



NEIL SILVERWOOD



Department of Conservation staff recently flew into Mega Mania and spent five days photo-monitoring and marking out 'sacrificial' routes throughout the cave system.

The main entrance into Mega Mania was originally discovered from the air. After its discovery cavers explored 15 kilometres of underground passages. Cavers now use this entrance as a campsite. The entrance environment is particularly fragile. New Zealand cave entrances often contain rare plants and insects, which have adapted to the harsh environment. Cavers have already had a noticeable impact here causing erosion on the entrance slope.



The dense West Coast bush surrounding Mega Mania held the cave location secret until 1994. Isolation and dense rainforest continue to protect the cave from high levels of visitation. As the boundaries of Mega Mania have become known, exploration cavers have begun searching other areas of limestone nearby. The thick bush covering makes cave prospecting slow. So far no new cave systems have been discovered

with the surface is a multitude of large entrances and tomo. These slippery bush-covered holes act as natural traps for wandering birds and animals. This natural, brutal process has been going on for thousands of years. And like Honeycomb Caves,

elsewhere in Kahurangi National Park, Mega Mania has become an ancient bird graveyard.

Mega Mania's 27 entrances contain a variety of bird bone deposits. Little scientific study has been carried out on these sites and their relative importance has yet to be established. Trevor Worthy, a leading palaeontologist, spent a few days briefly examining some key areas. Several different species of birds were identified such as the kakapo, kiwi, snipe, and adzebill. A variety of moa species are also represented. In one section of the cave there are five complete moa skeletons laid out where they died.

One of Mega Mania's other attributes is its bizarre formational sections. In one area of the cave we discovered large aragonite spikes protruding from the cave walls and ceiling. (See cover.) These are known as anthildites. Apart from some sections of our marble cave systems they are the only known examples of these underground in New Zealand. In another section cavers discovered a small room filled with crystal pendulums hanging on the tips of flimsy looking straws. These had been formed under water in a calcite-saturated pool. Luckily this room is well protected; cavers must peer through a natural stalactite curtain to see the pendulums. Other sections

of Mega Mania are not so lucky.

Officers of the Department of Conservation recently visited Mega Mania and were concerned about the state of some areas of the cave. They considered gating off one of the more fragile sections of Mega Mania. Apart from protecting the particular section in question this would enable DoC to gather information on who is using the cave. Most active local cavers I spoke to were opposed to DoC's proposal. Personally I believe gates should only be used when there are no other alternatives left. A gate can really detract from the wilderness feeling of a cave. In the case of Mega Mania little study has been carried out on who is using the cave system and as yet we know very little about how much impact people are having.

Mega Mania's Future

In recent months the Department of Conservation has been working with local cavers to come up with a practical plan for managing and preserving Mega Mania. This is not an easy task! When I went along on a trip with local DoC staff, we camped in the main entrance of the cave just beyond the farthest point the sun reaches into. During the week we completed several different tasks. Our priority was