

Stewart Island/Rakiura National Park Proposal Advanced

Moves to establish a national park on Stewart Island are in their final stages, with 'approval in principle' already agreed by the New Zealand Conservation Authority. The proposed park will cover most of the island, excepting the township and hinterland of Half Moon Bay, 'buffer zones' and areas of Maori-owned land.

The Conservation Authority, which has the responsibility for conducting any public enquiry into national park proposals, has found the island meets the exacting standards demanded by legislation. The Authority will now forward its recommendation to the Minister of Conservation for the declaration of a national park, New Zealand's fourteenth.

The outstanding values of Stewart Island include extensive forests and natural features which deserve 'protection in the national interest'. The island is home to a number of endangered birds and plants, and is notably free of mustelids, such as ferrets and stoats, which have devastated birdlife in mainland forests.

The investigation for the Stewart Island national park extended over 163,000 hectares, about 93 percent of the main island, but excluded all private and Maori land. A large number of coastal islands were also included, but not the nature reserve of Whenua Hou/Codfish Island which is subject to the special joint-management provisions of the Ngai Tahu Maori lands settlement.



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Stewart Island/Rakiura may become New Zealand's fourteenth national park following 'approval in principle' by the New Zealand Conservation Authority, which found the island meets the criteria for national park status. The investigation was begun at the behest of the former National Minister of Conservation, Dr Nick Smith, but any recommendation must go to the current Government for approval.

The national park investigation revealed that a number of offshore islands and rocks are actually unallocated Crown lands — essentially ownerless — and the inclusion of these has to be negotiated with Maori. Most of these islands support outstanding populations of lizards and seabirds, particularly those sufficiently far offshore to be rat free.

The ownership of some of the riverbeds has also to be negotiated with local Government and the Commissioner of Crown Lands. Further questions relating to the management of the tidal zone have also to be determined with the Southland Regional Council — the area is important because of the shelter it accords birds and seals.

As landward boundaries are vague in places, a buffer zone

required by law presently separates Crown reserves from lands which are set aside for Maori under the South Island Landless Natives Act of 1906. The Authority found these buffer zones, amounting to some 13,000 hectares, also contain forests deserving of national park status. It suggests that such remaining areas could be included later, when legal boundaries between Crown and Maori lands have been established.

Much of Stewart Island was formerly protected with the status of 'nature reserve', to protect the habitat of rare and endangered species such as the New Zealand dotterel and the kakapo. Because national park status downgrades this (by allowing people to visit these areas), special protection zones

will be created within the national park so endangered birds and plants remain undisturbed.

Two offshore nature reserves, Bench Island and Whero Rock, will retain their special status, however, so their important tidal zones remain protected places where seals can haul up.

The Conservation Authority has recommended that the park be named Rakiura National Park, recognising that it extends offshore and includes a larger area than just Stewart Island, while also acknowledging its dual heritage of Maori and early European settlement.

— Gordon Ell
A more detailed report on the natural and scenic values of Stewart Island may be found in the May 1999 issue of Forest & Bird.

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