



ANDY DENNIS

Part of the 1100 hectares of sandy intertidal foreshore off the mouths of the Motueka and Riwaka rivers, near Nelson. Large foreshore areas like this are a prominent natural feature of Golden and Tasman bays. Forest and Bird, and others, are seeking to protect such areas from the proliferation of marine farms which now dominate many bays in the Marlborough Sounds (below). In Golden Bay, an 80-hectare mussel farm, two kilometres off the north of Collingwood has more than 11,000 of these buoys. From beach level they form a continuous line along the sea horizon for about 2.5 kilometres.



and the clearance of indigenous vegetation (see *Protecting your local patch*, *Forest & Bird*, August 1994). However, councils almost invariably also face pressure from landholders and resource users to restrict the scope of environmental protection. As a result, local authorities frequently opt for a compromise, relying on measures such as 'education' and 'voluntary restraints'. Forest and Bird generally supports a more effective process of council supervision through rules and the issue of resource consents.

As more councils complete the public submission and hearing process, and notify their amended plans, Forest and Bird has to decide whether the revised plan provisions are adequate to safeguard nature, or whether it should seek stronger protection through the Environment Court. While this removes the issue from the lobbying and political pressures, the time and effort involved can be expensive. There is the time in preparing for and attending court hearings, the need for (and cost of) expert witnesses and legal counsel, and the

## Protecting the South Island high-country

by Eugenie Sage and Andy Dennis

**T**ravellers along State Highway One between Christchurch and Timaru traverse one of the most tedious landscapes anywhere in New Zealand — two hours of monotonous, rectangular paddocks, wire fences, pine shelter-belts and spray irrigators; a landscape from which wild nature has been almost totally outlawed. Some vestiges of 'natural character', however, remain in the broad, braided beds of the Rakaia and Rangitata rivers, and in the distant backdrop of the foothills of the Southern Alps. Otherwise, this is a part of New Zealand where the landscape consists only of introduced trees and shrubs, introduced animals and human structures and devices.

Further west, beyond the plains, the landscapes of the Ashburton high-country are more diverse and wild. Ancient glaciers have smoothed and shaped hillsides and hillocks, and created an internationally important network of lakes and kettlehole tarns. Here too, on the hill slopes in the Ashburton Basin, are extensive areas of tussock grassland along with dracophyllum and matagouri shrublands. Gullies retain remnants of beech and mountain ribbonwood forest. Wetlands are widespread, and streams and rivers flow along beds unchoked by weeds and willows. While shelter belts and bright green swards of exotic pasture are also common, these are largely confined to valley floors and gentler lower slopes, so much of this landscape retains a predominantly natural character.

The proposed district plan released by the Ashburton District Council in 1995 recognized the importance of this high-country through the creation of a separate 'high-country zone'. It also identified some 55 areas covering some 70,780 hectares of 'significant nature conservation value' mostly within the high-country. Associated rules required landowners to seek a resource consent if they wanted to burn, clear or otherwise damage these areas. There were also general rules protecting riparian and wetland margins, controlling exotic forestry, and restricting earthworks above 1000 metres altitude. Such rules were made in recognition of the thin soils, difficult growing conditions, and slow recovery rates characteristic of this kind of montane and sub-alpine environment.

In extensive submissions on the draft plan, and in subsequent oral hearings, the Department of Conservation and Forest and Bird generally supported the approach taken by the Council. Federated Farmers and individual landholders, however, hotly contested many of the proposed mechanisms for protection. As a consequence the Council decided to back-pedal on a number of the key provisions for nature conservation. Among other things this resulted in a proposal to re-assess the values of half the significant natural areas identified in the 1995 draft plan. It also postponed the introduction of rules for controlling vegetation clearance, earthworks and other damaging activities during the five-year period proposed for revision of the plan.

As a result, Forest and Bird referred the revised plan to the Environment Court in August 1997, seeking better protection for the high-country landscapes and their significant conservation values.

As is increasingly the case with appeals lodged in the Environment Court, this led to further negotiations between the opposing parties, to see if a compromise could be reached. Although initial negotiations were fairly combative, progress was eventually made, resulting in a draft agreement in November 1998.

In return for tighter controls on the clearance of indigenous vegetation and any modification of areas designated as 'areas of significant nature conservation value', Forest and Bird and DoC agreed to new provisions being included in the plan. These: (i) allow landholders to clear tussock, matagouri and other vegetation in areas of pasture which are already largely modified; (ii) require greater consultation with landholders in reviewing the list of significant natural areas in the plan; (iii) allow changes to the boundaries of some of the proposed significant natural areas; and (iv) allow a more permissive regime for forestry in parts of the district which already have shelter belts and woodlots, and where species prone to wilding spread are not used.

If the Environment Court approves this agreement and its proposed changes to the draft plan, Ashburton will be one of the first districts in the South Island to have an operative District Plan. It would come into effect with policies and provisions which go a long way towards protecting the essentially natural character of a very important part of the South Island's treasured high-country.