

## Cultural harvest

**F**OREST AND BIRD is occasionally drawn into the debate about the taking of protected species by some Maori people through our historical commitment to preservation through the law. Since 1923 Forest and Bird has been instrumental in pressing for the successive statutes which at present protect many native species. Recent suggestions that some of these species should be harvested have been opposed by the Society.

This discussion comes at a time when in all areas of the environment there are arguments made for "sustainable management." This seductive theory allows for the taking of trees and other resources at a level which nature can restore. The problem with many of our birds is that the "resource" is so depleted that it cannot be regarded as "renewable." Harvest of such species cannot be sustained. The bottom line too often is protection or possible extinction.

It would be unwise to overlook the fact that different people have different perceptions of conservation. The Society has always taken the view that it has a duty to protect native species of plants and animals, even if only for their intrinsic value. That is why the Society exists and why many of its early battles were about obtaining legal protection for New Zealand birds.

There is another view of conservation which allows for the harvest of everything in moderation. Conservation then is about managing stocks of birds (and plants) so there will be more to use tomorrow. That is how we manage our freshwater fisheries and gamebirds, the muttonbird harvest, and how presumably those who wish to eat godwits would manage that resource. The difficulty arises when birds such as kereru in Northland no longer exist in sufficient numbers to harvest. Then, the Society has always argued, harvest is no longer appropriate.

It is worth remembering that present laws make provision for the taking of Maori cultural materials from nature. In this way totara and kauri have been taken from Department of Conservation land to build canoes. Plant materials and feathers from protected birds can be available for the repair of tribal treasures. Problems arise, however, with how this process is managed. The Society is concerned about this burgeoning harvest.

There is considerable argument in Maoridom about this too, with concerns expressed about the volume of material being taken, the degree of tribal consultation, and the taking of materials by one tribe from the traditional area of another. In the interests of protecting nature, while being fair to those legally entitled to take, the Society has pressed the Department of Conservation and the Conservation Authority to develop national guidelines for such harvest, in consultation with tribal and conservation interests.

A potent aspect of the present debate is the Treaty of Waitangi. This document asserts the right of Maori chieftainship over certain natural resources which some take to include native birds. From this point it can be argued that Maori authorities should govern the use of them, just as some have argued for control of fisheries. To argue the Crown's right to manage native birds can be seen as an opposition to Maori political aspirations. While the wounds of Waitangi remain open, those questions unresolved, such feelings will continue to trouble the individual conscience and divide people.

Forest and Bird has a long standing commitment to absolute protection for native species, arising from its successful efforts to enshrine these principles in law. To zero-rate this effort and debate the whole structure of our commitment to conservation and use would be unacceptable to most of our members. Further, any weakening of our advocacy would also be in contradiction of our aims and objects. Now the Society's June council meeting has asked for your executive to develop a policy with regard to the harvesting of indigenous flora and fauna.

Debating the possibility may fit with fashionable economics and social interests. It may also be that everyone will benefit from reviewing their commitment to conservation and by discussing it with those most affected. Personally, however, I am doubtful that wavering in our resolve will benefit that absolute protection of native species that this Society has sought for nearly 70 years.

**Gordon Ell**  
President



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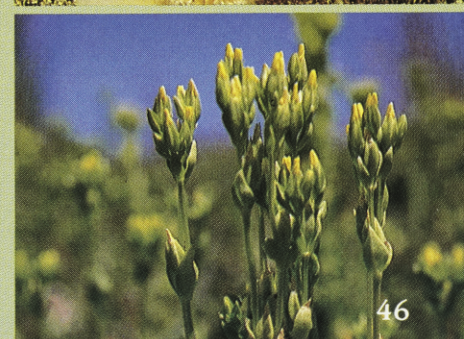


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