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Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area

What is World Heritage?

What do the Taj Mahal, the ancient pyramids of Egypt, the Grand Canyon and the south west corner of New Zealand have in common? At first glance, very little, but in fact they have all been designated World Heritage sites by the World Heritage Convention. World Heritage status gives international recognition to more than 800 of the world's most outstanding natural and cultural areas.

The World Heritage Convention, adopted by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) in 1972, unites more than 180 nations working together to protect and promote the earth's irreplaceable natural and cultural heritage, so that these places can be treasured and enjoyed by all people.

When and where was WHA status declared?

In December 1990, an area covering 2.6 million hectares of South West New Zealand (10% of New Zealand's land area) was declared a World Heritage Area in recognition of the area's outstanding natural values. The area included and expanded upon the 1986 World Heritage listing of Westland/Tai Poutini, Aoraki/Mt Cook and Fiordland National Parks to include Mt Aspiring National Park and all the intervening and adjacent significant natural areas. The nomination was supported by the tangata whenua (indigenous people of the land). The area is known to Maori as Te Wāhipounamu - the place of greenstone, and has great spiritual and mythological significance.

Why South West New Zealand?

To be accepted as a World Heritage Area Te Wāhipounamu had to meet one of four criteria for natural areas by representing examples of:

- The major stages in the earth's evolutionary history, or
- Significant ongoing geological processes, biological evolution and man's interaction with the natural environment,
- Contains areas of exceptional natural beauty or outstanding examples of natural phenomena, or
- The most significant natural habitats where threatened plants or animals still survive.

Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area meets all four criteria.

Remnants of the ice age, wilderness links with Gondwana, and the ongoing geological processes are some of the reasons why South West New Zealand qualified for the status of World Heritage Area. Other reasons included the rugged coastline and fiords, and large stands of lowland rainforests and wetland areas providing habitats for rare plant and animal species.



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And few areas of the world have such a variety and concentration of natural scenic beauty.

Te Wāhipounamu is regarded as one of the world's best examples of a dynamic mountainous landscape. The awe inspiring Southern Alps/Kā Tiritiri o te Moana mark the collision of the Pacific and Indo-Australian plates of the earth's crust which has forced the alps to rise sharply along the fault line. Regular earth tremors tell us that the plates are still on the move.

The area is also recognised as one of the world's most outstanding glacial landscapes. The last Ice Age glaciation carved its way through the fiords and deep U-shaped valleys. The remnants of this age can be seen in the forms of the Fox/Te Moeka o Tuawe, Franz Josef/Hine Hukatere and Tasman glaciers, while the vast array of lakes dotted throughout the region, including Te Anau and Manapouri, have been left behind as souvenirs of the retreating snow and ice.

The large range of native plants and animals, most of which are unique to New Zealand, represent the close links between the World Heritage Area of today and Gondwanaland of 100 million years ago. Foremost among the links with Gondwanaland are the forests of southern beech, rimu and kahikatea, as well as birds like the flightless kiwi.

As the least modified region on mainland New Zealand, Te Wāhipounamu is important for the conservation of many animals which have disappeared from other parts of New Zealand. Takahe, South Island brown kiwi and mohua (yellowhead) are just a few of the endangered or threatened animals which still survive in this vast wilderness.

How is the WHA managed?

The Department of Conservation manages the World Heritage Area on behalf of the New Zealand Government. The main legislation, which the land area is administered under includes the National Parks Act 1980, Conservation Act 1987, Reserves Act 1977 and the Wildlife Act 1953. Other important management documents include Conservation Management Strategies (CMS's), National Park Management Plans and Reserve Management Plans often referred to as Conservation Management Plans (CMP's).

Department Area offices carry out the delivery of conservation, with the support of Conservancy offices. Conservation Boards work closely with the Department in the role of approving CMS's and CMP's.

New Zealand's other WHAs

New Zealand has three areas inscribed on the World Heritage List: Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand*, for its natural values; Tongariro National Park, for its natural and cultural values; and New Zealand's sub-Antarctic islands (Auckland, Campbell, Antipodes and Bounty groups and the Snares islands) for their natural values.

Further information

Further information on Te Wāhipounamu -*South West new Zealand* World Heritage Area can be obtained from;

Forests, Fiords and Glaciers. New Zealand's World Heritage. The case for a SW NZ World Heritage Site. Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of NZ. 1987.

Nomination of South-West New Zealand (Te Wāhipounamu) for inclusion in the World Heritage List. Department of Conservation 1989.

www.doc.govt.nz

www.unesco.org/whc