved to be foolishly ambitious and had disappeared within a decade. Since then there has been gradual economic development based on farming in the river valleys, commercial fishing of whitebait and sea fish, game recovery (red deer and chamois) and tourism. The 1960s saw a dramatic upsurge in tourism with the completion of the Haast highway. More than 300,000 tourists now travel this highway each year and are catered for in the Haast

district by a major tourist hotel, a motor camp and motels at Haast, Okuru and Lakes Paringa and Moeraki.

### Chequered sawmilling history

Sawmilling has had a very chequered history in the region. In the 1960s a large mill was established near Haast by Carters, an Auckland-based firm, to mill private resources. Poor economics and a dwindling estate of unlogged private forest saw the mill close in 1979. Local people have mixed feelings about this saga. While concerned about the population loss, they were relieved to see the exit of a sizeable "rough" element in the imported work force and an end to large scale milling which threatened to turn the Haast plain into a wasteland. During their short stay, Carters felled most of the forest between the Okuru and Turnbull Rivers.

Carters were replaced by a small sawmill that eked out the remaining private timber. After several changes of ownership it closed last year because it was unable to sell its timber on the glutted South Island timber market.

Local confidence in the fledgling sphagnum moss industry took a nosedive last year as well when a sizeable moss plant on the old Carters mill site closed because of marketing problems.

### The future – a realistic view

What of the future? June Johnston, local motelier and garage owner, takes a realistic view. "What we are seeing at Haast with the increasing emphasis on protection and tourism is part of a world wide trend. Unless we adapt we could end up as extinct as the moa."

June has joined forces with motor camp owner Brian Glubb and storekeeper Ian

Rendall to explore new ways of capitalising on Haast's potential for nature tourism. They are ideal people for the task as they share a great love of the Haast environment. Each of them treasures a personal copy of Jonathon White's book of landscape paintings which features a striking cover painting of tall kahikatea swamp forest beside Ship Creek — Haast's answer to the Everglades. White, a Forest and Bird member from Edgecumbe, is a regular visitor to Haast and is considered by the locals to have captured the essence of the New Zealand rainforest better than any other painter.

Their delight in nature may come as a surprise but everyone at Haast it seems has a great store of fascinating anecdotes about the abundant wildlife on their doorsteps. Birds that have disappeared from most parts of the country are commonplace here. A falcon recently put on an entertaining performance when it trapped a bunch of sparrows under a pile of bread crates outside the store.

Fernbirds and booming bitterns abound in the wetland alongside June Johnston's Erewhon Motel. Banded dotterel and godwits share the adjacent paddock with her herd of Timor ponies, a tourist attraction in their own right.

Brian Glubb tells of a kiwi hunt with the Wildlife Service in Waiaototo forest next to his motorcamp and hearing 14 individual bittern along the edge of the vast Waiaototo Swamp. Ironically, the extensive wetlands of the Haast plain mean that local shotgun enthusiasts have to stick to claybird shooting. The waterfowl have such a wide choice of wetlands they can easily avoid a handful of duckshooters.

The local residents' observations have made an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of wildlife in the Haast area. For example, *Powelliphanta* snails were first recorded in the area by Ian Rendall and a fellow deer shooter who had noticed seagulls collecting them in the Roaring Billy Valley.

### Bird watchers' delight

Ian came to Haast in 1963 from the Orkney Islands. Attracted here by its natural beauty himself, he considers Haast has an untapped potential for nature tourism. "Bird watchers would have a field day here. Our forests are alive with birdlife and the wetlands teem with waterfowl and wading birds. You can even watch Fiordland crested penguins waddle across the beach from the roadside near Knights Point."

The Haast tourist operators have been impressed by Forest and Bird's South Westland Adventure Tours. Eighty people came on the three pioneering tours last year and spent a week with my wife Barbara and I enjoying the South Westland outdoors. One of the tours was run mid-winter to demonstrate the potential for winter tourism.

Tourists traditionally avoid South Westland in winter, yet at this time of year the weather is usually fine and mild, while the snow-clad Alps are at their photogenic best.

Few people realise that the sunshine hours at Haast equal those of Christchurch. The plentiful rainfall usually comes in short sharp bursts (18 inches in 24 hours is the Haast record) and is quickly followed by

## The Haast Experience

Too often the residents of South Westland have been depicted in a somewhat less than flattering manner. We would like to dispel the "chainsaw and box of matches" myth, once and for all. In fact, we would like to invite wilderness connoisseurs to add Haast to their "Must See" list.

Haast can delight you, it can frustrate you, but most of all it will challenge you. This is an environment which can bring endless enjoyment to those able to meet its challenges. A very wide range of activities can be arranged. Forest and coastal walks, historic Chinese gold workings, hunting, fishing, jet-boating, scenic flights, canoeing, rafting, etc. We have penguins, bitterns, falcons, kaka, fern birds, carnivorous snails, and fur seals, to mention but a few. In fact, the Haast area can offer a very wide range of activities to suit every pocket and ability. We locals think that we can enhance the Haast experience, and we are very keen to become involved.

We at this time are very actively in-



*Ian Rendall, Haast store manager, June Johnston, motellier, and Topaz: "We would like to extend an unconditional welcome to all conservationists."*

involved in promotion, and would like to extend an unconditional welcome to all conservationists. Come and marvel at our mountain, rave about our rivers, fantasize about our forests and enjoy our exaggerations.

Ideally, the Haast Experience should relax the mind, sharpen the senses, purify the soul and exercise the body. Surely, the complete experience.

**Ian Rendall**