

# Gerry McSweeney: Cherishing Our Natural Heritage



Anne Saunders and Gerry McSweeney with children Michael and Clare. Photo: Martin Hunter, Dominion.

**I**n 1983 Dr Gerry McSweeney became Forest and Bird's Conservation Director. Previously he was Park Scientist at Franz Josef Glacier 1979-82 and from 1975-79 carried out research work in South Island tussock grasslands. He had also spent years in voluntary conservation work as Chairman of the Christchurch branch of the Native Forest Action Council.

In the six and a half years he has led Forest and Bird's conservation staff, it has grown from two to nine people spread throughout the country. Society membership has nearly doubled; there has been a fourfold increase in its budget, and a major expansion in its conservation activity and achievements. In July Gerry left Forest and Bird to develop a wilderness tourist lodge at Lake Moeraki in South Westland with his wife Anne Saunders and children Katie (6), Michael (3) and Clare (2).

**F&B:** What changes have you seen and what do you regard as New Zealand's greatest conservation achievements during your time as Conservation Director.

**G.McS:** The biggest change is that the Government has stopped handing out millions of dollars for environmental destruction in subsidies to the private sector and by direct funding of Government agencies. Our first editions of *Conservation News* in 1983 chronicled this. For example Forest Service were flat out burning bush for pine trees at Mohaka near Wairoa, in Tongariro Forest and in North Westland. Lands and Survey were clearing important forests and native shrubland at Te Puki in the Far North, in the Waitere kiwi

block near Napier and in the Tongariro forest. Using forestry encouragement grants Aetna Life Insurance were burning off native forest in the Hunuas, Caxtons were torching Eastern Bay of Plenty forests and Carter Holts doing the same next to the Urewera National Park. Everywhere natural land outside parks and reserves was considered ripe for "development" and millions were wasted pursuing economically and environmentally crazy dreams.

Thanks to Labour since 1984, the subsidies have gone and New Zealand now has a Department of Conservation protecting nearly a third of the country including most of our publicly owned natural land. That is an enormous conservation achievement. We can now concentrate on protecting nature on private land, in raising awareness about conserving the seas and seacoast and in fostering a conservation conscience so that New Zealanders link their individual actions to the global environmental crisis.

**F&B:** Forest and Bird has been campaigning recently on marine, ozone and greenhouse issues, to name a few that are outside its traditional areas of concern. Would you like to see a continuation of that trend and if so, is the Forest and Bird name still applicable?

**G.McS:** Yes, I would. We're New Zealand's largest and most active environmental group. Our objects clearly require us to protect the broad natural environment. We can't afford to narrowly restrict those objects just to birds and native forests. Loss of the ozone layer, global warming, exploitation of our fisheries and fertile soils, toxic substances and pollution threaten not just the natural areas and wildlife we have all helped save. They also

threaten the future of all of us on this planet.

Our dramatic increase in membership over recent years shows that New Zealanders want to be part of an organisation that is leading efforts to save our heritage and halt the squandering of resources like soil, fisheries and forests.

If we're effective in our actions, I don't think our name is all that important. The full title is a mouthful – especially with the media. But abbreviated to "Forest and Bird" it is now widely known and respected.

**F&B:** What do you think are the strengths of Forest and Bird?

**G.McS:** I think our greatest strength is our ability to act as a team at all levels from staff and Executive to branches and members. Everyone matters. We couldn't operate without the thousands of volunteers who work for Forest and Bird. I have always been inspired by the dedicated and enthusiastic people in every part of New Zealand who are at the forefront of their local and national conservation issues. There is a real sense of family in Forest and Bird – so much so that everywhere I've always been graciously hosted in people's homes and enjoyed their company in their local district. We can't afford to lose that sense of trust and family as the organisation gets bigger.

Equally I know that it gives our members great confidence when they face the arrogance and power of many development proponents to know that help from our Executive and staff, and through them access to lawyers, scientists and politicians is only a phone call or letter away.

When I came to Forest and Bird there was still some division and disunity over the failed