

Kārearea

Protecting a southern land

Dec–Jan 2017



Image: Craig McKenzie

Conservation Gains or Groundhog Day?

Jane Young

Remember *Groundhog Day*? A TV weatherman finds himself in a time loop, fated to repeat the same day over and over again.

For conservationists attempting to gain protection for NZ marine ecosystems there are times when it can all feel a bit like *Groundhog Day*. Take the issue of marine reserves in Otago for example.

The 1991 President's Report for South Otago Forest & Bird stated optimistically, "Marine Reserves are now moving rapidly . . . The proposed marine reserve at the Nuggets is an exciting prospect and needs the support of everybody."

Yes, but . . . New Zealand's first marine reserve was established at Goat Island in 1977. Almost half a century later we still don't have a single marine reserve in Otago.

1992 The Department of Conservation made its first attempt to establish a marine reserve covering the coastal waters around the iconic Nuggets. In the face of a hostile reception the application was shelved.

2003–2005 A renewed attempt to protect an ecosystem with some of the most stunning marine biodiversity in Otago met with vehement local opposition. This proposal also failed, despite it being for a much smaller area than that originally put forward.

2014 The South-East Marine Protection Forum (Te Roopu Manaaki kit e Toka) was appointed by the National Government to make recommendations for a whole network of protected areas for the south-east coast

of the South Island between Timaru and Waipapa Point. The Forum was tasked with protecting all habitat types and ecosystems in a reserve (Type 1 MPA). Because no one reserve can cover them all unless it extends from Karitāne to the Catlins – not likely to be a popular move – a number of reserves are required. Other Marine Protected Areas (Type 2 MPAs) will be established using legislation that is already in place. At a bare minimum, dredging, bottom trawling and Danish seining won't be allowed in Type 2 MPAs.

There are 13 members of the Forum, including five who represent fishing interests, three representing Ngai Tahu, and two representing the environmental sector. Community consultation has been, to say the least, exhaustive – the original timeline was extended by ten months to allow the Forum to consider as many viewpoints as possible. Despite this, at one of the most recent public meetings, an attendee was heard to voice the familiar complaint: "We haven't been consulted!"

The Forum has now released a consultation document which shows nine marine reserves with a total of about 5.3% of the Forum Region's area. It is only in these tiny reserves that there would be a total ban on killing or removing living organisms, or on waste discharge (such as when fishing boats are cleaned).

At this stage nothing is finalised and none of the proposed sites are 'locked in' to be recommended to the government. The sites themselves, where the boundaries are drawn and the types of protection put

cont p2

Long Point

in place are all still to be debated and decided. Even if all the proposed sites were accepted, the total area is nowhere near the '10% by 2020' Aichi Biodiversity target that the government has signed up to. (The 2016 World Conservation Congress stated that at least 30% of each marine habitat needs to be protected if there is to be any chance of creating a fully sustainable ocean.)

A major disappointment for conservationists was the discovery that not only is no marine reserve proposed for the Nuggets; it won't even get Type 2 protection. This may come as a surprise to an Australian visitor who stopped by to chat at a Forest & Bird stall in Owaka last month. She had gone to see the wildlife at the Nuggets the previous evening, and was astounded to observe a fishing boat pulling up a net within a few hundred metres of where some of the world's rarest penguins were coming ashore.

It would be a mistake to think that taking the Nuggets off the table as a proposed marine protected area has made it any more likely that fishing interests would accept Long Point as a compromise candidate. Long Point has high biodiversity values, though not equal to those of the Nuggets. However, any attempt to restrict fishing raises the same passionate arguments from those who consider that their rights would be curtailed.

A commonly used argument over the years has been

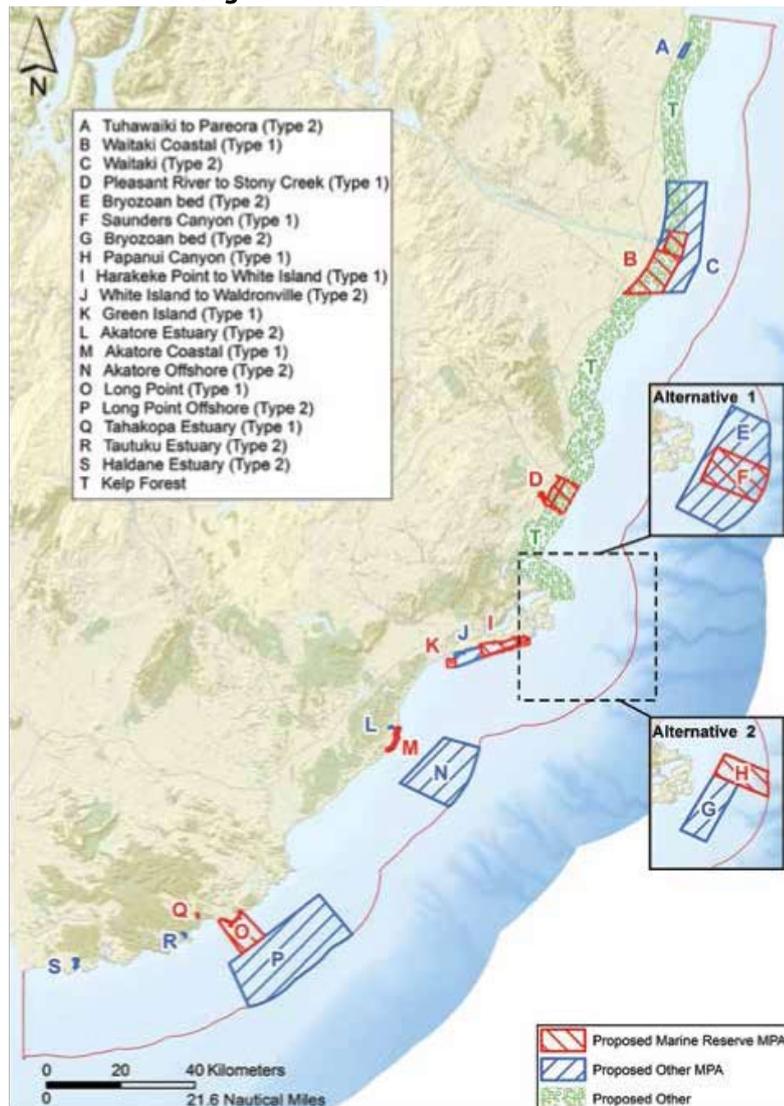
that because local land use activities, such as conversion of wetlands to pasture, cause marine pollution, there's no point in having reserves.

It's true that there are many reasons, including changing land use, why marine ecosystems are in decline. Overfishing is only one part of the story. Long term, climate change and ocean acidification are bigger threats to the marine environment than all the rest put together. But is this a reason not to do what we can to protect it in the here and now?

In 2003, back in the days when Department of Conservation staff were expected to actually advocate for the environment, a senior DOC officer from the Dunedin office spoke to a public meeting in the South Otago town of Balclutha. He made a valiant effort to get across the idea that marine reserves aren't just about fish. Or even just about penguins or sea lions, however photogenic. They're also about sea tulips and bryozoans and crabs and star fish and red algae and sea hares and coral and tubeworms and anemones and kelp and seagrass and sponges and a whole lot more. They're about all the poorly understood, complex webs of living organisms that make up marine ecosystems.

There was some not-so-subtle mockery from the audience, with references being made to 'cute, wee sea creatures'. But it would be nice to think that, although humans have caused so much environmental damage during our short stay in this amazing part of the world, we could at long last come to feel that the 'cute, wee sea creatures' – and all the others that depend on them – should be able to inhabit some parts of it, safe from exploitation by humans. ■

Sites that are being consulted on



Make a Submission

To have your say about the sites that are being consulted on, view the consultation documents on line at: www.south-eastmarine.org.nz or request a paper copy (including a submission form) by phoning 0800687729. The Forum uses Seasketch to inform its planning and you can find out how this interactive tool works at <http://southeastmarine.seasketch.org>. Online submissions are preferred: <http://seasketch/ywoqOcd7GN>. You can also download a submission form: <https://otagomarine.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/submission-form-5mb.pdf> Each potential site can be submitted on individually, as part of a network (eg sites intended to protect mud flat or estuarine reef habitat), or as part of general comments that you wish to make.

You can join Forest & Bird's submission at <http://forestandbird.org.nz/submit-on-sempa>

SUBMISSIONS CLOSE AT 5PM ON TUESDAY 20 DECEMBER 2016

One, two, three . . . many?

Richard Schofield describes the challenges involved in carrying out a black-billed gull census

Black-billed gulls are endemic to New Zealand, and classified as Nationally Critical. The majority of colonies are found in Southland, with smaller numbers in the rest of the South Island, and a few in the North Island. They traditionally nest on braided rivers, but are also found near the coast and on manmade sites.

Over the past few years, several counts in different regions have been conducted to obtain an up-to-date estimate of the size of the breeding population. This year, Birds New Zealand, sponsored by Fruzio, will cover the whole country except for Canterbury which is being covered by ECan. In October this year Southland and Otago were surveyed by Claudia Mischler, who is coordinating the census. The plan was to fly over all sections of rivers at the peak of incubation, in order to gain the most accurate count of breeding pairs. Too early, and not all the birds would be sitting; too late, and chicks would be out of the nest. A selection of colonies was checked in advance of the flight, to determine the timing for the survey. All colonies were photographed from the air, and GPS coordinates recorded. This enabled the apparently occupied nests (AONs) to be counted on the computer screen at a later date.

The weather was variable during the two days of flying; Southland was windy with showers, while Otago was calm and mainly sunny. This made the photography challenging, both from the point of view of holding the camera still in the wind, and the high contrast in the sunshine. To locate colonies, the whole length of rivers were flown at 500 feet, and once colonies were spotted they were photographed. Concentration was essential, as white specks on white gravel blend in very well, and there was a lot of potentially suitable habitat. However, the mission was successful, and over 40 colonies were recorded in Southland, and a further five in Otago.

In a few days following the aerial survey, a selection of sites were visited on foot ("ground truth counting") to compare aerial and ground-based counts; these enabled a correction factor to be applied to the aerial photos to give an accurate estimate of the breeding population. In addition to the AONs, an attempt was made to count all adults as a different method for estimating the population. ■



*A Southland colony from the air
Part of a northern Southland colony at ground level
Spot the gulls – a West Coast colony from the air*



Richard's family – Annie, Suzanne & Tess – check out his judgement of the entries in South Otago Forest & Bird's photographic competition. (See the winning pics on p6.)

Canterbury Biodiversity – a sad loss

Jane Young

Some years ago a South Korean student came to stay with us in the Catlins for a few months.

After arriving from Seoul, he flew down from Christchurch to Dunedin. His first impressions of New Zealand rather took us aback: "There are no trees!" he exclaimed. The cheek of it, I thought. Isn't he coming from a country that is all industry and high-rise? How dare he criticise our clean, green country!

Well, yes. There is a lot of concrete to be seen in South Korea. But when we actually visited the country what made a huge impact on us was the lack of urban sprawl, and the presence of lots and lots of trees.

The eastern coast of the South Island of New Zealand is rather different. Drive from Canterbury to the Catlins and there is little to be seen other than green pasture, dairy cows and sheep. There are some trees, certainly – especially the great, gloomy macrocarpas – but you can be hard-pushed to spot many natives.

The loss of Canterbury's biodiversity was a major theme at the stimulating South Island Gathering of Forest & Bird branches held in Geraldine recently.

In the high country basins about 10–20% of indigenous plant cover remains, but on the plains less than 1% of the original cover survives. The loss has been so drastic that even fragmentary habitats are now significant – but these are also being destroyed with the increasing intensification of agriculture, especially dairy farming. The piles of stones built up as windrows when land was originally converted to pasture provide habitat for animals such as lizards and insects, but the stones are being removed because they get in the way of the huge pivot irrigators. When so much land has been denuded of biodiversity, the roadside verges becomes important refuges, but 50–60% of their native plant cover has been lost since the mid-1990s.

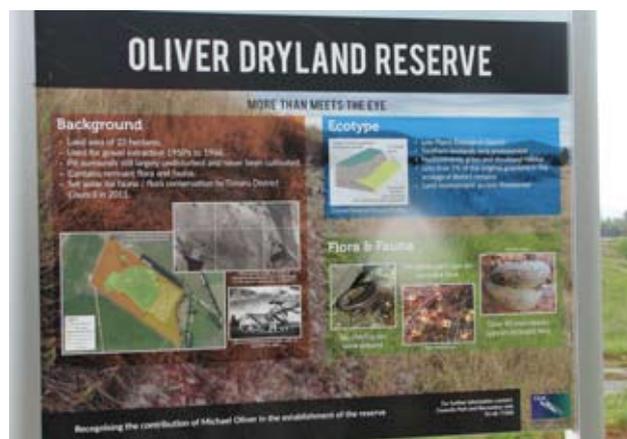
Native animals are still hanging on, but their grip is precarious. Literally, in the case of long-tailed bats that roost in tree hollows, and can lose their habitat overnight if a favoured tree is felled. The nationally vulnerable banded dotterel often lays its eggs in riverbeds where they are exposed to changes in river flow, bulldozing and other human-caused disturbance; and of course to the attentions of the phalanx of introduced predators. Other introduced animals – pigs, deer, wallabies, rabbits – cause major habitat damage, as do the weeds such as lupins, crack willow and wilding pines that degrade the area around Lake Tekapo, for example.

We need to try and protect the biodiversity that is left, always keeping in mind that some changes, if allowed, will be irreversible. In the high country, native plants can out-compete introduced grasses in the absence of grazing (although wilding pines are an ever-increasing problem), but if that land is cultivated as is done with pasture development then there will be complete displacement of the indigenous species and no recovery will be possible.

As always, advocacy and education at all levels are essential. Speakers at the F&B Geraldine Gathering stressed the need to lobby local authorities and also to alert them to infringements of existing regulations.

The most recent results (2013) for a Lincoln University biennial survey carried out on people's perceptions regarding the state of the New Zealand environment showed that more than 90% consider that their understanding of the issues is at least adequate. Yet although the Lincoln report considers that the state of NZ's biodiversity can be regarded as bad or very bad, 80–90% of New Zealanders believe that the state, diversity and management of native land and freshwater plants and animals is adequate to very good. The survey editors suggest that for many people the large amount of 'good news' stories about the recovery of rare species or increased predator control measures may mask the gravity of the underlying situation.

Coming from the Catlins where, although we certainly have our problems, there are still significant amounts of largely intact ecosystems, it was saddening – but also inspiring – to see some of the tiny, lowland holdouts that are treasured by hardworking Canterbury conservationists. Kia kaha. ■



Debs Martin (centre) shares a thoughtful moment with new CEO Kevin Hague and other Forest & Birders at the Oliver Dryland Reserve, a former gravel pit set aside for conservation in 2011

South Otago Forest & Bird in association
with **The Catlins Historical Society** invites you to:

The Catlins Summer Programme

January 2017

Events include:

- Bat talks & walks at Tawanui and Tahakopa
- Bioblitz survey at Owaka River
- Fossils at Papatowai
- Historical Society bus tour
- History, birds & bush at Otanomomo & Awakiki
- Insect Conservation at Earthlore
- Lichens at the Lenz Reserve
- Local Geology at the Owaka Museum
- Mohua at the Wisp
- Predator tracking at Pounaweia
- Sea birds at the Catlins Lake
- Sea lions at Cannibal & Surat Bays
- Yellow-eyed penguins talks and walks
- Walk the Long Track at Lenz Reserve

For more information janejimmyoung@slingshot.co.nz

**South Otago Forest & Bird
Photographic Competition
*Life on the Edge***



Highly Commended: *Catriona Gower* Rockpooling



First Prize Winner: *Sue Wilkins* Stranded

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Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust

www.yellow-eyedpenguin.org.nz

New Zealand Sea Lion Trust www.sealiontrust.org.nz

Kārearea: protecting a southern land

Contributions welcome. Copy for Feb is due on 31 Jan.
Editor Jane Young: janejimmyoung@slingshot.co.nz



Highly Commended: *Emma Bardsley* Iridescence



South Otago Forest & Bird display at the South Otago A&P Show

Our thanks to Telford for sponsoring the printed version of this newsletter.

