

A plea for protection

THE DESIRE to harvest indigenous species conflicts with the widely-held conservation ethic which is reflected in New Zealand's protected species legislation.

Essentially, the ethic is centred on valuing ecosystems in a non-hierarchical way. In this sense, it does not place humans above everything else. It recognises an intrinsic value in each component of ecological communities. It is central to this point of view that each component has a right to exist for its own sake, in this case as an element of New Zealand's remarkable natural heritage. This right is derived from the contribution made by each to the stability and diversity of its community.

From the notion of intrinsic worth have arisen strong cultural and spiritual associations. Together with ecological values, these establish in principle that the right to exist overrides the human right to harvest. In New Zealand, this is especially so for indigenous species, since these are more closely identified with New Zealanders' maturing perceptions of their heritage. These cultural and spiritual values are as valid as those of the tangata whenua although they are not so clearly associated with any particular ethnic group.

The protection view sees individual species in a context which is quite literally a global one. This perspective has grown in both stature and acceptance internationally as modern science has revealed more of the biology and vulnerability of these species, and of the fragility of life

systems on the planet. The need to reduce levels of risk to these systems is felt acutely.

Proponents of protection acknowledge the existence of harvest traditions and accept that Waitangi Tribunal rulings on claims of right may be well-founded. Considered in the context of New Zealand's natural heritage today, however, the *appropriateness* of the harvest tradition is questioned. It is clear that too large a proportion of New Zealand's indigenous species is threatened by human-induced change, and almost all of those on which harvest applications are focused are small remnants of a once rich and more diverse fauna.

The importance of recovering as much of this fauna as possible is fundamental to the protection view. Renewed human exploitation is seen as fraught with risk, a view underscored by deep scepticism about stated guarantees of security for the harvested species. Conservation agencies have been unable to cope with existing threats to species, for instance. It is not accepted that harvest could improve this situation.

The reinstatement of harvest practices represents a fundamental retreat from the healing philosophy of absolute protection.

The fear is held that sanction for the . . . harvest (of indigenous species) will increase harvest expectations and prompt communities to apply for a more extensive range of species. This may result in the need to research and monitor a steadily increasing number of harvested spe-

cies and is seen as inevitably drawing scarce resources away from recovery programmes for threatened and endangered species.

Existing harvests of indigenous species are not automatically accepted as precedents for extending harvest to others. It is argued instead that these existing harvests are now inconsistent with good conservation principle and practice, especially where they exploit species which have not benefited from modification of the New Zealand environment or may be threatened by exploitation.

Expert international opinion, as articulated by the International Council for Bird Preservation, supports New Zealand's present species legislation. Though not opposed in principle to indigenous harvest of species, ICBP found that Chatham Islands Maori and Moriori claims to harvest toroa [royal albatross], for instance, did not meet minimum criteria for acceptance:

- the tangata whenua are not truly dependent on the harvest for their livelihood;
- reliable assessments of sustainable harvest would be extremely difficult to obtain because of the scale of the research required.

The department's desire to stop illegal harvesting by allowing controlled take was considered to be unfounded: in ICBP opinion, controlled harvesting usually facilitates illegal take. ”

— from an internal DoC discussion paper on the harvest of native birds, 1992. The paper also contained an alternative "harvest perspective".

number that go about their business unchecked is not known. Nor is it known what the effect is of this hunting pressure on the already unstable breeding and static population of an area such as Mangamuka.

Mangamuka and the adjoining Raetea conservation area are now fortunate enough to be policed by a predominantly voluntary group of enforcement officers and DoC staff with minimal financial resources.

What is happening in a forest such as the Warawara where there is no such active protection? What of the Waima, where pig hunters tell of finding piles of pigeon feathers that come up to their knees? What of the Puketi where cut

horse tracks lead to camps with their hitching rails set up, and the miro trees cleared of surrounding undergrowth? What of the rumours from local hotels of kereru being sold or raffled for a hundred dollars apiece?

In the Mangamuka example, if you were to enter the forest prior to 1992 on a fine day during the pigeon "season" (April through to late June), you would have been sure to find evidence of hunting. All the major tracks were well trodden with fresh footprints. Good miro stands with piles of pigeon feathers about. The odd camp site littered with rubbish, spent shotgun and .22 rounds. And, if you knew what to listen for, you would have heard the occasional shot.

Mangamuka in mid-June 1992 is now a different story. The tracks are no longer well trodden, the piles of feathers have all but disappeared, and the camps are no longer used. The occasional hunter is still trying his luck but he is now very wary. At the Easter holiday break, a time when many out-of-town hunters normally come home to try their luck, Mangamuka was quiet. The word around was that going for a bird was too risky.

Mangamuka is now an exception to the norm in hunting pressure, although the kereru population has yet to return to an acceptable level. This result has been achieved by old-fashioned enforcement procedures.