

# Kaimanawa Wild Horses and Conservation

The Kaimanawa wild horses that once roamed over some 80,000 hectares of tussock grasslands in the central North Island are now confined. They live now on 18,000 hectares in the southern region of their former range. The herd has been reduced in number to about 500. The horses are doing well. They are healthy, living longer and still running free.

The other 60,000 hectares of tussock — the largest such area in the North Island — is a horse-free zone. The tussock grasslands, the subalpine herbfields, wetlands and forest margins, are on the road to recovery, a process that could take about 40 years.

When 208 Kaimanawa horses were removed from the Waiouru tussock grasslands in June 2002, there wasn't a protester in sight. It was a far

cry from a few years ago when the fate of the Kaimanawa horses caused a public frenzy.

The 'stand-off' between the defenders of the Kaimanawa horses versus those of the tussock grasslands appears to have been solved. The key to success has been leadership by the Department of Conservation at conservancy level, the willingness of key players to talk things through, and a determined Conservation Minister. The management plan that emerged after four years of investigation and public consultation has achieved all its principal objectives and is now being reviewed.

There is no new evidence to suggest that the minimum effective population of 300 horses should be re-assessed. There are, however, questions whether the horse population is at a level that allows a safety

margin for plants. This matter continues to be monitored.

Since 1993, considerable numbers of Kaimanawa horses have passed into private ownership — with their offspring this could amount to 1000 horses.

A Kaimanawa Horse Advisory Committee appointed by the Minister of Conservation in 1998 keeps an eye on things and provides a forum for continuing stakeholder involvement. It is serviced and chaired by DoC, and includes DoC scientists, the Kaimanawa Wild Horse Preservation Society, the Army, Forest and Bird, the Veterinary Association, Wanganui Conservation Board, SPCA and private landowners.

This committee is currently reviewing the Horse Management Plan with three objectives — to ensure the welfare of the horse is dealt

with appropriately; to promote the sustainability of the natural features and ecosystems of the Moawhango Ecological District; and manage a herd of Kaimanawa horses at a sustainable level.

The removal of horses from the northern region has ensured, as far as possible, that nationally endangered and rare plants and a number of biogeographically significant plants are no longer adversely affected by the horses.

Although the greater threat of the horses is out of the way, there remain land-management problems to do with weed infestation, pinus contorta eradication and hares! Army land managers are spending upwards of \$800,000 a year on these problems.

— KEITH CHAPPLE *has represented Forest and Bird in these negotiations.*

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