

Forest and Bird is 80 Years Young

Forest and Bird marks its eightieth birthday on March 28. On that day in 1923 a group of people who loved the outdoors gathered in Wellington to form the Native Bird Protection Society.

The Society was a natural reaction against the rapid clearance of frontier forests and the consequent vanishing of our wildlife. In those days the huia and the piopio were but recently believed extinct. Kauri forest was burnt to clear the countryside. The process of pioneering, following earlier forest clearances by Maori, had already changed the nature of the land. New Zealand was largely carved from the bush and the founders of Forest and Bird were saying 'enough is enough'.

Among the folk who founded this Society were a former Liberal prime minister, Sir Thomas Mackenzie, the first president. The active agent, however, was a former car importer, Captain E.V. Sanderson who became the Society's first secretary, and later president. Distinguished naturalists and business leaders were among the first committee members.

In 80 years a huge number of committed people have served the Society nationally and locally. Indeed, many of the branches were born out of a need to act locally, to preserve a forest or a wetland.

Forest and Bird is fundamentally a populist movement. While it has a dedicated staff, very much of its day-to-day activism is conducted by committed volunteers.

Over the decades some of the country's foremost scientists have also lent their time and authority to the movement. The Society has always prided itself on using good science, not sentiment, to win its arguments.

Not that a well-developed love of country doesn't play a large part in all this. New Zealanders who have dedicated time to the movement have done so with a strong conviction that we need to act in concert to preserve our peculiar wildlife, our ancient forests.

The job has not been easy, for the particular distinction of the New Zealand environment is its vulnerability. When people (with rats and dogs) arrived here some 800 years ago they were the first mammals to reach this island ark. All our wildlife, all our plants, had developed in isolation from the rest of the world. It has taken us less than 1000 years to undo much of the evolutionary history of 80 million years and more.

The causes the early Society took up are sadly still with us. The country has developed hugely from what was then basically a period of pioneering. During the Society's life, many more bird populations have collapsed, wetlands have been drained, forests felled and coastlines disturbed.

Yet, the same period has seen a third of the country protected in public parks and reserves, a virtual end to the logging of native forests, the 'mainstreaming' of the conservation message, and the science developed to save what is left of our nature. Forest and Bird has been at the forefront of all this.

The organisation which was founded to protect New Zealand's native forests and birds still goes to work every day, vigorously advocating on behalf of the natural world. The job is never finished; only the circumstances change.

Our present concerns extend from establishing protected areas in our high

country to restoring the dawn chorus of native birds; from protecting our environment from invasive pests and weeds to creating marine reserves and saving the nature of our territorial seas.

The Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Incorporated is today very much a formidable force in the community. At a time when many voluntary societies and community groups have suffered badly through falling membership, Forest and Bird remains a substantial and stable contributor to the nation's identity. And, best of all, conservation has become a national concern. Volunteers within and without the Society contribute to literally thousands of community initiatives to care better for our country.

Forest and Bird has played a major part over the years, in moving the national psyche from its pioneer destructiveness to a more considerate appreciation of what it takes to sustain all life on earth.

Hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders have done this through the Society over the decades. Activists and passive supporters alike each make a valuable contribution towards preserving our nature and wildlife.

While the need for Forest and Bird is as critical as ever, its eightieth anniversary is a moment worth celebrating.

Congratulations to all our members and supporters.



Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Inc. (Founded 1923)

Registered Office at 172 Taranaki Street, Wellington.

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