

# World Heritage Partnership

Last month the Government delivered an historic document to the headquarters of the World Heritage Convention in Paris.

This was the nomination for the 2.6 million hectare South West New Zealand or Te Wahipounamu World Heritage Area. It embraces four outstanding national parks, and the nation's finest lowland podocarp forests (South Westland and Waitutu). It also now includes the tussock grassland communities of Wanaka's Buchanan Peaks and Te Anau's Mavora Lakes.

This great continuous wilderness is poised to join the elite club of World Heritage sites such as the Great Barrier Reef, Grand Canyon, Serengeti National Park and Sagarmatha (Mt Everest) National Park.

Official acceptance of the proposal, which must surely be a formality, is expected by the middle of 1990, our sesquicentennial year. For the thousands of New Zealander who have campaigned tirelessly over 20 years for the protection of the South West, this will be the highlight of 1990.

Areas that first leapt into prominence as conservation battlegrounds are now universally held to be some of this country's most precious natural gems: Manapouri, Okarito, Waikukupa, Waitutu, Dart, Rowallan, Haast's kahikatea forests, the Red Hills.

Future generations will owe a huge debt to the many people who gave of their time to save the South West, to the professional conservation advocacy of the Department of Conservation, and to the politicians who embraced the wilderness ideal – Geoffrey Palmer, Helen Clark, Philip Woollaston, Ken Shirley, Ian Shearer, Jim Bolger, Simon Upton. Kerry Burke's commitment to UNESCO's World Heritage philosophy was responsible for muting bizarre claims by some West Coast business interests that the World Heritage proposal was a communist plot.

Work begins shortly on the Rainforest Visitor Centre at Haast, ushering in a new era where nature tourism is being integrated with traditional activities in this frontier town. Forest and Bird's former director, Gerry McSweeney, who pioneered the South West concept, has taken the partnership between local people and conservationists a step further and now as a tourist operator at Lake Moeraki is working with his neighbours to promote Haast's natural wonders.

At Whataroa the white heron, once reviled as a symbol of conservation, is now the proud symbol of the town. Sensitive trips to the colony are conducted by the local Arnold family.

Just as important as the partnership between conservationists and local people has been the partnership between conservationists and the tangata whenua. The Ngai Tahu Trust Board fully support the South West World Heritage proposal. Indeed, the Trust Board together with Forest and Bird are listed in the nomination document as having assisted the Department of Conservation in its preparation. Virtually all of the lands involved are currently the subject of a claim by the Ngai Tahu before the Waitangi Tribunal. The outcome of this claim will not affect the future protection of the South West or its eligibility for World Heritage status as Ngai Tahu are publicly committed to maintaining the area's protected status in partnership with the Crown should the claim be successful.

From Aoraki to Fiordland the area is seen as the cradle of Ngai Tahu belief. The maintenance of their ancient traditions within the South West is seen by Ngai Tahu as being as important as the natural and scientific values for which it is recognised by the wider world.

The partnership between the Maori people and the Government over the South West took a further step forward when the Minister of Conservation announced in July that agreement in principle had been reached with the Waitutu Incorporation for a protective permanent lease over the Waitutu Maori land that stretches along the southern coast.

The commitment of the Waitutu Incorporation to the protection of their taonga is a matter for rejoicing. They are to be congratulated for their farsighted stand and it is hoped that negotiations for an enduring agreement are successful.

If such fruitful partnerships can be continued – for example to end the scourge of woodchipping and the plunder of our marine resources – then conservation in New Zealand will be in good heart.

**Dr Alan Mark, President**



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