



In 150 years New Zealand has lost ninety percent of its wetlands. Of those remaining, one of the most outstanding is the Wairau Lagoons and its associated estuaries in north-east Marlborough. Yet, as MARGARET PEACE reports, the area has never had protected status or a management plan. Only recently has local controversy over the lack of protection motivated the Department of Conservation to look at an appropriate management regime for the lagoons.

AT THE SOUTHERN end of Cloudy Bay, just east of Blenheim and south of where the Wairau and Opawa river mouths flow into the bay, are a series of tidal wetlands known as the Wairau lagoons.

They are famous for the diversity and abundance of their birdlife. These include the largest population of spoonbills in the country and a significant breeding population of Caspian terns. It is also an important staging area for golden plover, wrybill, knot and even the occasional black stilt in their migration from the South to the North Island.

The area also has great cultural significance. The lagoon surrounds were used extensively by early Maori and there are numerous archaeological sites dating back a thousand years. Recent investigations on the Wairau Bar by Dr Roger Duff have changed archeological thinking on the evolution of Maori culture and society.

The lagoons themselves cover 12 square kilometres; two times this if you include the fringing land under DoC stewardship. They average less than half a

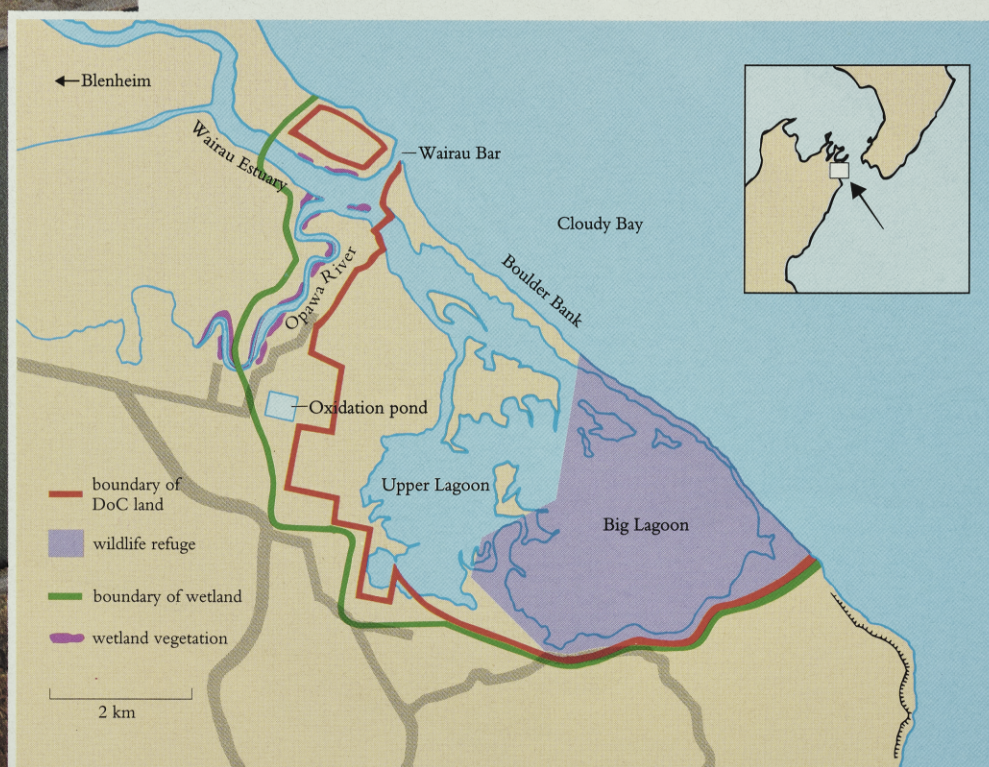
metre deep and are separated from the sea only by a low boulder bank or spit formed of gravel from the Awatere River, swept up from the south by ocean currents. Tidal flow is maintained through a channel opposite the Wairau River mouth.

The Wairau wetlands are now only a fraction of what they were 150 years ago. Since that time they have been continuously reduced by drainage canals on adjacent farmland and since 1963 by the opening of a major diversion canal north of the lagoons designed to take the major part of the Wairau River flow.

Of the 90 species of birds recorded in the area some 60 are wholly or partly dependent on wetland resources. Some, like godwits, turnstones and knots are long-distance regular migrants, others are rare visitors.

Shooting is popular and the western half of the lagoons is open for waterfowl hunting. Black swan, Canada geese, mallard, plus the native grey duck and paradise shelduck are regularly shot during the official hunting season (May and June) by about 60 hunters.

The lagoons and estuary are also



Opposite: Wairau Bar in the foreground with the gravels of Boulder Bank stretching away to the south. The bank includes sites from the early Moa-hunter period. The lagoons lie in a rain shadow and the surrounding hills are parched and dry.

Inset: Spoonbills were first observed on the lagoons in 1975 and now the wetland contains the biggest population in New Zealand with 30 breeding pairs.