

level of inter-regional coordination within DoC which is not currently obvious.

One potential solution may be to establish a management committee for the South West World Heritage area, including sector groups and non-government representatives, as has been done in Australia. This could have the added benefit of linking communities as distant and diverse as Haast, Tuapitere, and Twizel, and fostering a sense of identity for the area as a whole.

### Possum threat

In the estate protection area, other management challenges exist. Possums threaten to repeat the ecological disaster they have created in the rata and kamahi forests of the central Southern Alps in extensive areas of South Westland forest.

This year, DoC's control efforts are focused on the Copland/Karangaru and Moeraki catchments. Possum numbers in the Moeraki catchment are low at present while the kaka population is strong. The overlap between the foods preferred by kaka and possums means control programmes are vital in ensuring that those plant species which help support high bird populations such as native fuchsia, mistletoe and Southern rata remain abundant.

The continued decline in real terms in the conservation vote has seen control work "postponed" in other areas, including the magnificent stands of rata forest in the Turnbull River catchment. This risks a burgeoning of current low populations capable of containment, and possums invading the forests between the Paringa and Haast Rivers where they are now largely absent.

Introduced predators also threaten bird species such as the yellowhead. A survey of the yellowhead population in the Landsborough Valley in January showed a huge decline in bird numbers compared to a similar 1985 survey. A stoat plague last summer is thought to be responsible and DoC plans to start a five year trapping programme this summer.

With its wild and rugged splendour, outstanding examples of temperate rainforests and floristically rich alpine plant communities, its landforms bearing the imprint of major stages in the earth's revolutionary history, and the range of habitats it provides for a number of threatened species the South West easily satisfied all four criterion for World Heritage listing. As "Forest, Fiords and Glaciers" said, "that such a stunning natural asset has survived almost untouched for so long seems a miracle."

The miracle must be preserved by ensuring that human uses continue to touch the landscape only lightly. In South Westland sustainable economic development depends on conservation. Increasing local confidence in the future of nature tourism and the high quality visitor facilities being put in place are the result of a creative partnership between DoC, private sector tourism operators and industry representatives, and the local community. Each relies on the other. All rely on the preservation of the unique natural values of this part of the South West.

## A warm welcome in the wilderness

THE ROAR of an enormous Mack truck shatters the towering forests and lakeside setting of the Lake Moeraki Wilderness Lodge. Local roading contractor, Nobby Clark from Haast, and his team are delivering yet another load of shingle as part of their landscaping contract at the lodge.

The lodge's driveway is crammed with the vehicles of tradesmen all rushing to complete a \$250,000 rebuilding of the lodge. Even local cray fisherman and neighbour, Barry Wyber, is here helping to build a spectacular fireplace from local stone while the weather is too bad for him to go to sea. His daughter Lynn Brown is the lodge's assistant manager.

Former Forest and Bird Director, Gerry McSweeney, and his partner Anne Saunders are in the midst of a massive exercise to get the Lodge open in time for the 1 September reopening day. The scale of the project underway gives a good indication that they are succeeding with their aim of setting up the Lodge to show that nature based tourism could generate jobs and revenue while preserving the forests.

"We expected it might be difficult to be accepted down here," says Anne, "But we've been impressed by the help and support we have had from all the locals. We've got wonderful neighbours and if ever we have a problem, help is just a phone call away."

Gerry is also full of praise for the recreation and tourism project in the area being coordinated by the Department of Conservation. "DoC have built probably the finest network of walks and information in the country. The kowhai and kahikatea forest walks, wetland lookouts, seacoast tracks and the new visitor centre are just what this area needed. They have given an enormous boost to tourism and lots of people are coming specially to walk these tracks and discover the Haast area and its people."

Since its reopening on 1 September, the Wilderness Lodge has been involved in running a number of special nature programmes as well as catering for casual guests. Four times a year it offers special week-long "Wilderness Weeks", where New Zealanders spend seven full days exploring southern South Westland. Lodge staff have also just completed a three-day special nature discovery course for 26 senior citizens from the Upper Clutha region. They discovered forest birds and Fiordland crested penguins and learnt about the different forest trees and plants. A highlight of their visit was a special jet boat trip with long time Haast farmer, Crikey Cron, who has just turned tourist operator. For more than 100 years, the Cron family



*The McSweeney family and lodge staff, Lake Moeraki. Top: Gerry McSweeney, Anne Saunders, Katie McSweeney, Lyn Brown. Bottom: Michael McSweeney, Claire McSweeney, Emma Falk.*

have lived at Haast where they were the ferrymen helping travellers to cross the wild Haast River. Crikey Cron's jet boat tours are therefore continuing a long tradition. His tourist venture is just one of a range of activities that have recently started at Haast – horse treks, fishing, jet boat and helicopter trips, hunting trips and craft displays, as well as expansion of accommodation and other tourist services.

More than half the visitors to the Lake Moeraki Lodge are from overseas, mainly Germany and the United States. At a time when the New Zealand economy is depressed, the numbers of overseas visitors to the Lodge has been increasing spectacularly.

"Last year we had 80 small tour groups from overseas, averaging about 15 people each tour. This year we already have over 200 groups booked to stay. They want good quality accommodation and meals in a natural setting and they also want the special nature activities, the guided walks and canoe trips that we can offer", says Gerry. "It's given us the confidence to press ahead with developments and take on more staff when the rest of the economy is in the doldrums."

At a time when there has been heated opposition from the West Coast to proposals to investigate DoC's protected lands in the North West Nelson/Buller region for national park or world heritage status, based on the Haast experience, one can't help feeling the sooner the North West becomes a national park or world heritage area, the better.

**Kevin Smith**