

# Becomes a Corporate Cause

by Kevin Smith

## Public Captivated

Yet, ever since the seemingly miraculous rescue of the Chatham Island black robin from the brink of extinction, the public have become captivated by the dramatic struggle to save some of our critically endangered species. Don Merton, the Department of Conservation's endangered species specialist, has become a national hero.

But his ingenuity and the tireless efforts of his team of fellow workers can achieve little without adequate funding. Helicopter trips, pest eradication programmes, sophisticated radio telemetry, the servicing requirements of remote field stations, innovative research and so on place a heavy demand on the conservation budget – a pittance compared to a Clyde dam, a couple of frigates or any number of lesser government projects. But in these times of economic restraint, taxpayer funding of threatened species work will always fall short of the optimum.

Forest and Bird's deputy president, Gordon Ell, believes the role of the Threatened Species Fund is to supplement DoC's base level funding, enabling the department to tackle projects that would otherwise be delayed or never get off the ground.

*A track and bowl system on the summit ridge of Little Barrier Island. This one belongs to a male kakapo dubbed Arab. Photo: Brian Lloyd*



"Corporate New Zealand is awakening to the reality that it is to their advantage to support conservation in the 1990s. The public will expect and demand a meaningful commitment from big business towards conservation.

"Enlightened companies and their public relations consultants are looking for opportunities to contribute in a meaningful way to green projects.

"Forest and Bird welcomes this interest and has established the Threatened Species Fund as a vehicle to channel corporate sponsorship into DoC's recovery programmes," Gordon Ell says.

## Critically Endangered

This novel concept became a reality in April when the Fund was launched by the Minister of Conservation, Philip Woollaston, coinciding with the announcement of Comalco's major sponsorship of the critically endangered kakapo. Sadly, just prior to the launch it was announced that the rescue programme had suffered a major setback with the death of a chick and abandonment of an egg on Little Barrier Island. The chick was the first hatched for nine years.

## A Power of Good for Kakapo

Twenty years ago conservationists and industry were locked in bitter confrontation over the proposal to raise scenic Lake Manapouri, touted as "New Zealand's most picturesque lake."

The plan was to lift the lake level by 27 feet in order to provide more water to turn the giant Manapouri hydro station's turbines, which would in turn power the proposed Bluff aluminium smelter.

Even though the hydro station was finally built, along with the aluminium smelter, the conservation movement achieved a major victory in forcing politicians and power planners to scrap the lake raising proposal. In New Zealand the campaign has in retrospect been hailed as marking the birth of the modern environmental movement.

Today Comalco, the smelter company at the centre of the controversy, is one of a number of businesses keen to sponsor "green" projects. Over the next six years Comalco proposes to contribute \$1 million to the rescue programme to save the kakapo, the world's largest and rarest parrot.

Kerry McDonald, chief executive of Comalco NZ Ltd, has a reputation for being a hardnosed businessman. He recently talked with *Forest & Bird* about

why Comalco is prepared to sponsor a rescue programme for the kakapo.

**F&B:** How committed is Comalco to kakapo rescue?

**Kerry McDonald:** A concept was put to us by Forest and Bird and the Department of Conservation. They indicated a time period of five to six years within which they thought the project could achieve some significant success. So we have been willing to discuss an arrangement which envisages an involvement for that period. So, I think that in itself is a pretty substantial commitment on behalf of the company. The fact that there is a regional focus with kakapo, it's got a strong linkage with Southland or the south of the South Island, which is the centre of our operation, gives an added incentive to be involved with it.

**F&B:** What would you say to the sceptics who say you are just conducting a PR exercise and that you are going to give your company a green gloss at the same time as you are negotiating for the purchase of a share of the Manapouri power station?

**KM:** Well, any of the issues we have to deal with, such as negotiations on Man-

apouri and expansion of the smelter, they all stand alone. If we are going to have a substantial presence in New Zealand, if we are going to operate as a New Zealand company, then I regard all this as an important adjunct of our position here – that we are involved in sponsorship of the arts and community-related activities.

So kakapo is simply another facet of that. Now, I think there is likely to be a desirable spin off. Some of the problems we have had in the past we have found have been caused by poor communication, lack of knowledge by both sides, and that's one of the reasons why over the last couple of years we haven't just been adopting a higher profile in advertising – we've been providing a lot more factual information about the company, level of profit, tax paid and so on.

Now I'm hopeful that one of the spin offs of the sponsorship is that we will have an opportunity for contact and discussion. People who have a strong commitment to environmental issues will get a better understanding of our perspective, we in turn will get a better understanding of theirs. I think that will be a very positive process.