

What is the Tongariro Power Development?

THE IDEA of diverting some of the rivers running off the central North Island mountains for electricity had been kicked around since the 1930s, but was only given serious consideration during the power shortages of the 1950s.

The scheme, which was later to be slated by Treasury as “one of New Zealand’s most misguided engineering projects”, was authorised by a government decision in 1958. No consideration was given in the planning stage to issues of soil and water conservation, fisheries, recreation, tourism or aesthetics, let alone river ecology. No local authorities were consulted.

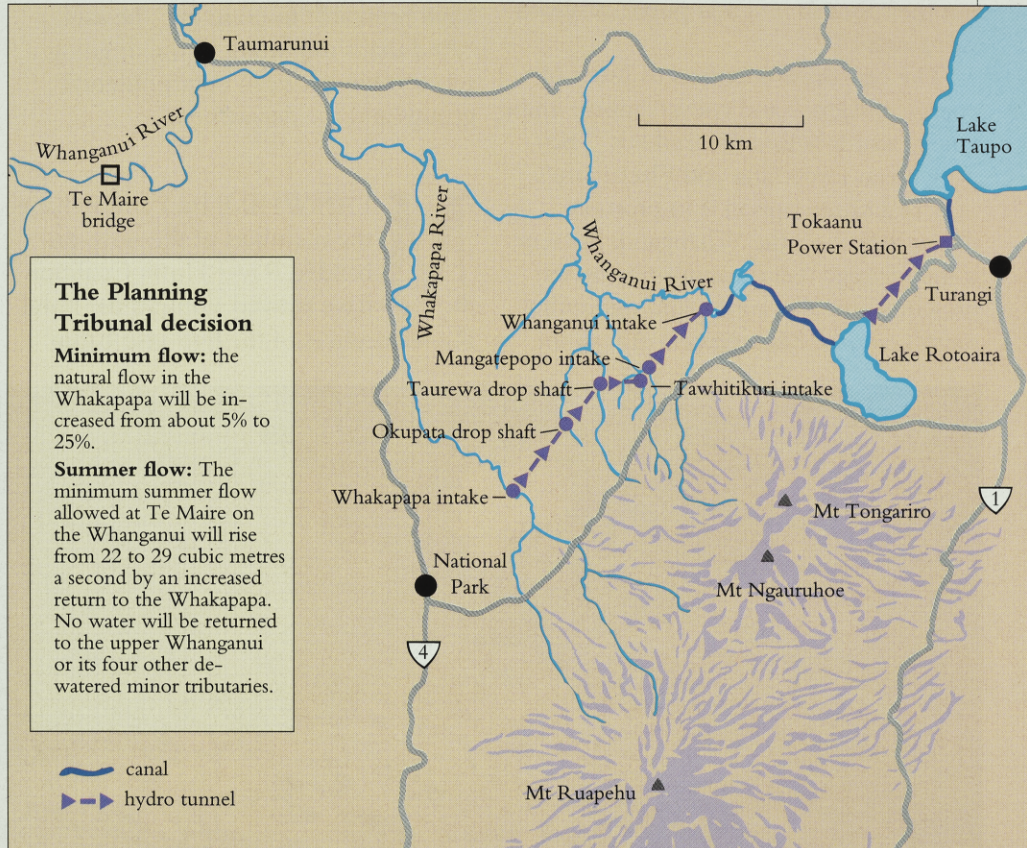
Built in two main stages from 1967 – known respectively as the Western and Eastern Diversions – the scheme diverted water from all

the four major catchments flowing from the volcanic plateau, affecting over 60 rivers and streams.

In all, the scheme provides 30 percent of the North Island’s hydro capacity or six percent of New Zealand’s total electricity generating capacity.

The Western Diversion, which covers the Whanganui and its tributaries, accounts for slightly less than half of this. Thus the water lost by Electricorp in the final Whanganui flows decision amounts to only about half a percent of the country’s generating capacity.

The Western Diversion of the Tongariro Power Development showing the decapitation of the Whanganui headwaters. Until the implementation of the Planning Tribunal’s decision in June last year, ninety-seven percent of these headwaters were diverted by a system of drop shafts and intake gates along a large mainly-underground tunnel to the Tokaanu Power Station and into Lake Taupo.



in opposing Electricorp’s application for continued near-monopoly of the Whanganui headwaters.

John Ombler, the local DoC conservator at the time, was put in an interesting position. The new department had been set up, with the high hopes of all conservationists, under legislation that gave it a role as an “advocate for conservation”.

Ombler knew that environmental groups had great expectations of the department using its financial, technical and scientific resources to take up this, as yet untried, advocacy role. Here was a ready-made case where there were significant conservation values at stake and under-resourced conservationists attempting to maintain the struggle against a corporate giant.

“The department was entering untested waters,” says Ombler. “The challenge had been laid down, and it was the sort of challenge that if not taken up, would have been very damaging for the new department. At first we chose some rather careful words in saying we’d do some research to determine the exact

effect of the reduced flows and the changes necessary to remedy the negative effects. At the time I did wonder what exactly I was getting us into.

“DoC of course, ended up with a large team working on the case, some in the department, some consultants, some volunteers. The interesting thing we were finding as a department was just how far we could push, how much the department was following the public groundswell of opposition and how much it could lead.”



One way to use a river. The headwaters of the Whanganui system all wrapped up and headed for Tokaanu Power Station.

NOW THAT IT IS OVER, what has come out of the struggle for the rivers?

First, the decision has set a precedent for any future conflicts over water rights in New Zealand. It can be safely said that never again will any river be totally de-watered. Compromises may be made between competing parties but, as Chapple says, it is now stamped into the New Zealand psyche that rivers actually count, and that their natural values are just as important as their potential megawatts.

A second lesson is that you need significant resources to contest the actions of a huge state-owned enterprise such as Electricorp. The coalition spent about \$100,000 on the case, two-thirds of which came from Forest and Bird. But this was small beer compared to the \$1 million that DoC estimates it spent and the minimum of \$7 million spent by Electricorp. Electricorp, of course, was the only party not disadvantaged by spending money. The corporation stood to lose \$35 million a year from an unfavourable decision.