

Moss harvest

SPHAGNUM MOSS processors in Southland have been lobbying local MPs and the news media to try and change the Department of Conservation's policy on moss collecting on conservation land.

DoC's guidelines decline harvesting applications where a wetland has a specifically protected status such as national park or reserve, is rare or of representative value, is significant ecologically, or is slow growing, such as in alpine areas.

On the West Coast, sphagnum harvesting licences have been granted on previously logged, mined or burnt terrace land with relatively low conservation value. Licences stipulate that the moss must be harvested in a sustainable manner.

Sphagnum's antibacterial properties and ability to absorb up to 20 times its own weight in water make it very popular horticulturally as a growing medium, particularly in the massive Japanese orchid industry. On the West Coast, sphagnum harvesting has become a sizeable \$12-million export industry employing up to 500 people. West Coast sphagnum is valued especially because it is uncontaminated. About 25 percent of the harvest is from DoC land and licences have been issued covering almost 4,000 hectares.

But in Southland, DoC's regional conservator Kerry Mawhinney says that no conservation land would meet the department's criteria for issuing harvesting licences.

A lot of Southland sphagnum bogs are within scenic reserves or national parks. Those on stewardship land were allocated to DoC because of their high ecological value and representativeness.

Also it appears the higher altitude and latitude of the south produce a slower growth rate than on the West Coast.

New Zealand has 11 species of sphagnum. They all have a remarkable ability to absorb



Camouflaged bags of illegally harvested sphagnum moss in the Seaward Moss conservation area near Bluff Harbour. The area is a proposed reserve adjacent to the internationally recognised Waituna wetlands.

and retain water and are thought to play a vital role in water storage and flow throughout whole catchments especially in upland areas. Sphagnum-dominated bogs form naturally in areas of high rainfall and low temperature or poor drainage.

The most common species and the one targeted for harvesting, *Sphagnum cristatum*, grows in extensive carpets or as

hummocky cushions which are very easily damaged. Many harvesters use four-wheeled motor bikes to drag out their bags and the channels left by the wheel tracks act as drains, causing ponding and eventual death of the moss. The ponding also draws water out of the mounds. The moss dries, its growth slows and eventually it will be colonised by weeds or other bog species better

adapted to slightly drier conditions.

Sphagnum bogs in Forest and Bird's Lenz reserve in the Catlins have been raided, causing considerable damage.

DoC says several prosecutions are pending following illegal harvesting on its estate in Southland and the department has been appealing for the public to report suspicious activity.

Hovercraft halted in Rotorua

FOREST AND BIRD has succeeded in halting wildlife disturbance by a hovercraft operator on Sulphur Bay in Lake Rotorua.

The waters of the bay are gazetted as a wildlife refuge. They are a very important wildlife habitat for over 40 native bird species, and the breeding place for significant populations of dabchick, scaup and banded dotterel.

The tourist hovercraft operator had sought for some time to take passengers into the geothermal bay and had received a permit last August only to have it revoked when the conditions were broken and the birds disturbed.

Then, in an unorthodox

exercise of patronage, the Rotorua District mayor arranged a temporary permit for the hovercraft. While submissions to the council from Forest and Bird and DoC had advocated the development of the area for sensitive ecotourism, conservationists couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the hovercraft operating again in Sulphur Bay over the New Year holiday, without any consent hearing or consultation.

The hovercraft harassed birds in the refuge by driving through them at speeds of up to 40 km/h. At the head of the bay it then landed on a geothermal flat showering sand and pumice over the breeding territories of banded dotterel.

Particularly disturbing was the disregard of the principle of

sanctuary that is inherent in the wildlife refuge status of the bay.

Forest and Bird, in particular local members Alan Newman and John Innes, led a determined campaign against this inappropriate venture that masqueraded as ecotourism. Eventually they convinced the council that the disturbance of dotterels and the geothermal flat (gazetted a local purpose reserve) was contrary to the wildlife provisions in the Reserves Act, and that the hovercraft venture was a new activity requiring a consent under the Resource Management Act.

With landing denied, the hovercraft passage across the wildlife refuge was effectively stymied.

Basil Graeme