

NATIONAL PARKS NATIONAL TREASURES

In 1987/88 New Zealand celebrated the first 100 years of its national parks. Since the gifting of Tongariro National Park in 1887 by Tuwharetoa chief Te Heuheu Tukino, a further 11 parks have been added to the system. In that time too, the bush wren, native thrush, the laughing owl and the huia have become extinct, and many other birds have disappeared from the mainland. A huge area of native forest has been destroyed since then, causing many plants to become extinct as well. We must set aside national parks and reserves if we are to keep some of New Zealand in a natural state.

What is a National Park?

A national park is a relatively large area (at least 10,000 hectares) that contains scenery of such distinctive quality, ecological systems or natural features so beautiful, unique, or scientifically important that their preservation is in the national interest. They are sometimes referred to as New Zealand's natural "crown jewels" because they are regarded as the most special of our natural areas. Some of New Zealand's national parks, such as Fiordland and Mt Cook/Westland are so important that they have been put on the World Heritage List, joining world famous areas such as the Grand Canyon and Mt Everest National Park. But national parks are not just magnificent mountains and spectacular lakes; they can also contain wetlands and shrublands.

Why do we need them?

It is a sign of a nation's maturity when it decides to set aside areas as national parks. We create them for two main purposes: firstly, they are meant to protect the plants, animals and landscapes of an area forever. Secondly, they are places where people can enjoy themselves, whether tramping, picknicking, skiing, canoeing or bird watching.

National parks are also used for environmental education and scientific research. Researchers have also found out that people don't even have to visit national parks to appreciate them. These people feel secure that national parks are there, protecting the environment for future generations.

New Zealand has many confusing types of parks. Their overall name is "protected natural areas" and they could be any of the following: National park, nature reserve, scenic reserve, ecological area, conservation park, scientific reserve, wildlife reserve, historic reserve, maritime parks, wilderness areas.



Te Heuheu Tukino IV, paramount chief of the Tuwharetoa who gifted Tongariro as a national park.
Photo: Burton Bros

The Government is reviewing the different types of park and soon there should be fewer names to describe them. However, it is certain that the internationally recognised title "National Park" will survive this review.

New Zealand's first National Park

Tongariro National Park, in the centre of the North Island, was gifted in 1887, 15 years

after the world's first national park, Yellowstone, was created. Since then 11 other parks have been added to the national park system. The last was Paparoa National Park, in 1987.

Appropriate activities

What can people do in a national park? Because we established them mainly to protect an area's natural features, we don't