

RETURNING THE WATERS TO THE WHAKAPAPA

Five years ago a coalition of King Country residents took on the huge New Zealand electricity machine in defence of the mountain rivers of the North Island volcanic plateau. IAN CLOSE visits the Whakapapa River and attends the final celebratory meeting of the coalition.

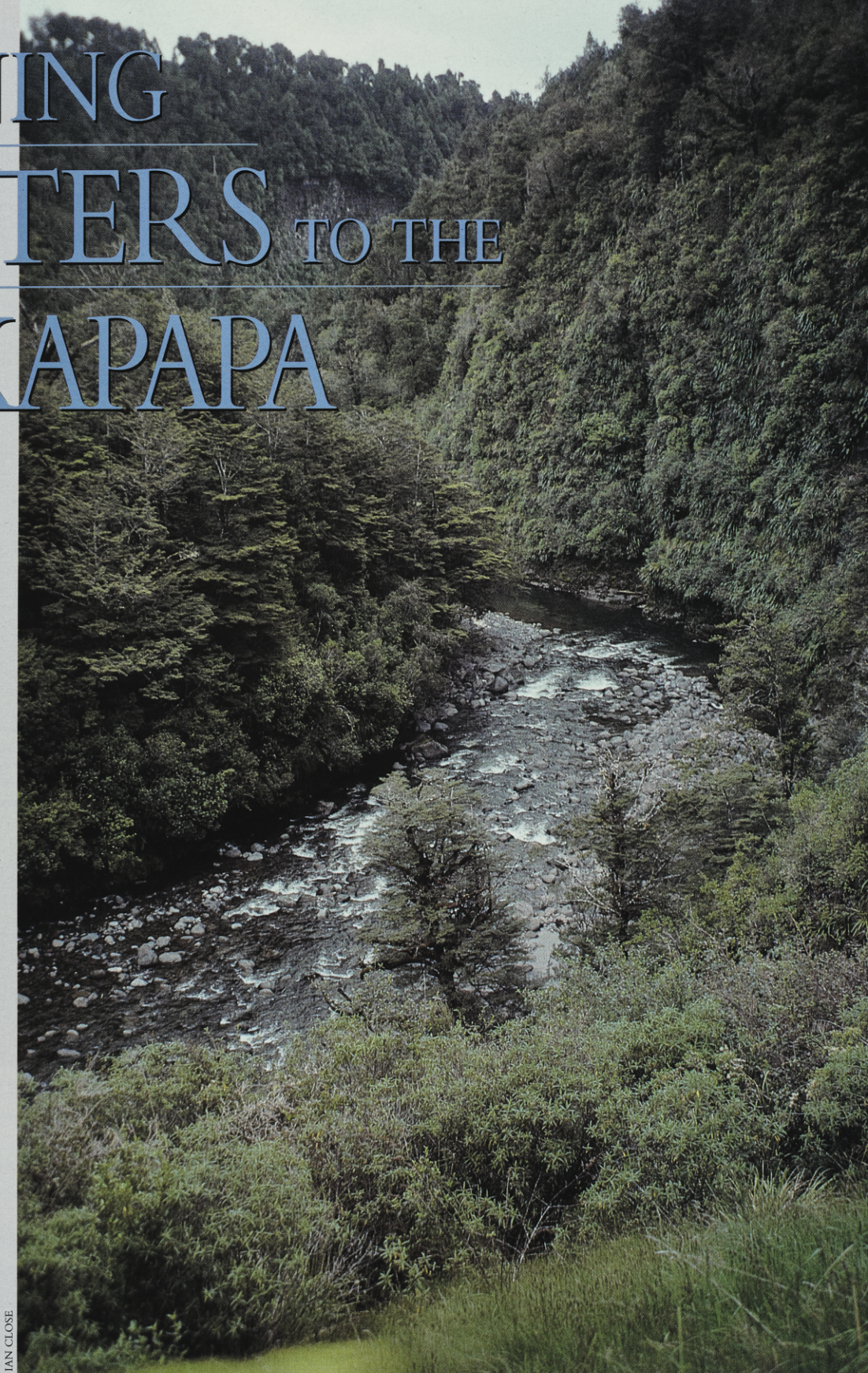
ON A WET FRIDAY afternoon in early December, a small group of people arrive for a meeting in the Owango Public Hall beside State Highway 4.

In the gentle King Country rain they have come to formally wind-up the Wanganui River Flows Coalition.

The fight has seemingly been won. In June, the High Court dismissed Electricorp's appeal against the Planning Tribunal's decision to return partial flows to the Whakapapa River. In September, the minimum flow for the Whakapapa set by the tribunal's Judge Sheppard had been instituted, and in December, the tribunal's decision on the higher summer flow on the Whanganui would take effect.

A few kilometres from the hall is a small bridge over the Whakapapa, once one of the finest mountain rivers in the country and the focus of much of the coalition's campaign. It was a river celebrated by poets and painters. For Greg Kelly in 1967 it was:

"... an introduction to glory. The highland air of the mountain country, the sweet smell of rich forest with its groves of splendid totara trees, the dark blue bluffs below which rare blue ducks sported fearlessly, the white stillness of high pumice banks under which trout pools curled and gurgled. Where birdlife was orchestral in dawn light. Where in winter, crisp white morning



IAN CLOSE

The Whakapapa, once a fine mountain river and still a beautiful gorge. Will the increased flows be enough to increase the habitat for blue duck?

reflected the clear warm sunlight." But within a few years the Whakapapa's waters had been diverted underground for power generation. For two decades only a derisory trickle, less than five percent of the river's natural flow, ran from the top of Electricorp's intake shaft to the confluence with the Whanganui 55 kilometres downstream at Kakahi. The significant population of blue duck for whom the river had been home was now reduced to a remnant of its pre-1972 numbers.

The other upper tributaries of the

Whanganui were similarly de-watered. The result was the longest navigable river in New Zealand – over 200 kilometres to its mouth – with the life choked out of it. Silt has built up, and trout fishing, canoeing and rafting have all suffered. In drier periods it has been described as "quite rotten" with decaying algae.

The fight for the Whakapapa and the other headwaters of the Whanganui River had, of course, been going far longer than five years. It started in 1964 after news of the proposed Tongariro