

# Bitterns on their Doorstep

*West Coast conservation officer, Kevin Smith, looks at Haast and its people.*

**H**aast has one of the most splendid natural settings in New Zealand. Some people, however, would have you believe that Haast is a rain-lashed hamlet sitting in the middle of a mosquito-infested swamp, and that the local residents have little time for nature and even less time for nature lovers; a petrol stop between the glaciers and Queenstown, but most definitely not a place to linger.

Yet, if you are tempted to join the increasing number of tourists who stop at Haast, you will discover an area endowed with ecological riches and natural scenic beauty. Haast offers unparalleled opportunities for wilderness recreation from challenging back country tramps to leisurely canoeing on a myriad of hidden, slow-flowing waterways.

The local people will surprise you too. They willingly share with you their love of Haast's many natural wonders and endeavour to make your stay the experience of a lifetime.

## Environmental spotlight

Haast is in the national environmental spotlight at the moment. Later this year, the Government will make decisions on the future of the publicly-owned forests and wetlands of South Westland between the Cook River and Big Bay. Conservationists are seeking full legal protection for these public lands which contain the country's last kahikatea forests, most extensive freshwater wetlands and exceptional populations of

forest and wetland birds.

The Haast district lies in the heart of this region. With 278 people it is the major population centre.

Haast people are determined that they do not become "conservation casualties" as exaggerated claims by anti-conservationists raise fears that they may be forced to leave the district. Local fisherman Jenny Barratt represents their interests on the South Westland Working Party. This was set up by the Government to make recommendations on future land use options for the State forests of southern South Westland. Other members of the Working Party include representatives of the timber industry, West Coast local bodies, and several government departments. Since June, I have been on the committee representing public conservation interests.

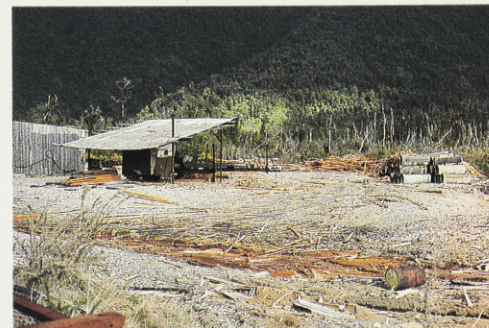
Jenny says she is not opposed to reserves if they can be shown as vital and do not affect the local people. Conservationists must be sensitive to that challenge if they are to achieve their goals. Significant progress was made in reconciling the needs of local people and conservationists last year when Forest and Bird Director, Gerry McSweeney and I negotiated directly with the residents' action committees, and visited many of the region's households to listen to local people's concerns. An interim agreement was reached covering major issues such as grazing leases, whitebaiting, game recovery and tourism developments.

## Partnership needed

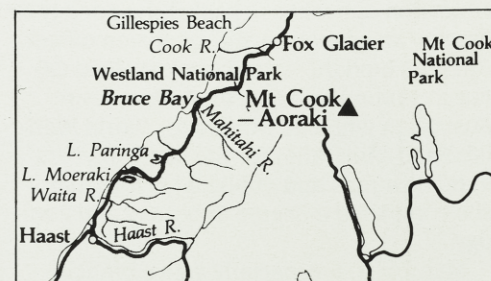
Suspensions about conservation still exist but local people have also been quick to realise that conservation management can bring them social and economic benefits from increased tourism. They are seeking a partnership with the Government in tourism promotion and development to help them build up their nature-based tourist industry.



*John Dennes has confidence in the future of Haast tourism. He is one of the new owners of the Haast tourist hotel.*



*Sawmill at Haast. After a chequered career, this sawmill closed last year as it was unable to compete with mills closer to the market.*



*Inset Opposite: Forest and Bird South Westland natural history tours have proved immensely popular since they were begun last year. Munro's Beach, Moeraki.*

*Left: Protection of the Haast wetlands and forested streams is essential for the future wellbeing of the area's major whitebait fishery. Whitebaiting on the Okuru River.*