

Tony Gray – The bellbird's barrister

by Gerard Hutching



SOUTHLAND CONSERVATIONIST Tony Gray recounts the time he addressed a meeting of the Southland Progress League where he described himself as the "bellbird's barrister." The subject was woodchipping of native forest.

"Native birds can't argue for themselves. All they have is their own sweetness," he told the meeting of Southland worthies.

It was not the first time that Tony Gray had stood up to defend the rights of species which could not speak for themselves. The veteran campaigner has long been a constant thorn in the side of developers, although he prefers a more colourful analogy.

"A thorn in developers' sides? I prefer to see myself as a drop of disinfectant in a bucket of muck," he says emphatically.

Since he arrived in Southland in 1971 from the United Kingdom, Tony has been one of a dedicated few in the region who has carried the torch for conservation. Early on it was a fairly lonely business, he admits, but today Forest and Bird's Southland branch is one of the most active in the country, with committed people such as chairperson Christine Henderson, secretary Audrey Gamble and long time conservationist Don Lamont in its ranks.

A firm believer in the power of education to mould a person's outlook on life, he traces his awareness of environmental issues back to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. It was a book which he maintains changed his life, and was naturally a publication he used to recommend to students at Kingswell High School where he taught English until recent retirement.

In the 1960s his beloved countryside was being overrun by development, with a motorway slicing its way through the River Swift near his village. Tony was described by the *Guardian* newspaper as an "ardent conservationist" in the battle over the motorway.

New Zealand beckoned. "I felt I had come to a better place which still had a chance. In Europe there were too many people, and too much pollution."

His arrival in Southland coincided with the launch of the Forest Service's infamous beech scheme proposal. The

proposal was to clearfell or intensively log 339,500 ha of indigenous forest in Nelson, Southland and Westland – including most of the accessible beech forest in the South Island – and convert much of it to pines or eucalypts. Tony's introduction to New Zealand's native bush was through Ross Reidie, one of the foremost opponents of the Forest Service plan and someone he holds in high regard.

Fortunately, public anger was such that the Forest Service's proposals were dropped. However in 1981 the Southland chipmill began to clearfell native forest in the region. Tony was an implacable opponent from the chipmill's early days. At the time he was putting a lot of his energy into Ecology Action, a group which today goes by the more pedestrian title of the Southland Resources Monitor Group. A decade later his sense of outrage at the way the mill has disfigured the Southland landscape has not diminished.

"It was a big con. People were told that it was going to use 'waste wood.' The mill received a suspensory loan but has never shown a profit."

That other great Southland resource user, Comalco, has also been the object of his ire. So when Forest and Bird worked with Comalco on the kakapo sponsorship, it was not a decision he greeted with joy.

"I think a lot of people weren't happy with it. How could you be happy to get into bed with a monster like Comalco?" he charged in *Terra Nova* magazine recently.

In the relatively small, close knit Southland community, Tony has suffered for his outspokenness. Christine Henderson, active in conservation since the early 1970s, understands why locals react to him as they do.

"He's a passionate man and that can alienate people. They don't understand that passion."

"Tony's slogged his heart out but he's had little kudos from the public. The fact that he's right has nothing to do with it," she observes.

She is full of admiration for the professionalism with which he tackles issues. He is often called upon to write Forest and Bird submissions.

A gifted raconteur, Tony Gray was born with a delightful sense of humour, one that has "seen us through some rough times," says Christine Henderson. In retirement he continues to keep busy with Forest and Bird work, maintaining his farmlet and occasional teacher relieving. In between chores he tries to fit in a spot of trout fishing – his favourite leisure activity, although he claims to talk about it more than practice it.

In July the chipmill is due to start operating in the Longwood Forests, on Invercargill's back doorstep. It appears certain that trout fishing will take a back seat as the "bellbird's barrister" prepares his case against the mill. His client will be hoping he is well briefed. 🐦

Farmer fears

SOUTHLAND FARMERS Brian and Robyn Barnes are two locals prepared to voice their opposition to the chipmill.

From their homestead near the picturesque seaside town of Riverton they gaze across to the south-eastern corner of the Longwood Range. In the near distance the silver beech forest begins, forest that was recently allocated to Timberlands. Described as cutover, the podocarps were hauled out years ago. Yet, the beech which remains is tall, contiguous and abounding with birds such as bellbirds, tui and fantail. Less common forest birds such as kaka, parakeet and robin are also present.

Rumour has it that this corner of the Longwoods will be the first to go when the chipmill renews its attack on the state's native forest resource. At present Timberlands are refusing to divulge where they intend to let the chipmill loose. But just prior to the election Labour rejected a Timberland's application to clearfell 260 hectares of this forest as part of a so-called sustainable beech scheme.

For the Barnes' the implications of any clearfelling above their property are all too clear.

"God knows what will happen when the chipmill gets up there. At the moment we dredge out about two feet of silt a year from our stream."

The stream on the Barnes' property is tidal inland as far as their farm. That makes it very prone to flooding. The couple fear the problem could only worsen with clearfelling and subsequent silting.

Brian Barnes believes that opposition to the chipmill is widespread among locals. A number of factors contribute: once the mill has laid waste to the forest its values for outdoor recreation plummet; local employment will not be assisted by sending woodchips to Japan compared to the opportunities from local solid wood processing for high quality furniture; clearfelling will exacerbate downstream siltation and flooding; and the view from the surrounding countryside will be blighted by logging scars.

For now it is a time of waiting. By July both the Barnes and Timberlands should know who has won the day. 🐦



Brian and Robyn Barnes