

Preserving the miracle

South West New Zealand (Te Wahipounamu) is one of less than 100 premier natural sites around the world. Its World Heritage status puts it alongside the Grand Canyon, Australia's Great Barrier Reef and the Rocky Mountains of North America. Eugenie Sage reports on developments in the heart of the South West, South Westland.

IN HAAST, where "tree-hugger" was once a term of abuse, half the local community now turns out for the opening of a forest and wetland walk. Roadside signs advertise the World Heritage Hotel Haast Ltd and a new promotional pamphlet begins "Haast – a refuge of wildlife, stands guard over the last and biggest stands of native forest in the country". Talk of the campaign for World Heritage listing being a communist plot to undermine New Zealand's sovereignty has been largely forgotten. In its place is emerging one of the country's most positive partnerships between conservation and development.

Forest and Bird first suggested the South West nomination in 1985. It is an area of wild and rugged beauty extending from the Saltwater Ecological Area and Waitangiroto Nature Reserve in the north to Dean, Waitutu and Rowallan forests in the south east, encompassing Mount Cook, Westland, Fiordland and Mount Aspiring National Parks and another 1.079 million hectares of conservation land, scenic, nature and scientific reserves.

Making the case for World Heritage listing was a key element in the campaign to persuade the South Westland Working Party and then Government to allocate New Zealand's last stand of lowland semi-wilderness, the beech, kahikatea and podocarp forests south of the Cook River, to the Department of Conservation rather than the Forestry Corporation (See *Forest & Bird* February 1988). Pamphlets, a calendar, posters, a stream of articles in newspapers and magazines, reports, and the Society's book "Forests, Fiords and Glaciers" helped raise public awareness of the World Heritage concept and the values of the area sought for nomination.

It was a high profile and controversial campaign. It was rewarded with the Labour Government's 1989 decision to protect the total area of publicly owned forests and wetlands, and the announcement on New Year's Day 1991 that UNESCO's World Heritage Committee had accepted the South West nomination.

In South Westland there has been an outpouring of creative energy, effort and innovation to grasp the opportunities presented by both events. December will see the opening of the new \$649,000 South West Heritage Centre in Haast. The centre

is the lynch pin in a \$1.2 million package of recreational, interpretation and visitor facilities designed to present the travelling public with a "sample of the best of South Westland".

Several existing tracks such as those to Monro Beach and at Jamie Creek beside Lake Paringa have been upgraded. New tracks and associated visitor facilities have been built at Hapuka Estuary and Ship Creek. A new picnic area and car park is



The Haast visitor centre under construction at the junction of the roads to Haast Pass, Fox Glacier, and Jackson Bay. An artificial wetland beside the centre and indigenous plantings are intended to attract birds and re-create nature in what was once a farm paddock. Photo: Eugenie Sage

planned at Jackson Bay. A clifftop promenade and toilets are to be built at the Knight's Point lookout. New displays and other improvements planned for the visitor centres at Fox Glacier and Makarora will make them more fitting entrances to the southern section of a network of heritage highways being promoted on the West Coast. A handbook due for publication in December 1991 will provide visitors with information on the range of things to do and see close to the road. "It's really great to see the things DoC is putting in place because they are of a very good standard," says Jenny Barratt, Westland District Councillor and former member of the South Westland Working Party.

There has been a conscious effort by the department to link all the new recreational and tourist facilities with information about the cultural and natural values of South Westland, and the special features of this part of the World Heritage area. On site interpretation panels explain phenomena such as the beech gap, glaciation, and food webs in fresh water ecosystems. Liaison with local tourism operators means facilities are being developed where they will be best used, encouraging visitors to stay another day in the region. Haast

Motor Camp owner, Phillipa Glubb, says guests often walk the new Hapuka Estuary track opposite the camp several times during their stay.

Low key promotion

The intense activity in South Westland is due largely to the \$1.5 million grant which accompanied the Labour Government's 1989 decision, the vision of key individuals and the use of employment schemes to extend the funds available and get local people directly involved in track construction and other projects.

Elsewhere, at national level and in the three other DoC conservancies which are responsible for the management of parts of the South West, there has been a decidedly low key approach to explaining the importance of World Heritage status or examining its implications for current management regimes. Not a single pamphlet on a World Heritage theme has emerged from DoC's Wellington Head Office since the January announcement. The new draft review of the Mt Aspiring National Park Management Plan gives it one sentence and a footnote.

There are proposals for DoC's Canterbury, Southland and Otago conservancies to promote different aspects of the South West World Heritage area and in their visitor centre displays and signage. In practice this may be a long time coming with scarce conservation dollars having to be pared from other projects.

By comparison, Australians have seized on the opportunity their World Heritage areas have created by enacting a World Heritage Properties Act in 1974 to outline the status of these sites, established a management committee for them, and prepared a raft of promotional material – films, pamphlets and videos aimed at domestic as well as international visitors.

While the Tourism Department's current marketing strategies include encouraging "green tourists" to visit New Zealand, no campaigns focusing on the South West are currently planned. The potential for the World Heritage theme to be a powerful tool in New Zealand's international marketing effort appears to have fallen foul of the incomplete restructuring of the Tourism Department into the Tourism Board.

At a local level it's a different story. The West Coast Tourism Council has been closely involved with the developments in