

The costs of conservation

WHEN TIMES ARE TOUGH people stop spending. Now we have a Government of similar mind. State conservation, like other Government responsibilities, is vulnerable to funding cuts.

Right now many New Zealanders are developing a siege mentality; holding out till better times. In the interval, our defence of the environment may well involve suffering continued bombardment from the advocates of development. So, instead of securing the future of our forests – and wetlands, high country and oceans – conservationists are also spending energy redefending some of the battle fields of the 1980s.

It is manifest that, politically, some West Coasters don't appreciate the meaning of "stewardship land" managed by the Department of Conservation. During a recent series of public meetings, held by the New Zealand Conservation Authority, to establish local interest in a North West Nelson National Park, politicians from west of the main divide spoke often about opening the stewardship lands for development. They chose not to acknowledge that such an option no longer exists. When former Forest Service and Lands and Survey blocks were allocated to the Department of Conservation, they achieved a legal status akin to conservation reserves. Yet development interests on the West Coast still look longingly at the cash potential of those hills, often ignoring the potential income from nature tourism based on the conservation estate.

One of the criticisms of the Department of Conservation's management of such areas as North West Nelson is that the State is not a good neighbour. Nearby farmers complain, justifiably, of the risk of tuberculosis infection from possums crowding the public estate. Yet it is estimated that an effective wild animal control programme would cost more than half the conservation budget annually.

Some have said that if effective control of pests is not made shortly, there is some risk that large areas of native forest could be diminished to the status of scrublands within fifteen years. Such a problem is a national one, transcending conservation politics.

There appears to be no more public money for conservation just now. That makes *Forest and Bird's* task all the more vital. We need to take a leading role in the debate about the future of public lands.

Above all, we must continue to defend the idea of conservation as a public good, not a cost-accountable resource to be sold off. Without a secure environment we run the risk of destroying the world for our children. Hard times are not good times to reassess the value of what the wider community has accepted in recent years as socially responsible.

The environment is not a commodity to trade off. The solutions to our present economic dilemmas must lie beyond our investment in the environment of the future.

Gordon Ell
President



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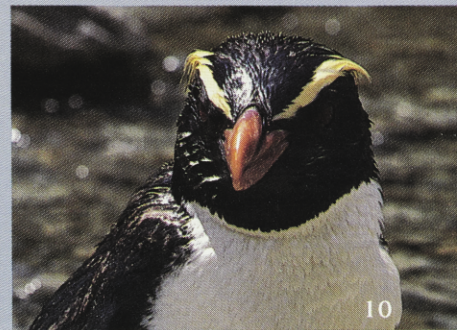
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