New Zealand’s national park and wilderness area system: its evolution, protection and threats

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TECTONIC SETTING: Plate Boundary on the Circum-Pacific ‘Ring of Fire’

Mt Ruapehu, in Tongariro National Park, erupting in 1996

Lake Taupo occupies caldera of Taupo ‘super-volcano’
Landform Diversity of entire Continent squeezed into New Zealand archipelago

- **Alpine Fault on West Coast of South Island** (one of only 4 places in world where plate boundary on land)
- **Franz Josef & Fox Glaciers descending into rainforest**
- **Aoraki/Mt Cook, Tasman Glacier, and 100s of peaks and glaciers of the Southern Alps**
- **Canterbury Plains, with braided river landforms**
- **Some of world’s most frequently active volcanoes**
A long intricate coastline (>15,000km); 700 islands
THE FIORDS OF FIORDLAND, SOME REACHING 35 km INLAND FROM THE TASMAN SEA
Aoraki/Mt Cook & Southern Alps above Fox Glacier

Extreme rainfall gradients across alps – 18,440mm/yr in west, possibly the wettest in the world; as low as 350mm/yr in east
Glacial lakes, braided rivers, and tussock grassland landscapes of eastern South Island High Country
NEW ZEALAND’S INDIGENOUS FORESTS

• prior to the arrival of Maori (c.1000 years ago), indigenous forest covered 80% of Aotearoa

• 3 main forest types:
  • beech (*Nothofagus*)
  • podocarp/broadleaf rainforest (pictured)
  • kauri (*Araucariaceae*)

• today only 23% of NZ carries indigenous forest
New Zealand’s Diverse Alpine Plants

• 30% of total flora
• 93% endemic
“….the attraction of most of NZ’s biodiversity stems from its antiquity and its many curiosities.”

Les Molloy, “New Zealand’s Wilderness Heritage”, 2007

TUATARA – ‘living fossil’

KEA – alpine parrot

KAKAPO – flightless, nocturnal ‘owl’ parrot

KIWI – ‘the most unbirdlike of birds’, with many attributes more typical of mammals.
New Zealand’s biota is ‘depauperate’ (ie, lacking major groups of plants and animals) **but very rich in unusual life forms** – and very different from Australia

- Gondwanan link of many plants and Tuatara, Moa, Wrens and Kiwi (endemic at order/family level)
- Lack of **mammals** (except bats)
- Mainly birds and reptiles
- Gigantism and Flightlessness
- Unusual invertebrates (95% endemism), especially *Peripatus*, weta, giant earthworms, beetles, and carnivorous land snails
- Alpine geckos and parrots
TONGARIRO NATIONAL PARK: THE GIFT

1887 - summits of Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu volcanoes gifted by Te Heu Heu Tukino, chief of Ngati Tuwharetoa tribe - nucleus of New Zealand’s first national park

- 4th national park in world (progressively increased to 80,000 ha)
- First national park freely gifted by an indigenous people
- World Heritage site (mixed, both natural and cultural)
Following the legal designation of Tongariro NP in 1894, another four national parks were set aside after campaigns by concerned citizens:

- Egmont, 1900
- Fiordland (Sounds Reserve), 1904
- Arthur’s Pass, 1929
- Abel Tasman, 1942
“...the public shall have freedom of entry and access to the parks so that they may receive in full measure the inspiration, enjoyment, recreation, and other benefits that may be derived from mountains, forests, sounds, lakes, and rivers.”

- rationalised untidy legislative treatment of national parks
- Federated Mountain Clubs of NZ key role (free access to backcountry)
- emphasis was on ‘scenic grandeur’ (especially mountains)
- set up professional ranger service in Department of Lands & Survey
- DL&S had internal policy conflicts (as govt’s land development agency)
- powerful National Parks Authority (set policy); Boards for each park
- no scientific basis to selection of new national parks
FIVE NEW NATIONAL PARKS DESIGNATED UNDER THE 1952 ACT

Mt Cook 1953

Urewera, 1954

Westland, 1960

Nelson Lakes, 1956

Mt Aspiring, 1964
“…preserving in perpetuity as national parks, for their intrinsic worth and for the benefit, use, and enjoyment of the public, areas of New Zealand that contain scenery of such distinctive quality, ecological systems, or natural features so beautiful, unique, or scientifically important that their preservation is in the national interest.”

- a response to widespread criticism that national parks were not representative of New Zealand’s geodiversity and biodiversity
- NZ Forest Service had set up representative ‘ecological areas’
- no new national parks for 16 years
- new NP Act limited the powers of NP Authority and Boards
FOUR NATIONAL PARKS SUBSEQUENTLY DESIGNATED UNDER 1980 ACT

Whanganui, 1986

Paparoa, 1987

Kahurangi, 1996

Rakiura (Stewart Island), 2002
NEW ZEALAND’S NATIONAL PARKS

- All 14 are all of high quality (conform with IUCN’s New Delhi definition of a ‘national park’, unlike many in Australia, UK, China, and Japan)
- are protected by Act of Parliament
- have detailed Management Plans (with public input) to balance protection & use
- are wild, uninhabited and generally unroaded (no Marine NPs)
- are free to enjoy (no entry fees)
WHAT IS A ‘WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE’?
‘What unknown affinity
Lies between mountain and sea….
Somewhere in a blanket fold of the land
Lies the golden strand.

R.I.P where no gold lies
But in your own questing soul
Rich in faith and a wild surmise.
You should have been told
Only in you was the gold:
Mountain and river paid you no fee,
Mountain melting to the river,
River to the sea.’

Denis Glover [‘Arawata Bill’]
“Each footstep on the mountain isn’t just a means to an end – but a unique event in itself.

To live only for some future goal is shallow: it is the side of the mountain that sustains life – not the top”

*Robert Persig*

“Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance”
During 1960s and 1970s there was increasing concern in mountain clubs at the loss of wilderness through:

- logging of indigenous forest,
- damming wild rivers for hydro-electricity generation
- mining, and
- widespread development of huts and tracks for wild animal control (primarily deer)

There were only 4 small legal Wilderness Areas and No Wilderness Policy or Protection Strategy.
THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE IN THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

- Embodies Remoteness and Discovery
- Solitude, Challenge, Freedom & Romance
- It fosters Self-reliance and empathy with Wild Nature
- Wilderness is principally a recreational and cultural concept (which is usually compatible with nature conservation)
FMC took the initiative during its 50th jubilee year in 1981, by organising New Zealand’s first Wilderness Conference.
“There are plenty of tamed wonders for all to goggle at through vehicle windows – we must also retain our wilderness areas where nature can develop in its own calm way and where only those humans who are prepared to walk and sweat a little qualify to go”

Sir Edmund Hillary
FMC  Wilderness Area Proposals presented to Wilderness Conference 1981

- 10 new large wilderness areas, each at least 30,000 ha in area, with a total area of around 500,000 ha for all 10
- 2 in the North Island,
- 7 in the South Island, and
- 1 in Stewart Island

- A draft wilderness policy

Subsequently, a ‘Wilderness Advisory Group’, chaired by FMC worked through to 1983, advising government on the viability of the new wilderness areas and finalising the wilderness policy.
In 1984, 110 km of the remote Motu River was the first to be protected as a ‘Wild & Scenic River’

Then in 1988 this wild river was included in the first real wilderness area in the North Island – Raukumara (39,650 ha) in the East Cape
STRICT CHARACTER OF WILDERNESS AREAS IN NEW ZEALAND

- They are wild uninhabited lands affected only by the forces of nature
- Large enough to take at least 2 days’ foot travel to traverse; >30,000 ha in size
- Buffered by other natural lands, and with clearly defined topographic boundaries,
- Without tracks, huts, bridges, signs, and mechanised access
CONSERVATION ACT 1987

- Act passed after 15 years of bitter conservation controversies
  (forest logging or clearance for farming, mining, development of high country tussock grasslands, rivers dammed and lakes raised for hydroelectricity, land sales to foreigners)

- Dis-established former public land agencies
  (Lands & Survey, NZ Forest Service, Wildlife Service)

- Created a Department of Conservation (DOC)
  with a nation-wide mandate to manage virtually all natural public lands (32% of NZ) for natural and historic heritage conservation

- DOC no longer considered national parks to be the ‘jewels in the crown’ but, rather, the largest entities in a spectrum of public conservation land
  (recreation and tourism were subservient to ‘conservation’ of natural & historic heritage)
Te Wahipounamu is one of the world’s outstanding World Heritage sites – listed under all four natural criteria. It is 2,600,000 ha, ie, 10% of NZ’s land area.
‘Mountains-to-the-Sea’ Protected Landscape

In Te Wahipounamu (SWNZ) World Heritage Area, Westland Tai Poutini National Park has one of the world’s best unbroken sequences of alpine landforms, dense temperate rainforest, wetlands and coastal dunelands.
Wilderness Area situation in 2012

• 11 areas designated, (6 of them FMC proposals) covering nearly 2% of NZ’s land

• 2 more (both FMC proposals) awaiting final boundary definition
DOC VISITOR STRATEGY: Visitors grouped into 7 categories by abilities and interests

12,000 km of tracks; 960 huts; 13,000 bridges, boardwalks, etc.
Tourism Changing Face of Backcountry Huts

- Nearly 1000 huts on conservation land – problem of too high Building Act standards?
- Concern at DOC proposals to remove many traditional and historic tramping huts
- Criticism of DOC building ‘tourist lodges’ instead of huts
- DOC ‘white-anting’ annual hut pass through booking system for tourists
‘THRILL-SEEKERS’ are “Time Poor” and want to “experience wilderness”, if at all, preferably in an afternoon

- Visitor Strategy’s 7th visitor category, “Thrill-seeker” catered for by Adventure Tourism industry, not by DOC
- The annual numbers of overseas tourists has now reached 2,600,000 (ie, about 60% of the NZ population) and many Kiwis feel like strangers in their own backcountry. This is particularly the case on ‘Great Walks’
CHALLENGES: NOW & FUTURE

• Making NZ protected area system more representative – especially marine ecosystems (and achieving more conservation on private land)

• More effective control of animal & plant pests

• Eastern South Island High Country – protecting landscape and biodiversity values (*Pastoral Tenure Review*)

• Reducing pollution of rivers & lakes – need for stricter controls on agriculture (especially dairying)

• Better access to backcountry (issue of foreign ownership of rural hinterland)

• Holding the Tail of the ‘Tourism Tiger’
SOME RECENT SUCCESSES

• Like Australia, New Zealand’s nature conservation and wilderness recreation NGOs have regained the vigour of the 1970s
• There is now an extraordinarily high level of volunteer involvement in conservation projects
• Despite the ‘Growthmania’– addicted agendas of John Key’s National government, 2012 has seen some important conservation victories
• But only because of constant vigilance and effort….
In 2011, 50,000 people marched through Auckland to protest at the plans of the John Key government to open some national parks to mining. The government backed down quickly.
A 6-year battle stopped the Lake Hayes wind farm in January 2012. It would have placed 176 turbines, at a cost of $2B, in this iconic natural tussockland of the Lammerlaw Range in Central Otago.
In May 2012, Meridian abandoned their plans to dam the Mokihinui -- one of NZ’s best wilderness rivers. An 85m dam would have created a 14 km-long lake in this landscape. The Mokihinui scheme was opposed by DOC and a wide range of NGOs. This victory for river conservation effectively means the end of hydroelectricity generation from New Zealand’s wild rivers.
NZ’s major environmental problem is pollution of rivers through intensification of agriculture, especially Agribusiness dairying.

The Rangitikei River rises in the Kaimanawa Mountains as a pristine wilderness river. It is significantly degraded when it reaches the farmlands of the Manawatu lowlands. But in Sept 2012 the Environment Court made a landmark ruling in favour of Horizons Regional Council’s “One Plan” to regulate water quality through discharge standards. This was an unexpected but welcome defeat for Fonterra and the farming lobby.
Impact of Treaty of Waitangi Settlements: Co-Governance of some National Parks by Crown and Iwi

Government’s initial secret plan was to pass Te Urewera National Park to Tuhoe iwi as redress for past injustices.
But there a number of very serious current threats to the viability of our wilderness

- **Mining** (minerals on conservation land and oil/gas exploration offshore).

- **Reclassification of Wild, Introduced Animals as Game Animals** *(likely establishment of a Game Animal Council & Aerially-assisted Trophy Hunting in Wilderness Areas)*

- **Tourism incompatible with national parks and wilderness areas**

- **New commercial emphasis in the senior management of Department of Conservation**
In August 2011, Australian-owned Bathurst Resources gained resource consents to develop an open-cast mine on Denniston Plateau, public conservation land of high biodiversity value. Bathurst has indicated it aims to expand the mine across the plateau and increase production to generate an estimated 80 million tonnes of coal. If so, Denniston would be the biggest open-cast coal mine on New Zealand’s public conservation land.
Proposed new tourism road tunnel and monorail in Te Wahipounamu World Heritage Area,

The 11.3 km-long tunnel would be dug under the world-famous Routeburn Track in the Humboldt Mountains of Mt Aspiring NP, in order to shorten the time taken by tourist buses to reach Milford Sound.
Increased commercial bias of DOC

DOC facilitation of Aerially-assisted trophy hunting of Himalayan Tahr in South Island Wilderness Areas – contravening 1985 Wilderness Policy
“Wilderness preservation is a conscious attack upon our idolatrous commitment to material growth, an opting for the type of restraint and moral growth preached by Edmund Burke and latter-day economic prophets like Georgescu-Roegen, Daly, and Schumaker.

It is in sympathy with the spirit and wisdom of Te Heu Heu Tukino when he gifted the volcanic peaks of Tongariro National Park to the nation to avoid their exploitation.”

Les Molloy, 2007
“New Zealand’s Wilderness Heritage”