From the Wet West

proposed additions to Arthur's Pass National Park

To run down a Canterbury shingle scree is to almost defy gravity. Your giant steps down the moving mountain resemble Neil Armstrong's moonwalk.

However, if you resist the temptation to run, and instead stop and look around, you discover life amongst the shattered greywacke; large black scree butterflies, cryptically coloured grasshoppers and scree plants. Grey, blue and purple leaved plants emerge from the screes, capped in summer with rosettes of fragrant white, yellow, pink and even black flowers. The penwiper, black scree cotula, yellow forget-me-not, fleshy lobelia, red willowherb, and Haast's buttercup are but a few of these. On a distant ridge crest, what seems to be flocks of sheep are on closer viewing found to be massive immobile cushions of white *Raoulia* or vegetable sheep.

Our eastern mountain screes host some of New Zealand's most distinctive plants. They are uniquely adapted with their long tap roots, succulent and hairy leaves and cushion forms to a life of extremes of temperature and moisture on a moving hillside of shattered stone. However, unfortunately they are less well adapted to introduced browsing mammals. For example, the fleshy penwiper plant — a member of the cabbage family — and Haast's buttercup are heavily grazed by sheep, chamois and hares.

These plants are largely confined to the eastern South Island mountains yet remain largely outside national parks or reserves.

It is a situation that mirrors the historical absence of lowland native forests — the merchantable forests — from our park system.

Grazing Leases Prevented Park Addition

Because most of the dry eastern mountains were already under pastoral lease tenure and grazed by sheep they were not included in the parks established along the wetter Southern Alps main divide where the specialised scree plants are largely absent.

Today, emphasis on ecological representation in our national parks means we need to reappraise the present boundaries of our parks and identify opportunities for extension. In response to public pressure and with the support of catchment authorities, government officials and pastoral lessees, cautious steps are now being started to recognise the national park values of the eastern mountainlands and add to the parks areas retired from grazing.

Each of our South Island main divide national parks is a candidate for such eastward extensions. East of Nelson Lakes National Park are the arid mountainlands of the Rainbow and St James pastoral leases and Molesworth Station. Much of the Ben Ohau range alongside Mt Cook National Park is now destocked as are much of the upper Shotover-Richardson mountains east of Mt Aspiring National Park and the Livingstone mountains east of Fiordland.

This article focuses on the 94,497-hectare Arthur's Pass National Park where a series of recent and proposed additions, both in the west (Deception-Taipo rivers) and in the east (Cox-Binser-Candlestick Range) offer the opportunity for a park covering the complete ecological sequence from wet lowland rainforest to semi-desert shrublands and scree.

30 Years Coming

Arthur's Pass National Park was created in 1929, centred around the transalpine pass and peaks at the head of the Waimakariri River. However, as early as 1955, the Arthur's Pass National Park Board started moves to add to the National Park a major area — the Cox River — to the park. The wheels of bureaucracy move slowly. Finally, 30 years later in 1985 the public was formally invited to comment on this proposed 19,230 hectare Cox-Binser Saddle addition. Unfortunately the boundaries chosen for this addition were based primarily on ten-