

Molesworth Controversy

by Gerard Hutching

Molesworth Station, 182,000 hectares in size, has long been a mystery to the general public. Ever since the huge inland Marlborough farm block was taken over by the Crown earlier this century, it has proved difficult for people to gain access to this high country wilderness.

However, the appearance of the Molesworth Strategy Plan in 1986 led conservationists and recreationists to believe that the former "lock-out" attitude of the farm management would change. The Plan admitted that few of the conservation or recreation values of Molesworth were known, but pledged to open up the station to the public.

Such was the intention; however, when Society conservation officer Kevin Smith organised a Forest and Bird trip to Molesworth in Labour Weekend last year, he found that old attitudes die hard.

In early October he arranged with station manager Don Reid that more than 100 people could visit the Acheron Valley, noted for its many lizards and large nesting bird populations (stilt, oyster catcher, shag, black-fronted tern, dotterel, black-billed gull).

Two weeks later Mr Reid contacted Barbara Devery, Kevin Smith's wife, to pass the message on to her absent husband that access was now denied on the grounds that the Forest and Bird group were "stirrers". Two days later Kevin Smith telephoned Mr Reid, pointing out that as a management plan was about to be released, a visit to the area would help the public make informed comment in their submissions. After a half hour heated debate consent was grudgingly given.

When a Forest and Bird field trip finally reached the area, they were accosted by a farm worker who demanded an explanation for their presence on the property.

Access was also a problem in the western zone of the station, where supposedly the

public are allowed open access via the Electricity Corporation's road from Jacks Pass following the Clarence River past Lake Tennyson through to the Tarndale Lakes. At the weekend, however, there was a sign saying "private road, no unauthorized entry" at the first turn-off from Hanmer and a "road closed" sign and rope across the road at the St James Station, 30 km along the road.

Despite the discouragement, over 100 Forest and Bird members spent two marvellous days exploring Molesworth over Labour Weekend. They discovered many of the special plants of inland Marlborough, climbed mountains, watched many birds nesting in the Severn and Clarence riverbeds and came to understand a little of the past and present difficulties in farming Molesworth. For many the Molesworth visit was a nostalgic reunion. Nearly 60 years after his first trip through Molesworth on horse-back, Mr Alfred Gollan of Wellington came back to Molesworth and led many younger Forest and Bird members in a stiff two hour climb of Pudding Hill.

Hopefully the problems Forest and Bird experienced in gaining responsible access to Molesworth will be a thing of the past when the long promised management plan is finally released.

The 1986 strategy plan, on which the draft management plan is supposedly based, recognised the major public interest in access to Molesworth. It proposed opening up the western sector of Molesworth to public access at any time. The central sector along the Acheron-Molesworth station road was to be open to the public over January-February only. Public submissions on the strategy plan almost unanimously asked for more liberal access provisions. The Acheron road limitation in particular seems unfortunate. It is a good standard metal road built with public funds and should be available for use on a permit system at least for all summer.

Over this 1987-88 summer Conservation Department officials erected nearly 200 public information signs through Molesworth to guide visitors. They also operated a register of visitors.

Unfortunately in developing a management plan from the 1986 strategy plan officials have not consulted with conservation

and recreation organisations. In his February 1987 decision to retain Molesworth in Crown ownership Deputy Prime Minister, Geoffrey Palmer set up a Molesworth management committee comprised of two DoC officials and two Landcorp staff chaired by Southland farmer, Bernard Pinney. This committee was charged with supervising a team to prepare the management plan and required by Mr Palmer "to consult closely with interest groups in the preparation of the plan." This was reiterated by then-Conservation Minister, Russell Marshall, in response to our concerns about being shut out of the plan preparation.

However the planning team's work has been conducted in total secrecy. The draft plan has been finalised. We have been informed by staff involved in the exercise that conservation and recreation remain subservient to cattle ranching.

No specific provisions have been made to reserve important natural areas such as sensitive wetlands. The plan does not abide by Government policy to destock severely eroded Class 7e and 8 mountain lands. It appears to have completely ignored most of the 175 public submissions on the earlier strategy plan.

The draft plan will shortly be circulated for public comment. It will be very difficult to change at this late stage unless there is a major public campaign to elevate the status of recreation and nature conservation on Molesworth. Your help will therefore soon be vital in writing submissions to change the draft plan.

The Molesworth news is not all bad however. Above all else, the property does remain in public ownership after our huge 1986-87 campaign. Despite access difficulties 100 people have explored the vast interior of Molesworth and discovered something of its magic.

Molesworth's natural treasures are also at last the focus of more intensive scientific study. Molesworth is being surveyed at present as part of the Protected Natural Areas Programme. The important step following the survey will be to reserve areas identified for their high conservation value.

Submissions on the Molesworth Management Plan are invited to Landcorp Box 794 Blenheim by 29 February 1988.

Hitch almost stopped Molesworth field trip

By JANE DUNBAR

A last-minute hitch almost prevented a field trip into the vast 182,000ha Molesworth station, at the week-end. The trip was organised by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society and attracted 100 people from throughout the South Island. Last Monday, however, the manager of Molesworth, Mr Don Reid, telephoned the society to say that in spite of prior approval the group would not be allowed in after all. It was pointed out to him, however, that a man-

agement plan for the station was soon to be released and a visit to the area would help members of the public make informed comment in their subsequent submissions. He then agreed to allow access, and on Saturday morning the group travelled in by mini bus. There were two field trips at the week-end. The first went up the Clarence River past Lake Tennyson to the Island Pass and then down into the headwaters of the Wairau River at Tarndale. On Saturday evening there was a discussion about Molesworth's future — the management plan and question of public access. The society's director, Dr Gerry McSweeney, said he was disappointed representatives from Landcorp and the Conservation Department had declined to go on the trip. "The era of shutting the public out of Molesworth is over," he said. The second field trip went down the Clarence River to the old Acheron house, accommodation then up the Acheron Gorge to the Severn River.

