

Conservation orders over Rangitata, Motueka rivers

Two of New Zealand's most outstanding rivers are to be saved from further development by the imposition of Water Conservation Orders. The Rangitata in Mid-Canterbury, and the larger part of the Motueka watershed in northwest Nelson, are to be preserved in their natural state.

In the case of the Rangitata, a special tribunal and the Environment Court have made an interim report to the Minister for the Environment who has asked for the wording for an Order. Both enquiries found the Rangitata needs protection for a range of outstanding features, including its scenic upper reaches, the salmon run, threatened birdlife, and special cultural values of both Maori and pakeha. Threatened birds which breed in the vast riverbed include wrybill

and the black-fronted tern both with world populations of barely 5000. Others nesting on the shingle beds include banded dotterel, the migrant South Island pied oystercatcher, pied stilt, colonies of black-billed and black-backed gulls, and Caspian tern.

Prior to this ruling, the river was threatened by proposals to dam it and extract more water for irrigation, (see *Forest & Bird*, May 2001). One proposal included a rock dam 550 metres wide above the Rangitata Gorge, flooding the upper reaches for 18 kilometres, to generate power, and abstracting around 150 percent more water to irrigate a further 95,000 hectares.

The water conservation order will fix current permitted abstraction at 33 cumecs, shared through the season by the needs

of existing irrigators and power generation — schemes dating back to 1946. The river is to be maintained at a minimum flow of 100 cumecs and no further abstraction is to be permitted.

The Rangitata application was made by Fish and Game with support from Forest and Bird, the Department of Conservation and Ngai Tahu.

Parts of the Upper Motueka River and other tributaries are to be retained in their natural state for their wild and scenic features, according to the Minister for the Environment, Hon. Marian Hobbs.

Among its many outstanding features are special parts of the Motueka River, Wangapeka River, the Rolling River and the Skeet River, which will be protected to

retain the natural habitat for blue ducks and the brown trout fishery. The Order also protects specific streams in the Arthur Range, Kahurangi National Park, because of the scientific and recreational values associated with the karst geological formations.

The Order also restricts certain activities, including damming and altering river flows and quality, which would have a detrimental effect on the Motueka River. It is not absolute, however, and will not prevent the exercise of 'current consents' — water can still be taken for domestic needs, the needs of animals and fire fighting. The original application was made by the then Acclimatisation Society (now the Nelson Marlborough Fish and Game Council), and their national bodies, in 1990.



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