

Trans-Tasman links

Tasmania, which I visited last summer with a group of New Zealand ecologists and conservationists, is only a 3-hour flight away. In an ecological sense it is also quite close, sharing similar types of alpine communities and temperate rainforests which distinguishes them as once belonging to the ancient southern supercontinent Gondwana.

However, New Zealand and Tasmania are in some respects quite distant. This country drifted completely away from Australia more than 60 million years ago, whereas Tasmania was still linked to mainland Australia during the last Ice Age, which ended about 12,000 years ago.

I am reminded of this dichotomy — this similarity and yet this distinction — by the theme of the Society's annual appeal, which this year is "Threatened Species".

The Tasmanian approach to conservation has not been influenced by the existence of large numbers of rare and endangered animals — especially birds — that sadly we have in New Zealand. Their fascinating marsupials have learned to live with predators and fire over millenia and most appear to be coping, although forest destruction through logging has placed some species under strain. Fire also poses problems because in Tasmania not only are they frequent but some 97 percent are lit by humans. They use fire as protection against uncontrollable fires, but those fires themselves can get out of control. Such fires — I was told of one which burned through 60,000ha of mixed eucalypt/rainforest in just two days — might be expected to have a catastrophic effect on wildlife. The reality is that they don't although frequent forest fires are having an adverse effect on the ecology of the forests — their structure and diversity are both simplified.

In a sense, then, it is easier to rally around the conservation cause in New Zealand. The fact that some 90 percent of our plants and animals occur nowhere else in the world is powerful evidence that this country is a very special place. Numerous of our threatened species are captivating and therefore gain public sympathy more readily than forests do.

Some of these rare and endangered animals are featured in this issue. Just to prove that the Society is concerned not only with appealing birds, we have begun a "save the giant weta" campaign to rescue from extinction the last known survivors on the mainland.

The story of hoiho, the yellow-eyed penguin, is by now well known to many New Zealanders. Unfortunately it had to wait until virtually the last of its habitat was destroyed by humans before a campaign was mounted to halt its slide into oblivion.

By necessity we are selective when it comes to threatened species, simply because there are so many of them. Thus, for example, there has been little publicity given to the fate of the New Zealand dotterel, which breeds along northern North Island sandy coastlines. An article in this issue points out that we cannot be complacent about any of our special native animals. Even though dotterel numbers have remained constant for the last 20 years, we could see numbers of these long-lived birds plummet suddenly.

My comment about how much simpler it is to enlist public sympathy for captivating animals than for habitats needs to be qualified. The informed and concerned public — that is to say, Forest and Bird members — have responded magnificently to our recent plea to save the forests and wetlands of South Westland. In the years I have spent in the conservation movement, I can recall few times that such consistently high calibre submissions have been made to government. I congratulate you all.

I hope you will give equal support to the conservation of our non-forest ecosystems east of the Main Divide which are so poorly represented in the reserves system. The Protected Natural Areas Programme in the South Island is concentrating its efforts in this rain shadow region, as outlined in this issue, in an attempt to identify the best of which remains before it is too late. I call on your support for this exercise as well.

Dr Alan Mark, President



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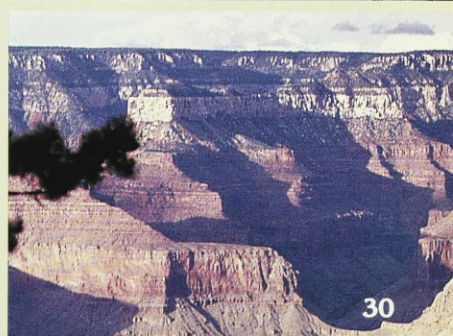
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