



Left: Tuatapere promotions group chairman Alec Miller (left) discusses planning for the Wild Challenge race with Department of Conservation staff Trevor Tidey (centre) and Barry Bennett on the wharf at Lake Hauroko.

Photo: Christine Williams, Southland Times.

Right: A mature rimu in the Holly Burn, south-western Longwoods. The Holly Burn is a habitat for the declining yellowhead.

Right inset: Waitutu Forest where the Tuatapere Wild Challenge was run: one of the largest areas of lowland forest remaining in New Zealand.

Photo: Alan Mark

Tuatapere community board chairman Ngarita Dixon says townspeople realise the attractions of the region.

"People are fully aware of the potential (for nature tourism), but will almost begrudgingly reveal the secrets that are here.

"We are very reluctant to give up our isolation because we enjoy it. But we can no longer afford the seclusion."

The Tuatapere and District Promotions Group have made the not-unrealistic assumption that if environmentalists are keen to protect the region's forests, they will also want to spend money exploring them. Tuatapere people are aware that one-and-a-quarter hours up the road Te Anau is enjoying the economic benefits of servicing the very popular Milford, Kepler and Routeburn tracks.

Most New Zealanders are drawn to Fiordland by images of launches on Milford and Doubtful Sounds, and trampers standing high above glacially-carved valleys.

Promotions group secretary Anne McCracken hopes that the comparatively under-utilised southern end of Fiordland National Park, and Waitutu, Dean and Rowallan forests, will become sought after by a different breed of tourist:

"The anti-tourist", says McCracken, "campervanners and cyclists – predominantly young people who want to get away from the main tourist routes to experience the natural environment, the relaxed pace of country life, and the hospitality of real New Zealanders. What better place than Tuatapere."

### Seals and dolphins

The McCracken farm homestead overlooks Te Waewae Bay. Family members take for granted the regular visits by fur seals and the antics of a population of about 400 Hector's

dolphins. Even last year's month-long visit to the bay of 10 southern right whales caused only minor excitement.

"There are a lot of things that we take for granted, which urban New Zealanders are looking to experience," says McCracken.

At the changeover for the mountain bike section of the Wild Challenge, at Bluecliffs Beach, Hector's dolphins cruised and cart-wheeled among the breakers, entertaining supporters.

The most gruelling section of the race was the run between the Wairaurahiri River and Te Waewae Bay, along old logging tramways.

Competitors passed over three spectacular wooden viaducts, the longest, over the Percy Burn, being 124 metres in length and 36 metres above the ravine below.

The viaducts and tramways were built in the 1920s to feed timber into the Port Craig mill, at the time one of the most modern in the southern hemisphere.

The remains of the mill, dwellings, and a wharf can still be seen, and the old school-house is maintained as a tramper's hut by the

Department of Conservation.

The 1930s Depression forced the closure of the Port Craig mill, and served to spare Waitutu forest, to the west of the Wairaurahiri River, from the axe.

The Department of Conservation – with assistance, recently, from engineers of the Australian Army – maintains the viaducts as part of a three-day tramping track from Te Waewae Bay to Big River, beyond Waitutu.

### Wilderness and adventure

Southland Conservancy advocacy manager Phil Doole says DOC is planning facilities which will not detract from the Waitutu area's sense of wilderness and adventure. The department is also looking at improving access over the Hump Ridge, a link between Te Waewae Bay and Fiordland's Lake Hauroko. The track will deviate from the present route, passing spectacular granite outcrops and alpine tarns, and providing panoramas of Lakes Hauroko and Pōteriteri, the southern coast and islands of Foveaux Strait. Tuatapere farmer Val McKay has been the first in the town to diversify into a tourist servicing business. He provides a ferry service on Lake Hauroko for trampers and hunters wanting access into the Wairaurahiri River and the southern end of the Dusky Track.



Women almost stole the honours in the inaugural Wild Challenge race. Second and third placegetters Penny Webster (left) and Jacinda Amey with race administrator Anne McCracken.

Photo: Tim Higham.