

# Part Three: Te Wāhipounamu - South West New Zealand World Heritage Area

## 3.1 TE WĀHIPOUNAMU - SOUTH WEST NEW ZEALAND WORLD HERITAGE AREA

Fiordland National Park is part of the Te Wāhipounamu - South West New Zealand World Heritage Area along with Westland/Tai Poutini National Park, Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park, Mt Aspiring National Park and other surrounding conservation lands (see Map 2).

The Te Wāhipounamu - South West New Zealand World Heritage Area is one of the world's 400 or so special natural and cultural sites, as recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The World Heritage Area consists of 2.6 million hectares of protected lands in the West Coast, Canterbury, Otago and Southland.

World heritage areas are designated under the World Heritage Convention because of their outstanding universal value. World heritage status does not affect the underlying protective status for which the land is held under New Zealand law; rather it places an obligation on the host nation to “take appropriate legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures necessary for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and rehabilitation of this heritage” (World Heritage Convention, 1972).

Its value can best be summarised from a quotation out of the nomination document which states:

*“Few areas of the world have such a concentration of natural scenic splendour as the South-West. It contains many of the natural features which contribute to New Zealand's international reputation for superlative landscapes: its highest mountains, longest glaciers, tallest forests, wildest rivers and gorges, most rugged coastlines and deepest fiords and lakes. It even has an extinct volcano in Solander Island.*

*From the vast wilderness of Fiordland in the south to the spectacular up thrust of the Southern Alps in the North, the South-West landscapes are of world class for the sheer excellence of their scenic beauty. It is an area of magnificent primeval vistas: snow-capped mountains, glaciers, forests, tussock grasslands, lakes, rivers, wetlands and over 1000km of wilderness coastline.*

*Only traces of human influence are evident and then mainly in peripheral areas. Overall the South-West forms one of the great temperate wildernesses of the world and the entire area fulfils the criteria of exceptional and natural beauty” (page 49-50, Department of Conservation, Nomination of South-West New Zealand (Te Wāhipounamu) for inclusion in the World Heritage List, 1989).”*

There is an obligation on the Department of Conservation to manage the World Heritage Area in such a way that its integrity is preserved. Although Te Wāhipounamu - South West New Zealand World Heritage Area contains internationally popular tourist destinations like Milford Sound / Piopiotahi, Aoraki/Mount Cook and the glaciers of Westland, its overwhelming landscape character is wild and unpopulated. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) have recognised it as one of the world's great areas of wilderness. Because World Heritage Areas are international tourist icons, the challenge for the Department of Conservation is to educate visitors about the area's heritage values and carefully manage visitor growth to avoid unacceptable impacts. The prime obligation is to protect Te Wāhipounamu - South West New Zealand World Heritage Area's biodiversity and ecological integrity.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee noted in its report on this world heritage area that the waters of the fiords are an integral part of Fiordland National Park and it welcomed initiatives by New Zealand authorities to bring the waters of the fiords under the control of Fiordland National Park. Although at present there are legislative restraints in doing this, the Department of Conservation is actively advocating to ensure there is integrated management between the management agencies responsible for the marine environment adjoining Fiordland National Park.

The Fiordland Marine (Te Moana o Atawhenua) Management Act 2005 is an initiative that has resulted in the protection of some components of the fiords' natural values (refer to section 1.3.10 for a description of the purpose of this Act).

Co-ordination by the Department of Conservation is essential to achieving the level of visitor management and servicing that will be required. Visitor centres and existing heritage highways will be some of the most important locations for providing high-quality visitor information, interpretation, signs and opportunities to experience the diverse recreational and educational attractions of the south west. Ongoing liaison with regional tourism organisations, Transit New Zealand, and district councils, concessionaires and other interested parties will be an important element of the Department of Conservation's co-ordination role.

As a result of the development of this management plan, it was noted that while the decision of the World Heritage Committee (14<sup>th</sup> session) included encompassing the whole of Fiordland National Park into Te

Wāhipounamu - South West New Zealand World Heritage Area, Solander Island is excluded from the current UNESCO map. It is anticipated that this administration error will be resolved during the lifespan of this plan.

MAP 2. TE WĀHIPOUNAMU – SOUTH WEST NEW ZEALAND HERITAGE AREA



## Objectives

1. To maintain the ecological and landscape integrity of the Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area.
2. To develop a co-ordinated approach to the management and servicing of visitors to the Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area.

## Implementation

1. Consider the addition of areas of high ecological and/or landscape values to Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area.
2. Provide information on the state of Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area as required under the Convention:
  - a) Priority sites and themes for interpretation of the area have been identified as: Fiordland National Park visitor centre in Te Anau (kākāpō) or an equivalent alternative, the proposed Fiordland National Park entrance on the Milford Road (takahē), and the West Arm visitor centre (glacial lakes); and
  - b) Secondary sites and themes for interpretation of the area have been identified as: Milford Sound / Piopiotahi (fiords and alpine faults); Milford Track entrance (glaciation and scenery); and
  - c) Publish a brochure on the World Heritage Area and include it on the Department of Conservation website.
3. In managing for ecological values within Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area the international status of this designation will be taken into account.
4. Advocate to protect the values of the Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area. In particular, advocate to ensure integrated management of the marine areas adjoining this world heritage area to support the values of the area.