

## Denis Marshall – National's green conscience



Conservation Minister Denis Marshall gets to grips with one of his areas of responsibility – Antarctica. With him is the manager of the DSIR Antarctic Division, Hugh Logan. Photo: Christchurch Press

**W**ILLIAM SWAINSON (1789-1855) – one of New Zealand's early naturalists – would have approved. His great grandson Denis Marshall was recently appointed Minister of Conservation in the new Bolger administration.

By the time Swainson arrived in New Zealand in 1841, he was well known for his illustrations of birds and shells, although it was as a scientist that he would have preferred to have been remembered. However, Swainson's skills lay with illustration – as a scientist he was a failure – and somewhat discouraged he emigrated to the young colony where he turned to landscapes rather than bird portraits.

Unlike those of his celebrated ancestor, Denis Marshall's strengths lie less in the artistic field than in the administrative. Nevertheless, he has some impeccable credentials for his new position.

"I joined Forest and Bird at an early age, I think I was probably about ten. I used to treasure the magazine, but because I was sent away to boarding school I was not particularly involved in local Forest and Bird activities. Later I became more actively involved in community projects because I've spent more time at home in the last 20 years than in the first 25," Marshall says.

Home these days when he is not in Wellington is a sheep farm near Marton. The 47-year-old father of three is also a director of Rangitikei Marine, a company specialising in jet boats. His wife Annette is developing a family kiwifruit orchard.

Marshall's first active involvement with conservation was his election to the Rangitikei-Wanganui Catchment Board in the 1970s. Later to become the Central Districts Catchment Board, it is the board which in 1988 decided Electricorp should return water to the Wanganui River.

He rose to become deputy chairman during a period of what he describes as "evolution-

ary, probably revolutionary" change on the board.

"I spent nine years on the board and I felt during that time we made a significant contribution to conservation values. We picked up on some issues that were not issues of the day but they are now. For example we initiated the Wanganui minimum flows regime and encouraged farmers to develop farm plans for soil conservation. Lower hill country has been stabilised and any particular part that is likely to suffer from erosion like the Mangaweka deviation was all planted beforehand," Marshall says.

The much criticised – by conservationists – land development policies of the National Government between 1978 and 1982 were not all bad, according to Marshall. If you had a responsible agency such as a catchment board that was prepared to take an overview, then forest destruction could, and was, kept to a minimum. But that was the exception and more than 30,000 ha of native forest and 360,000 ha of shrublands was destroyed to make way for pastureland and pine forest in that period.

Now that National is government again, and considering that one of the cornerstones of their election policy was a commitment to economic growth, does he see a possibility that such controversial land clearances could be repeated?

"Well I think that environmental considerations are a key part of any decision. Once we were ignorant of how developments would affect the environment, but today we know that some of the things we are doing have an adverse effect on our future life on this planet."

Asked if he would like to see the Ministry for the Environment become a control ministry in the same way as Treasury, with an input into all decisions, Marshall is non-committal. However he does believe in the concept of environmental auditing, whereby

a downstream cost is taken into account as well as an immediate benefit.

"Treasury itself ought to be taking recognition of these factors – I think the people in Treasury have a lot to learn about what true costs and true benefits are. We need to broaden their horizons as to what the true financial cost is because the environmental cost could also be a major financial cost at the end of the day for somebody," he says.

The Treasury cost accounting approach has seen a steady decline in the Department of Conservation budget since it was set up in 1987. The new minister would like to usher in an era of stability.

"I think they (staff) have been through so many changes and so many reviews that we will be concentrating on making sure there is some stability and certainty in their operations.

"But I think that what we have to do better is sell ourselves to the general public. It's important that we don't compromise our standards in that but there is still a lot of ground to be made up in terms of selling good conservation values.

"I would acknowledge the tremendous advances that have taken place already in terms of an understanding by many involved in the commercial world, that they need to take into account conservation values. I hope that through the Wanganui example there is an awareness of the need to reach a compromise. An example is the agreement reached with Electricorp in the Waitaki basin where conservation values are being enhanced to the tune of \$3.2 million. That's the sort of thing that we've got to achieve right around the whole country."

On the question of DoC funding, Marshall does not suggest the department will avoid the "razor gang's" attentions, but equally he argues that DoC spending at \$100 million is "small change" compared to big spending votes such as Social Welfare and Education.