

The costs of tourism

IN ITS ARGUMENTS for saving our native forests from the timber industry, *Forest and Bird* has often made the point that wilderness attracts tourists. We have argued that forests can be saved and still be profitable if preserved for visitors, who take nothing but photographs and leave nothing but piles of foreign exchange. Yet there are already signs that the burgeoning tourist industry is affecting some of our natural gems.

The character of Milford Sound is changed as tourists bus, fly and ship about this wilderness traffic jam. The Abel Tasman coastal walk is under such pressure that walking passes are now required, as they will be shortly on another eight of the "great walks". With the country hosting a million tourists this past year, how will wilderness fare if we reach the target of three million tourists annually, in eight years time?

Conservation lands are an obvious attraction to foreign visitors. Eighty-four percent of our incoming tourists have said they want to experience a national park. So offering our wilderness parks is part of the promotion of New Zealand's clean, green image. To the urban Asian, American or European, the native forests and other wild landscapes of New Zealand appear a natural paradise.

New Zealand, arguably, should be able to take three million tourists without damaging its conservation estate, accounting as it does for some 30 percent of our landmass. What is at issue is how we are going to open the gates without destroying the very qualities that attract the tourist and without damaging the environment and species we set out to protect. The answer is going to be an investment in providing the tracks and facilities which allow the visitor, and the New Zealander, into the conservation estate without damaging it.

The Minister of Tourism, Mr Banks, has suggested a necessary investment of \$6 billion on accommodation, transport, attractions and facilities, if we are to cope with three million tourists annually by the year 2000. He should consider his colleagues in conservation when the funds are divvied up.

The Department of Conservation is already short of funds to maintain existing walkways and huts. It is also becoming the target of those New Zealanders disgruntled by the introduction of track passes, increased hut fees and over-stretched facilities, as foreign backpackers add their load to a system built in better times for a more local traffic.

Forest and Bird has been a keen advocate of environmental tourism. As the tourist boom takes off we must ensure there is parallel investment in the conservation estate, both to protect it and to provide the framework of new facilities which growth in tourism requires.

Having partly justified protecting our forests for their tourist value, we shall now need to work with tourist promoters and official agencies to see that the footprints left by travellers don't destroy the fragile nature of our wilderness.

Gordon Ell

National President



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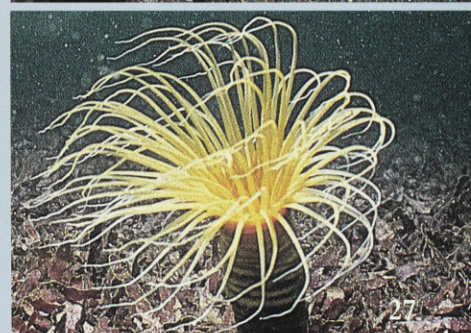
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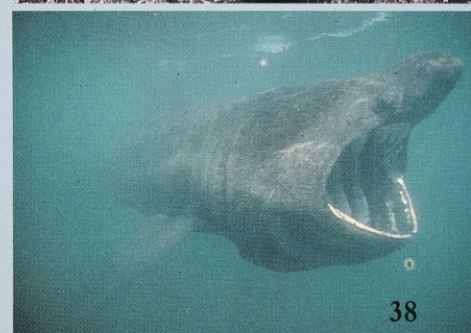
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