

Where we came from

the ideas behind the beginnings of Forest and Bird

SEVERAL CURRENTS in ideas and events came together to form Forest and Bird and help it on its way. By the 1920s there was growing support in New Zealand for the idea that native forests and birds were worth saving. This was part of a fundamental shift in outlook.

When European colonists first came to New Zealand in the nineteenth century and set about transforming it, they had taken it for granted that European animals, plants (and people) were superior to their native counterparts. They regarded the displacement and probable extinction of the native species in the face of more “advanced”, more “vigorous” immigrants as a natural and inevitable part of the progress of colonisation. Some explained the process as Divine Providence, others as Darwinian survival of the fittest, but either way this displacement, to the colonists, was part of the law of nature.

Any idea of protecting or preserving native species, from this viewpoint, seemed out of the question. With the bush being cut, burnt and cleared as quickly as possible to make way for farms (“one blade of grass is worth two trees” as the saying went), there was little support for saving native forest even for a timber supply. From the 1870s there was some discussion of forest “conservation”, but in this context the word was used in the sense of expert forestry management along the lines being developed at that time in India.

In the case of birds and other animals, the colonists were mainly interested in introducing or “acclimatising” European species. From the 1860s they had formed acclimatisation societies to bring in sparrows and thrushes, trout and pheasants, deer, possums and a host of others. Some

native species (kiwi and tuatara, for instance) were sought by scientists as museum specimens but, in general, unless they were good for eating (kereru and kaka) or good for hunting (ducks and godwits), native species were considered good for nothing, and all destined to disappear with the advance of civilisation.

By the turn of the century, however, this view of native inferiority and inevitable

extinction was being modified. The change seems to have been associated with the development of a national feeling in New Zealand: the colonists were becoming settled New Zealanders and beginning to identify with their new country rather than the old.

Their perspective on native things was shifting accordingly.

An increasing number were native-born themselves, and were developing a patriotic feeling for New Zealand, its bush and mountain scenery, and its special native birds. Some were even beginning to refer to the bush and the birds as a natural “heritage” which should be cherished and protected, and handed down unimpaired for future New Zealanders.

Forest and Bird was by no means the first group to promote this new kind of conservation. The earliest were perhaps the scenery preservation societies which flourished in many centres in the 1890s.

Above: In the 1920s there were still arguments over whether the celebrated huia still survived, and official and private expeditions set out to capture some for transfer to island sanctuaries such as Little Barrier and Kapiti. The growing interest in the bird was part of a change in attitudes to native animals and habitats, with a new belief that they were worth preserving.



In 1923 Captain Val Sanderson began what was then called the Native Bird Protection Society, and by his enthusiasm and energy nurtured and promoted the society through its early years. But no movement comes out of a void. ROSS GALBREATH looks at the conservation issues and ideas of those times.