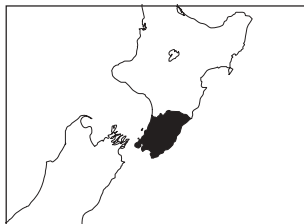


3. Overview

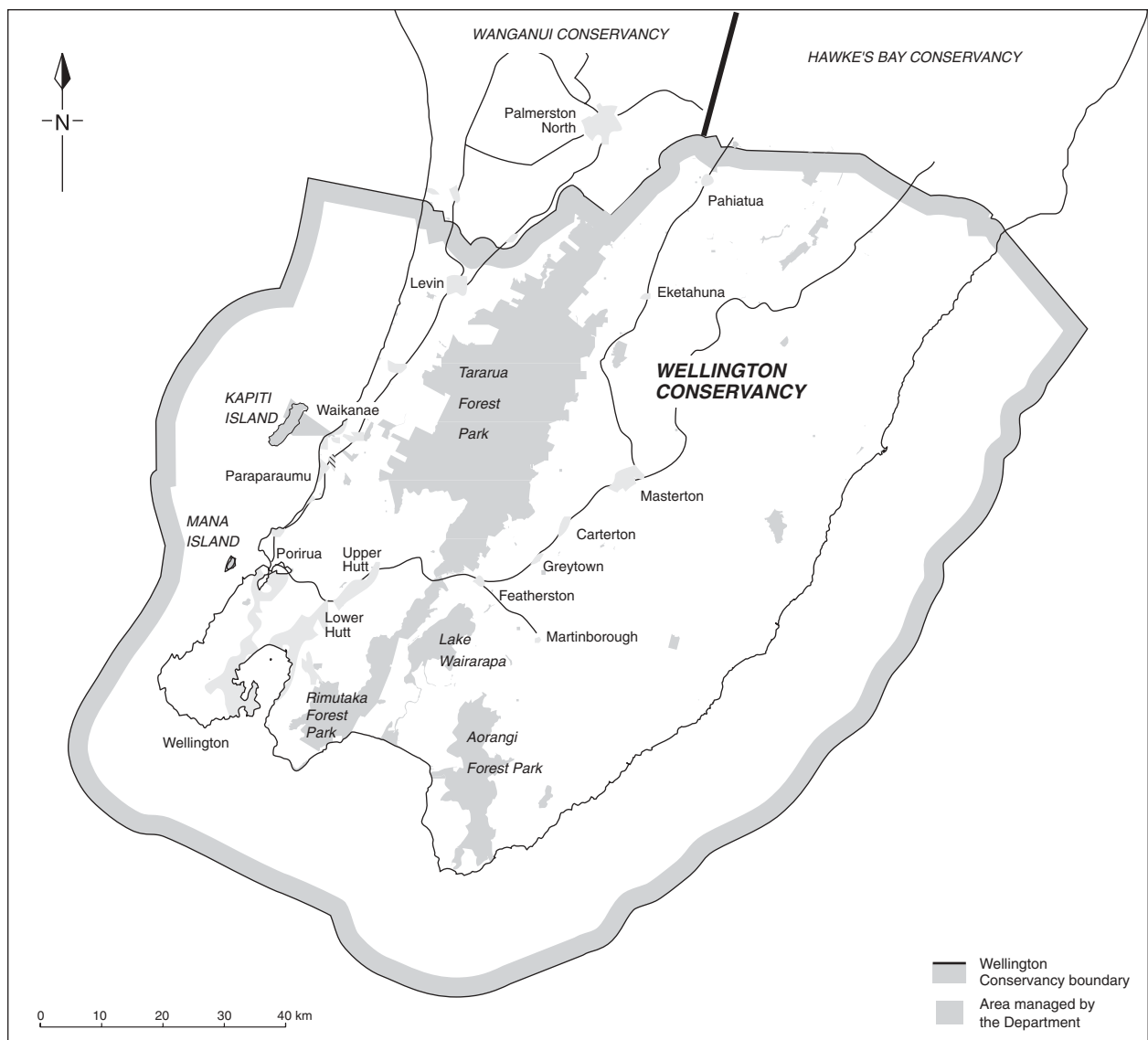
Map 1
Location of
Wellington Conservancy



The Wellington Conservancy is located in the lower North Island, south of a line from the mouth of the Manawatu River, through the Manawatu Gorge south of Woodville and across to the east coast, south of Cape Turnagain. The Department has divided the country into 14 administration units, called conservancies. Wellington's neighbours are Wanganui Conservancy on the west coast and Hawke's Bay Conservancy on the east coast.

In the Wellington Conservancy the Department manages 184,000 ha administered as 322 separate land units, and one marine reserve.

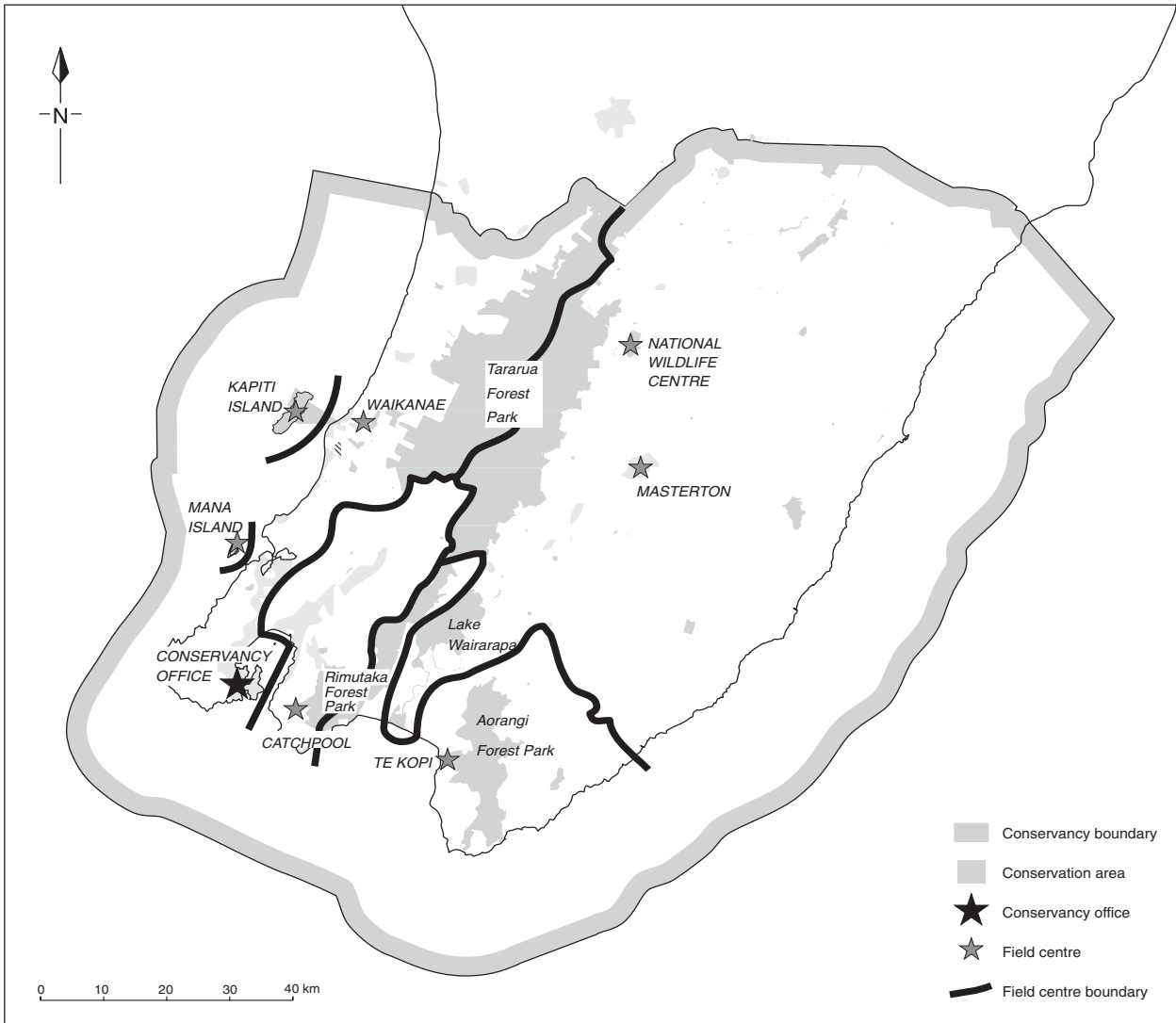
Map 2
Wellington Conservancy



New Zealand’s second largest urban area falls wholly within the Conservancy. The population of the Conservancy is mainly concentrated in the four cities of Wellington, Hutt, Upper Hutt and Porirua, and on the Kapiti Coast.

The Department employs 75 people in the Conservancy. The Conservancy office is in Wellington City, where administration, finance and regional specialists are based; other staff are based in field centres where the focus of activity is on physical management of areas managed by the Department. The field centres are on Kapiti and Mana Islands, at Waikanae, National Wildlife Centre at Mt Bruce, Masterton, Te Kopi, and Catchpool Valley in Rimutaka Forest Park. Department of Conservation staff are also resident at Otaki Forks and Holdsworth roadends in Tararua Forest Park.

Map 3
Conservancy office and field centres



3.1 PEOPLE

History of Settlement

The history of human settlement in the Conservancy stretches back to the earliest known New Zealand occupation dates. The oldest sites are found in Palliser Bay, and the area’s associations with Kupe are recorded in Maori oral tradition.

Unlike evidence in other parts of New Zealand, physical evidence of pre-European Maori occupation is not readily visible in the landscape. Areas of Palliser Bay and the coastal hills around the Wellington Peninsula contain the most discernible excavations and garden sites. Old eel channel systems are still recognisable in the Horowhenua.

The Department works with seven iwi in the Conservancy: Ati Awa ki Whakarongotai, Ngati Toa Rangatira, Ngati Kahungunu, Rangitane, Taranaki Whanui ki te Upoko o te Ika a Maui, Ngati Raukawa and Muaupoko.

The first Europeans to arrive were whalers who established themselves on the Kapiti Coast, followed by missionaries. European settlement began to intensify after 1839 when the New Zealand Company established its planned settlement in Wellington. After this date dramatic changes followed: the logging of the indigenous forest and the draining of wetlands which allowed the development of pastoral farming and towns.

Indications of early European settlement are still evident in the landscape: gold and copper mine shafts, sawmill relics and bush tramways, fortifications, historic buildings ranging from one of the largest wooden buildings in the southern hemisphere to trampers' huts, and wrecks of sailing and steam ships strewn along the shores of Cook Strait.

World War II left its mark on the Cook Strait landscape, with gun emplacements, lookouts and ammunition stores still dominating some prominent hilltops.

The Conservancy has a rich history of conservation of natural resources. Some of the earliest and most eminent naturalists lived in Wellington (including the world's first plant ecologist, Leonard Cockayne). Kapiti Island was one of the first wildlife sanctuaries in the country, and an early caretaker was the famous conservationist Richard Henry. Tararua Forest Park was the first Forest Park to be created by the Forest Service. The Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society had its origins on the Kapiti Coast, and its founder was instrumental in securing protection for Kapiti Island. The National Wildlife Centre (also known as Mt Bruce) was the first place in New Zealand where threatened animal species were bred in captivity.

Education

One university, one teacher training college, six polytechnics and 350 secondary and primary schools are located in the Conservancy. The tertiary institutes are concentrated in Wellington, Porirua and the Hutt Valley, making this a major education centre for the country. Substantial botanical, zoological and geological resources exist for the Conservancy as a consequence of the historic concentration of research institutions in this region. The concentration of government departments (and now Crown Research Institutes) and the Museum of New Zealand in Wellington has contributed greatly to this knowledge.

Visitors

The diverse landscape in Wellington Conservancy – from rugged coastal cliffs to wide sandy beaches; remote mountains to rural and urban parks; sheltered waters to exposed ocean – offers a great range of recreational opportunities. The Department has a major role in managing remote and back country recreational opportunities and a smaller role in rural urban fringe sites.

Popular outdoor recreational activities in this Conservancy focus on water sports, camping, tramping, hunting, fishing, biking, walking and jogging. Visitors to areas managed by the Department are mostly domestic visitors, and a high proportion live within the region.

Surveys show that the most popular “natural” visitor destinations are those where access is by car and immersion in nature is instant. The Wellington region is well endowed with such areas, although most of those closest to the major urban areas (within 20 minutes drive) are managed by regional and local bodies.

The track and hut networks provide the large forest parks with the most thorough access coverage of any mountain area in the country. Overnight usage of these parks is high, with an estimated 25,000 bed nights per year. Even more popular are the roadend destinations such as Catchpool Valley (with an estimated 180,000+ visitors per year) and Holdsworth (with 60,000+ per year). Otaki Forks is also very popular (50,000+) but difficult road access limits the numbers of casual visitors.

The demand for passive recreational opportunities is expected to increase in the Conservancy, while interest in active outdoor pursuits will probably stay at current levels. A shift away from hunting and tramping, however, towards vehicle-based and high-tech recreational pursuits is already apparent.

Although Wellington city attracts a third of the country’s international visitors, most are passing through, staying with friends or relatives or attending conferences. Relatively few treat Wellington and the region generally as a tourism destination. Of relevance to the Department, however, is that people who stay the longest in the region (Australian, UK, German and Hong Kong visitors) are, with the exception of those from Hong Kong, the tourists most likely to do short walks and visit historic sites. Most arrive by car and stay with friends and relatives or in backpacker hostels.

The few visitor statistics existing for areas managed by the Department indicate that the proportion of international visitors ranges from 2% to 15–17% at the visitor destinations with the highest profiles (Holdsworth roadend and the National Wildlife Centre). There are relatively few campervan travellers exploring the region. Backpack tourism is showing signs of increasing.

The arterial transport routes in this part of the North Island are not conducive to scenic or nature tourism, although the mountain ranges do form a backdrop to all parts of the Conservancy. Yet, as most international visitors arrive by car, detour off-route is possible if an attraction warrants it and is well promoted.

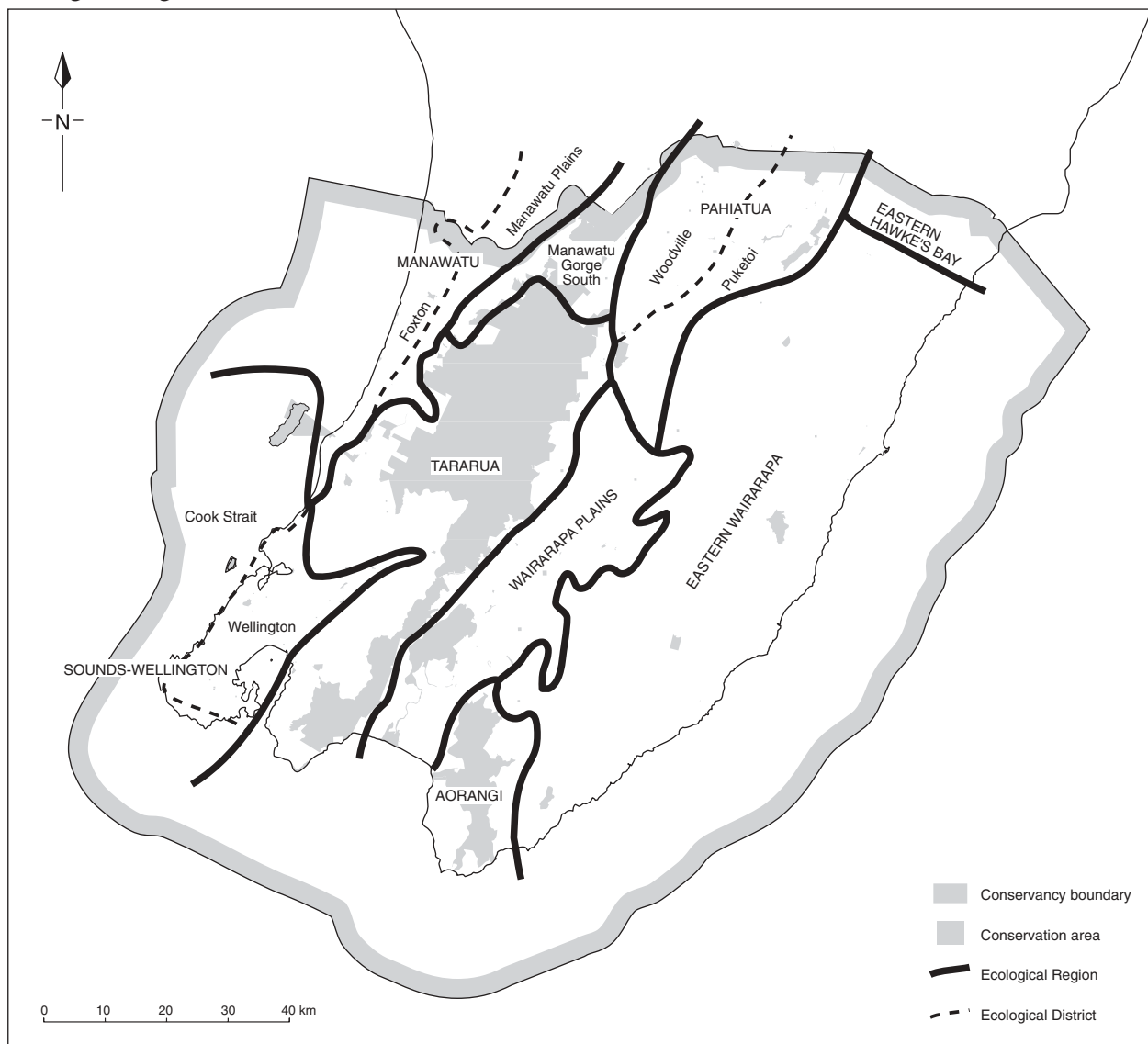
3.2 NATURAL FEATURES

The Conservancy has a range of landforms, soil, flora, fauna and vegetation types which have been classified as Ecological Regions and Districts [*refer Map 4, p 17*]. The distinctive landforms of the Conservancy are dominated by the axial greywacke Rimutaka and Tatarua Ranges. They rise to altitudes of 1400–1500 m. A few valleys in the alpine area display small areas characteristic of glaciated landforms. Local tectonics are raising the Rimutaka Range at a formidable 4 mm per year (on average). The rivers that flow from these ranges are mostly swift and direct, and carry a lot of sediment and shingle.

The broad, flat floodplains of the Horowhenua merge into extensive duneland and wetland systems which extend south along the Kapiti Coast. Here the build-up of sand under the influence of the prevailing northwesterlies breaks the flow of streams and rivers flowing from the Tararua Ranges, creating wetlands, lagoons and estuaries along the coast. Inland wetlands (many ephemeral) and peat soils have formed where migration of dunes inland has interrupted and ponded water flow across the coastal plains, and where scouring has created hollows and basins which intercept the water table.

Map 4

Ecological Regions and Districts



Kapiti Island is high enough to form its own cloud cover in many weather conditions. Its steep, fault-bounded western cliffs are not visible from the mainland and are a great surprise to visitors and to boat or aircraft passengers seeing them for the first time.

Further south, at Paekakariki, the old interglacial sea cliffs that skirt inland behind Waikanae and Raumati become the present sea cliffs and continue around the Wellington Peninsula in a rugged and steep escarpment. They are broken at Plimmerton by the Pauatahanui Inlet, the only sizeable drowned

valley inlet in the lower North Island, and a rich estuarine area. Just offshore, Mana Island's profile is remarkably flat. The Wellington Peninsula has remnants of once extensive ancient plain which are still discernible on the highest parts of an otherwise hilly landscape.

The shore around Wellington Peninsula and Wellington Harbour includes a narrow, rocky wavecut platform, raised last century by earthquakes. Faulting is a major feature of the Wellington region, creating conspicuous scarps, dislocated streambeds, drained swamps and raised terraces.

The broad valley floor of the Hutt River, bounded by the line of the active Wellington Fault, extends from the head of Wellington Harbour into the Tararua foothills. It runs parallel to several major rivers to the east, which follow the lines of minor faults.

Stretching east of the axial ranges are the broad, flat plains and wetlands of the Wairarapa. Coalescing gravel fans from rivers rising in the Tararua Range have created a broad floodplain which feeds into Lake Wairarapa at the southern end. A smaller lake, Onoke, abuts the steep Palliser Bay gravel beaches, which impede drainage of the entire Wairarapa floodplain.

The wide sweep of Palliser Bay at the southern end of the Wairarapa Plains is notable at its western end for a sequence of raised beach terraces, most readily recognised at Turakirae Head.

Eastern Wairarapa is rolling to steep hill country; a greatly contorted mixture of greywacke, limestone, siltstone and sandstone has produced some very striking landforms. The Putangirua Pinnacles, the sheer coastal hills of Cape Palliser, the steeples of Castlepoint, marine terraces, fossiliferous coastal reefs and the series of steep, jagged hills (taipos) in the hill country are a few of the better known features.

Vegetation

The pre-settlement vegetation cover throughout the Conservancy contained some characteristically "Wellington" quirks. The most obvious of these was the unexplained absence of beech forest on the Wellington Peninsula. Presumably a consequence of some glacial period circumstance, beech species have only slowly spread southwest from the Tararua Ranges into the western foothills. Another distinctive feature has been the relationship between the coastal escarpment vegetation and alpine vegetation. Many species are shared, some with only slight sub-species variants between the two habitats.

There is little terrestrial record of past links between the North and South Islands, even though they have been contiguous in previous glacial periods. It is the marine algae flora which so conspicuously links modern southern and northern biological zones.

Practically all the region had been forested and Maori settlement apparently had only localised impacts on the overall vegetation cover. The mosaic of grass, fern and forest found by pakeha settlers of the southern Wairarapa valley was probably natural but perpetuated by occasional burning to boost bracken growth. It is believed the current extent of karaka, widespread around the Conservancy's coasts where other trees have long been absent, is due in part to its past cultivation.

Western dunelands had kahikatea and pukatea swamp forest in dune hollows with titoki and tawa forest dominating the dune crests. Grassland and shrublands colonised the active dune zone. The drier alluvial flats supported totara forest or, where there was moister soil, tawa and podocarps.

The buffeted coastal escarpments around Cook Strait were cloaked in kohekohe, ngaio and titoki forest. Where conditions were too severe for forest, a *Coprosma propinqua* and *Muehlenbeckia* shrubland interspersed with *Poa* tussocks predominated.

Further inland, in the sheltered lowland country, dense podocarp forests were common. The best example would have been the lush “40-Mile-Bush” of the Wairarapa basin. In the hill country rimu and rata was conspicuous over a tawa canopy. (Today the removal of rimu for timber and the possum-induced death of rata has left tracts of tawa forest.) On dry spurs and ridges hard beech and black beech were conspicuous, especially on the drought-prone soils of the eastern Conservancy. With increasing altitude kamahi replaced tawa as the main canopy species. Red beech and silver beech became prominent and above 900 m an almost pure silver beech forest formed a band at the treeline.

Where silver beech was absent, such as in the northern Tararua Range, leatherwood formed a wide, almost impenetrable band between forest and alpine grassland.

Some alpine grassland communities were also found on the wider river valleys in the Tararua Range where cold air drainage prevented forest growth.

Summer drought limits the extent of broadleaved species in the east. There was totara-rich podocarp forest on the easier country (with a conspicuous absence of tawa, rata, kohekohe, pukatea and kamahi) and black and hard beech forest on the steeper, less fertile sites. Kowhai and ngaio were a major component of forest fringes here.

Fauna

On the coast, in pre-European times, there were large populations of seals, and at sea, dolphins and whales which migrated through Cook Strait and Rauoterangi Channel between Kapiti Island and the mainland. Seals, dolphins and whales still occur around the coast.

The lower North Island ranges were the stronghold of the now extinct huia and supported populations of kiwi, blue duck, weka and other bird species now absent from the mainland areas of the Conservancy.

Amongst the unique features of the Conservancy are the *Powelliphanta traversi* snail populations of the Kapiti/Horowhenua areas. The speargrass weevil species *Lyperobius huttoni* inhabiting the coastal habitats of Cook Strait is also found in alpine zones elsewhere in New Zealand, a fact which highlights the peculiarities of some Cook Strait species.

Lake Wairarapa, Lake Horowhenua, the wetlands of Kapiti/Horowhenua, the west coast estuaries and the Pencarrow wetlands would have been, and still are, relatively rich in both birds and fish.

Climate

The gales for which the Wellington region is renowned are most frequent around Cook Strait and the mountains. A venturi effect through Cook Strait increases wind velocity around the Wellington hills, which adds turbulence to the already strong winds. Most of the region experiences a prevailing northwesterly airstream. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Manawatu/Horowhenua where many hectares of old dunes are aligned WNW-ESE.

The mountains receive a coating of snow in winter, but in general the region is temperate. Northwesterlies flow across the Tararua Ranges creating a drying fohn wind in the Wairarapa resulting in long, hot, dry summers. The fire risks reflect these conditions.

The Tararua Range, arguably the region's playground, is actually very wet; the terrain is generally muddy underfoot, and rivers flood readily, making tramping and hunting feats of endurance on many occasions. The weather conditions (combined with the strong tides of Cook Strait) also breed a hardy type of sailor or boat. It is not surprising that people say Wellingtonians can survive anywhere.