

older volcanoes than Taranaki. For Taranaki, benign as it may appear in its surrounding ring plain of lush grass, is barely dormant. Its historical record, laid down in successive ash showers, suggests it erupts a minor ash shower once a century, on average. The last record is from 1775.

A careful look at the Taranaki countryside reveals great mounds of volcanic spoil – lahars – spread across the plains, evidence of what might happen again in the case of a major eruption. Glowing clouds of gas and lava have rolled down the mountain in the past. Its steeper slopes, which tend to stabilise at 35 degrees, are actually heavily eroded, with reefs of solid lava standing in places against deep and moving gullies of volcanic ash.

Much of the volcanic activity occurred during the great Ice Ages which separated Taranaki from the remainder of New Zealand. This is one of the explanations offered for the absence of beech forests on the mountain. Instead of rising through the usual succession of rainforests to beech near the snowline Taranaki has a moss forest, clinging to kamahi, then open ridges clothed in hard-leaved leatherwood scrub. There are many hectares of this wind-compacted shrub daisy spreading along some ridges. Mountain flowers and tussock grow in the lee of volcanic cliffs and boulders. It is a harsh environment. At any season, katabatic winds may drop from the mountain top, sweeping its flanks with cold air.

From the visitors' point of view Mount Egmont is particularly accessible. Three mountain roads climb from the farmlands through rainforest, nearly to the treeline. Commercial lodges on the mountain complement the more rugged accommodations of mountain huts and two 'intermediate' lodges provided by the Department of Conservation. Walking tracks also access the Pouakai and Kaitake sectors of the park.

On Taranaki there is a Round-the-

*On a clear day, the symmetry of Taranaki (2518 metres) contrasts with the eroded remnants of volcanoes to its northwest, including the Pouakai Range (1399 metres) and Kaitake (683 metres).*



GORDON ELL, BUSH FILMS

Mountain walk (taking up to seven days), traversing its forested flanks, with the summer alternative of emerging in several places to walk on the open flanks of the mountain, itself an 18-hour circuit. Walking tracks from the road ends explore the adjacent forest, or point the walker up into the sub-alpine zone. Altogether, Egmont National Park offers some 206 kilometres of tracks. There are also established routes up Taranaki itself, and the 'parasitic' cone of Fantham's Peak on the south flank of the mountain.

Climbing the mountain has been the cause of some controversy, ever since the scientist Ernst Dieffenbach and the whaler James Heberley became the first Europeans to do so in 1836. Maori regard the mountain as an ancestor and its head too sacred to disturb. The recently published Egmont National Park Management Plan Review suggests climbers do not take the final step

*Above the bushline, closely compacted leatherwood scrub surmounts many ridges. This almost impenetrable forest consists of a multiple-branched shrub daisy, which then blends with dracophyllum and tussock, approaching the alpine herbfields.*

to stand on its peak as a mark of respect. (A similar suggestion is made on behalf of Ngai Tahu at Mount Cook National Park, to protect the sacred summit of Aoraki.)

In 1978, the ownership of Mount Taranaki was granted to the Taranaki Maori Trust Board on behalf of tribes which had suffered through the Crown's confiscation of much of their land during the Taranaki wars of the 1860s. More than generously, the Trust Board immediately returned the mountain to the care of the Crown, as a national park for all. In the park's centennial year, however, ownership of the mountain is again being contested.

