

The Torlesse Range – A Natural Museum

FOREST AND BIRD has nominated the Torlesse Range as a Conservation Park. Close to the hearts of many Cantabrians, it has significance beyond Canterbury for its place in the botanical exploration of the country and its importance for mountainland research.

Well known Canterbury conservationist and regional councillor Di Lucas sums up local feeling about the Torlesse Range. "It is a very significant Canterbury landmark, a gateway to the high country, and a recognisable part of the Canterbury landscape. Its protection as a conservation park is important for landscape conservation and important for Canterbury."

The work of DSIR botanist Dr Brian Molloy in the early 1960s into subalpine and alpine plant ecology and soils at Porter's Pass illustrated the history of fire in the area and helped show that land instability has been a feature of the mountains for thousands of years. "This is a very special place," says Dr Molloy, "a natural museum housing much of our soil and vegetation history over the last 15,000 years. It is an extremely important area for biological conservation and, as a Conservation Park, would be a welcome addition to our protected areas."

The range was important in early botanical exploration. Well known alpine plants such as the slim snow tussock (*Chionochloa macra*) and the South Island edelweiss have their type



Di Lucas: "important for conservation."

localities here.

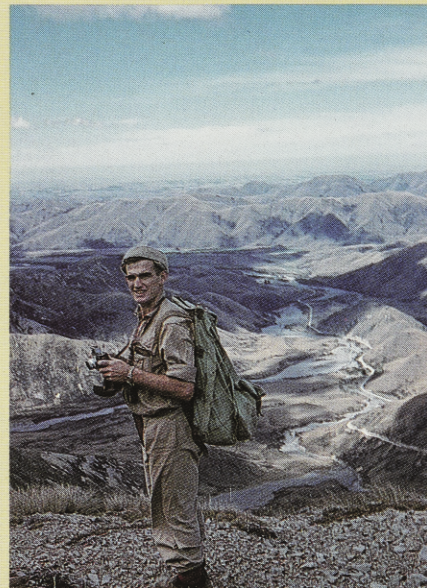
Local recreationists are enthusiastic about the possibility of a conservation park. "The Torlesse Range has been a popular area for mountain recreation for nearly a century. We welcome moves to give it greater protection and coherent management," says Federated Mountain Clubs vice-president David Henson.

Adjoining runholder Richard Johnson of Torlesse Station says, "I believe strongly that the area should be managed for a wider community use than the traditional hunting."

One of the most extensive studies on the range combined the efforts of several scientists to research the processes occurring in one small but significant tributary of the Kowai River. Dr John Hayward, now director of the Centre for Resource Management in Christchurch, researched erosion and stream flow in the Torlesse Stream.

"These were the pioneering studies,

aided by the accessibility of the site and the resources available for extensive field work," says Dr Hayward. They complemented studies of erosion and land stability occurring in other parts of the country and were instrumental in changing perceptions of high country erosion. The Torlesse Range remains a valuable research site and deserves formal recognition," he says.



Botanist Dr Brian Molloy in 1958 carrying out some pioneering research on the ridge to Foggy Peak above Porter's Pass. He supports the concept of a Torlesse Conservation Park over an area he has studied extensively. Photo: Prof. W.R. Philipson

Crown ownership. Over recent years run development has led to the intensification of grazing on the lower country and the destocking of the higher and steeper land. Land over 900 metres on Brooksdale Run is held under pastoral occupation licence with no right of grazing. The licence expired in June 1990; the land is now likely to pass to DoC.

Alpine Playground

While musterers may no longer trudge the steep ridges and scree, it is common to see people's smiling tanned faces emerging along the Porters Pass road after a long and satisfying day botanizing or walking on the range. And just two hours from the road, in a different season, you will hear the hiss of a primus stove from the candelit Kowai Hut as weekend adventurers prepare crampons and ice axes, for the ascent of the snow covered Mt Torlesse or for the steep climb to the Gap. This gunsight notch in the ridge provides stunning views of the Southern Alps to the west and Banks Peninsula to the east.

The Torlesse Range has long been a destination for Canterbury recreationists. Walkers and trampers explore the valleys and peaks, back country skiers and climbers pace the winter snows, botanists revel in the rich and unusual plant communities, and travellers gaze at it from most parts of the highway from Christchurch to Arthur's Pass – an alpine playground within sight of Christ-

church. Yet legal access points remain unmarked and facilities are few. Wilding conifers emerge from the *Dracophyllum* shrublands, introduced broom invades the riverbeds, deer and chamois browse the palatable alpine herbs, and unscrupulous gardeners plunder alpine plants from the roadside at Porters Pass. And nowhere is a dry eastern range protected within our parks and reserves network.

This historic bias in our protected areas system towards the high and forested mountains is nowhere more dramatic than in Canterbury. While extensive areas of beech forest and alpine tops are protected in Arthur's Pass and Mt Cook National Parks and in Craigieburn and Lake Sumner Conservation Parks, only a scattering of pocket handkerchief reserves offer protection for tussock grasslands of the high country and no parks or reserves are centred on the dry rock and scree ranges.

Historical circumstance meant that the foothills ranges of Canterbury, right to the ridge tops, were included in pastoral runs. Forested areas were eventually excluded as State Forest (now Stewardship Area), and for a time establishment of forest on the open rock and scree was considered essential to prevent whole mountainsides slipping to the sea. Now, a recognition that the barren appearance of these mountains is a largely natural phenomenon, and the gradual retire-

ment of much of the higher country from grazing, casts the eastern foothills of Canterbury in a different light.

Few tussock grassland reserves exist anywhere in the east of the Main Divide. Scree and dry rock plant communities have been largely ignored. Yet they are two of the more unusual elements of our native flora, and both remain largely unprotected.

The Torlesse Range is an area that has been a focus for Canterbury's scientific exploration and recreation for many years. It has remarkable and distinct native plant communities. The range's economic importance for grazing is low and local support for its protection is high. It provides a wonderful opportunity to correct the imbalance inherent in the reserve system and to give formal recognition to an area that is refreshingly different from our traditional parks.

A Torlesse Conservation Park would allow us to actively manage an area of scree, rock and tussock grassland for conservation and recreation and to control any threats to their integrity. It would encourage us to advocate a broader concept of conservation, one which includes all ecosystems, and enable us to enhance the opportunities for people to discover these special scree and grasslands.