

TUATAPERE'S WILD CHALLENGE

by Tim Higham

Competitors on Lake Hauroko race towards the outlet to the Wairaurahiri River. Photo: Tim Higham.



ON JANUARY 12 1991, 22 athletes lined up for the inaugural Wild Challenge race: Tuatapere's equivalent of the Coast to Coast endurance event.

The 6am gathering on the shores of Lake Hauroko was much more significant than the number of entrants in the race indicated.

Auckland Radio 1ZB, having seen a news item in the *New Zealand Herald*, decided to run updates on the race through the day. TV3's Melanie Reid built the race into an action packed and entertaining six-minute *Nightline* piece.

Positive exposure

Within a week race organisers fielded an enquiry from a North Island nature tourism operator about possible accommodation facilities in redundant forestry staff quarters. Tuatapere – it seemed – was finally gaining the positive exposure it deserved.

The town had been in the doldrums: in June, then-deputy Prime Minister Helen Clark announced to Forest and Bird's Council meeting a comprehensive ban on native timber exports. Outraged Tuatapere farmers, counting on the income from clearing and chipping beech forest on marginal land, defiantly felled as many trees as possible before the cut-off

date, parading chainsaws and sawdust in front of print and broadcast journalists.

However, it was the lobbying of Wallace MP Bill English and Awarua MP Jeff Grant which proved more successful than the publicity in exempting Southland from the constraints of Labour's Indigenous Forestry Policy.

National was prepared to allow chipmilling of sizeable areas of beech forest to give Tuatapere a reprieve. It would permit the filling of existing woodchip contracts and a five-year transition period in which native logging could continue until exotic hardwoods came on stream. However, native forest woodchipping would continue until 2002 at a reduced cut.

Even in the depths of economic despair organisers of The Wild Challenge were thinking positive. Often huddled around a bar heater in the Tuatapere promotions group information centre, they planned for the big day.

Despite thousands of cumulative hours of pounding the streets no major sponsor was forthcoming. The race feasibility study was funded by a business development grant, and a few Southland businesses helped out with prizes and promotional material.

Race day dawned fine, but a brisk nor-

wester forced the start of the race to be transferred to Teal Bay, Lake Hauroko's outlet to the Wairaurahiri River, cutting out a 14-kilometre lake paddle.

The kayak down the Wairaurahiri, compared by competitor Russell Prince to an hour-long hydroslide ride, passed through Waitutu Forest.

Waitutu – part stewardship land, part Maori land – is one of the largest areas of lowland temperate rainforest left in New Zealand.

Stands of dense podocarp – predominantly rimu, miro and Hall's totara – and silver beech cloak a series of ancient marine terraces which rise from the coast to the mountains of Fiordland. Each of the terraces has slightly different fertility and drainage characteristics and harbours a unique assemblage of plant life. The upper terraces support stunted podocarps, such as yellow silver pine.

Bush-clad terraces

In the mid-1980s Waitutu was the focus of a campaign by Forest and Bird and the Native Forests Action Council. Beautiful photographs of bush-clad terraces graced the pages of calendars and magazines. Forest and Bird has continued to press for Waitutu to be added to Fiordland National Park.