

The state of wilderness in New Zealand



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Te Papa Atawhai

The state of wilderness in New Zealand

Edited by Gordon Cessford

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This volume is dedicated to the life and conservation achievements of P.H.C. (Bing) Lucas, who died suddenly on 17 December 2000 while with his family on the Queen Charlotte Walkway in the Marlborough Sounds

When Gordon Cessford and I first conceived of this publication, we decided that Bing Lucas was the most appropriate person to introduce it. I subsequently asked Bing to write the foreword and he willingly agreed to do so, submitting the text of this in August 2000. Given his untimely death soon after, it is, therefore, among the last of Bing's writings in New Zealand. With production of the document timed after his death, it seemed fitting that we should publish it in his honour.

Bing Lucas was one of New Zealand's foremost conservationists and a world leader in the protected areas movement. He was also a strong advocate for wilderness. During a long and distinguished career in government administration of parks and reserves, and some 30 years as a professional consultant to the World Conservation Union (IUCN), Bing gained vast experience in protected areas and unique insights into the ways wilderness concepts were expressed both in New Zealand and throughout the world. His love of parks led him to take every possible opportunity to enjoy their recreational benefits. He was strongly committed to the philosophy that parks, while vital for the protection of natural and cultural heritage, were created also for people to enjoy. However, he remained adamant that recreational activities in wilderness areas should be conducted and managed in ways that didn't damage natural values or compromise the human experience of wilderness.

Within the former Department of Lands and Survey, Bing was both the first Director of Parks and Reserves, and its last Director-General, retiring after five years in that post in 1986. Among the host of official positions he held on the boards, working groups, and committees of many conservation and related bodies, he chaired the Wilderness Advisory Group. This government-appointed body, established following New Zealand's first wilderness conference in 1981 (in which Bing played a leading role), developed a national wilderness policy and evaluated ten wilderness area proposals from the conference. Several wilderness areas were designated during his tenure.

Through his various leadership roles in IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas, Bing was able to take his New Zealand experience on to the world stage. Important in this was his influence in the development of the wilderness area concept within IUCN's official categorisation of protected areas—now the universal standard for guiding the establishment of wilderness areas in all countries of the world.

Bing regarded this volume as an invaluable sourcebook of New Zealand experience in wilderness establishment and management, and he expressed to me the hope that it would be used extensively to promote the cause of wilderness protection in all its manifestations. Our accepting of this challenge would be a fitting tribute to the conservation efforts to which Bing devoted much of his life.

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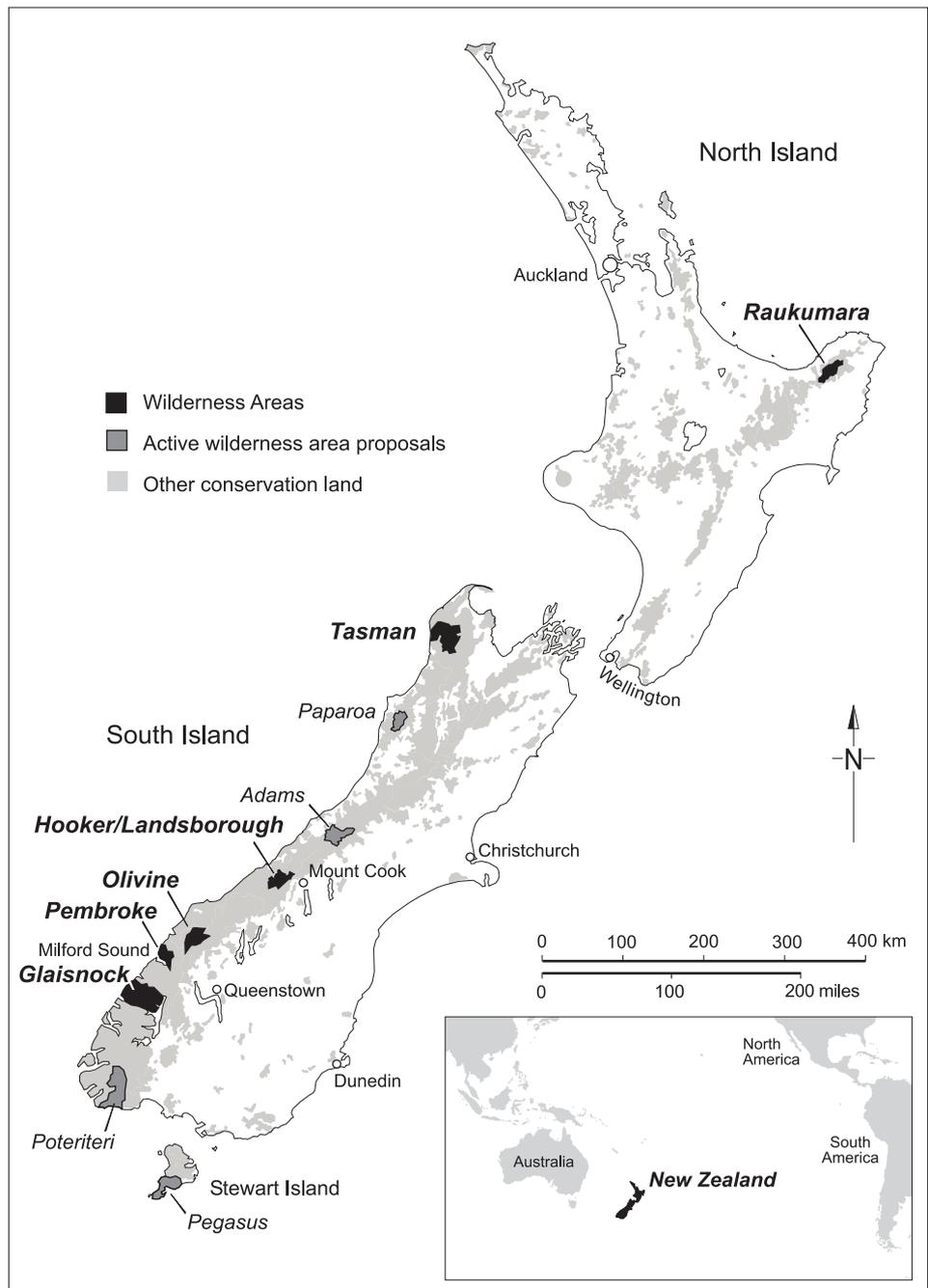
Preface

This publication is based on several papers written recently on New Zealand wilderness, derived mainly from some published in recent issues of the *International Journal of Wilderness*. This journal was first published in 1995 to provide wilderness professionals, scientists, educators and interested citizens, world wide with a forum for reporting and discussing wilderness research; inspirational ideas; planning, management and allocation strategies; education; and practical issues of wilderness stewardship. As part of this international focus, the journal editors requested that articles be submitted for a special issue on wilderness in New Zealand.

Among the New Zealand papers submitted, Paul Dingwall and I felt we could make a useful contribution by distinguishing the unique meaning of wilderness in New Zealand compared with North America, and providing information on recent management initiatives by the Department of Conservation. In developing our article, and discussing the New Zealand situation with some of the other contributors, it became obvious that the documentation on wilderness and wilderness areas in New Zealand was highly fragmented and relatively inaccessible. In that context, it became apparent to us that the collection of articles being published in this new journal represented a useful synthesis of the status of wilderness and wilderness areas in New Zealand today. However, because this journal is not yet widely subscribed to in New Zealand, we approached the journal editors Vance Martin and Michelle Mazzola for permission to republish the New Zealand articles as a special science monograph from the Department of Conservation. They readily agreed, and supported our intention to achieve a more comprehensive circulation of this wilderness information among the research and management audience in New Zealand. To further this end, and with permission from the respective editors, other recent articles published in the journal *Society and Natural Resources*, and in the proceedings of the sixth World Wilderness Congress were included.

The intention to synthesise this recent material on wilderness in New Zealand is timely, as one of the specific initiatives outlined in the Department of Conservation's Strategic Business Plan (1997) was to initiate processes for designating another four specific wilderness areas. This represents a renewal of interest in designating and managing wilderness areas, which is something that had been accorded lower priority while the Department of Conservation was going through an extensive period of renewal. The current situation is summarised in Appendix 3, which outlines the existing, proposed and revised status of wilderness areas in New Zealand. This information is also illustrated in the map on the following page. Previously published information has been highly fragmented, and these maps and summaries represent the result of considerable archival research.

As well as contributions from the respective authors, the following staff from the Department of Conservation contributed towards this publication: Chris Edkins produced and edited the graphical figures, Helen Shand and Margaret Wood typed the draft manuscripts, and Ian Mackenzie was the final production editor. From outside the Department, Arnold Heine provided some useful



Map of current gazetted and proposed Wilderness Areas in New Zealand.

feedback on a number of questions, Les Molloy generously provided slides from his private collection, and Bing Lucas put the overall topic into a wider context in his insightful foreword. Among all of these people, each making their own contribution, we hope we have provided a useful resource that synthesises the status of wilderness and Wilderness Areas in New Zealand today, and will prompt further advances in wilderness research and management.

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Foreword

As Roderick Nash pointed out in 1967 in his classic work *Wilderness in the American mind*, the concept of wilderness is elusive and lacking any accepted definition. Wilderness means something different to everyone. I recall discussions about wilderness with Art Wilcox of Colorado State University when he was visiting New Zealand. He believed strongly that the perception of wilderness varied greatly depending on the differing exposure people had to nature. When he was urban parks director in Akron, Ohio, he found that some local residents found their ‘wilderness experience’ in a walking trail through a small pocket of nature in the city environment, with others seeing it in the way most familiar to New Zealanders—as the experience of being in a natural environment away from other people and from facilities.

Alternatively, wilderness can be defined in a narrow legal sense. The legal designation of wilderness accompanied the growth of the world’s protected areas movement, applying to areas intended to be retained largely intact in their natural state without the impact of development. In this sense, wilderness is largely a phenomenon of the 20th century, originating in the United States of America. Although the Wilderness Act did not become law in the United States until 1964, the U.S. Forest Service had adopted a wilderness policy in 1929, codified by a regulation which called for a system of areas ‘to be known as primitive areas ... within which will be maintained primitive conditions ... with a view to conserving the values of such areas for purposes of public education and recreation.’ The wilderness concept is manifest today in that nation’s extensive National Wilderness Preservation System.

As so often happens, New Zealand was a world leader in legislating for wilderness. This had been presaged by Ron Cooper, an officer in the Department of Lands and Survey, who guided the subsequent 1952 national parks legislation. In 1944, in an address to the Tararua Tramping Club, Cooper outlined the possible option of a national park as ‘a wilderness area set apart for preservation in as near as possible a natural state, but made available for and accessible to the general public who are allowed and encouraged to visit the reserve.’ In the event, the far-sighted National Parks Act 1952 included a specific provision at section 34 of the act permitting the setting apart ‘of any area of (a National) Park as a wilderness area ...’ which, *inter alia*, ‘shall be kept and maintained in a state of nature.’

Wilderness management is now well established within the global protected areas system, although approaches to management and underlying philosophy vary considerably among different countries. The importance of Wilderness Areas globally was recognised when IUCN’s World Commission on Protected Areas reviewed the categories of protected areas and, in 1994, the IUCN General Assembly meeting in Buenos Aires noted the revised category system including Category Ib ‘Wilderness Areas: protected areas managed mainly for wilderness protection.’ The expanded definition was of a ‘large area of unmodified or slightly modified land and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition.’

Given the emphasis on retaining nature, the concept of managing wilderness areas may appear paradoxical. Management implies controlling nature with active management intervention to balance the social and biological demands on and uses of natural areas, which can be conflicting. From a human-centred perspective the naturalness of areas may be less important than optimising direct human uses accompanied by developed recreation facilities. However, such development can mean the loss of the essential quality of naturalness valued by many wilderness users, and would be detrimental to the scientific values of wilderness. In contrast, the biocentric approach to wilderness emphasises the maintenance of natural systems, if necessary at the expense of recreational and other development, which are regarded as of secondary importance.

In New Zealand, as in North America, wilderness management has a biocentric emphasis. Thus, wilderness management is intended to manage human use and influences so as not to alter natural processes, rather than manipulating nature to suit the needs of people. This philosophy is consistent with the definition of 'wilderness area' already quoted in the IUCN categorisation of protected areas. Providing opportunities for recreation and enjoyment are paramount among the objectives of wilderness management in New Zealand legislation, but in a manner that does not compromise in the long term the natural qualities of an area, or the quality of the human experience of wilderness.

While the establishment of protected areas in New Zealand commenced soon after European colonisation in the mid 19th century, the wilderness movement is a relatively recent phenomenon.

As revealed by the papers in this document, particularly the overview paper by John Schultis and the papers by Les Molloy and Hugh Barr, the wilderness concept in New Zealand had its origins in the initiatives of non-governmental recreation groups—notably the Federated Mountain Clubs. As the Schultis paper indicates, several Wilderness Areas were established in New Zealand national parks before the end of the 1970s. These were, of course, established in terms of the National Parks Act 1952 under which the power to establish Wilderness Areas lay with the relevant National Park Board 'with the consent of the Authority.' In the absence of an overall policy for Wilderness Areas, those areas established lacked a consistent approach. It was little surprise, therefore, that the revamped National Parks Act 1980 made for a more consistent approach by giving power to establish Wilderness Areas to the Minister responsible for the legislation acting 'on the recommendation of the (National Parks and Reserves) Authority.' This then set the scene for an initiative to establish a policy for Wilderness Areas and for a move to identify potential areas. It was to the credit of the Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand that they took such an initiative in commemorating the Federation's 50th Jubilee by organising New Zealand's first wilderness conference. This was done with the co-operation of the then principal conservation management agencies—the Department of Lands and Survey and the New Zealand Forest Service.

I recall the conference, held at Rotoiti Lodge in Nelson Lakes National Park from 22–24 August 1981, as an enthusiastic interactive event, which included Members of Parliament, and representatives of the government agencies along with non-government organisation members. The principal legacy of the

conference was a government-appointed Wilderness Advisory Group, which I had the privilege of chairing, that subsequently developed a national wilderness policy and evaluated the ten wilderness area proposals endorsed at the conference. The history of establishing these and other areas is recounted in the papers here.

The co-authored papers by Gordon Cessford and Paul Dingwall, and by Les Molloy and Murray Reedy, extend the story of wilderness to consider what these areas mean in terms of recreation and tourist management, the latter in the context of the South West New Zealand (Te Whahipounamu) World Heritage Site. Gordon Cessford and Murray Reedy then summarise the main issues affecting wilderness today, including reference to the cultural values for these wild areas and their implications for future management. James Higham reveals from his research how the perceptions of wilderness conditions can vary among visitors of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. John Schultis explores the distinctions between what wilderness means in the political context of legislation, policy, and advocacy, and its meaning for the wider public—both user and non-user. Finally, James Higham and his colleagues bring wilderness studies into the modern information era by reporting their findings from work in mapping ‘perceived wilderness’, as expressed by different types of wilderness groups.

Wilderness Areas are now a well-established component of the New Zealand protected areas network under a range of legislation—the National Parks Act 1980, the Reserves Act 1977, and the Conservation Act 1987. All come under the overall administration of the Department of Conservation, established in 1987 following the abolition of the Department of Lands and Survey and the New Zealand Forest Service.

Wilderness studies have come a long way in the short history of wilderness management in this country. Indeed, wilderness studies have come further than the formal establishment of new Wilderness Areas. This has prompted at least one long-standing advocate of wilderness (Arnold Heine, editor of the FMC Bulletin) to suggest that it may be time to expand the focus of wilderness beyond legally established Wilderness Areas to consider a wider vision of what he refers to (pers. comm.) as ‘wild lands’ of New Zealand—a fascinating reflection of the 1944 comments by Ron Cooper. Whatever the outcome of this line of thought, this collection of papers, which tracks the history of the wilderness movement in New Zealand, and reports the latest scholarship in understanding and managing wilderness areas, is an invaluable information resource for those involved in wilderness management and those who derive pleasure from wilderness recreation.

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Abstract

A contemporary overview is provided of the meaning of wilderness in New Zealand. Several recent papers describing the development of the wilderness concept in New Zealand are included, along with discussion of some current management issues in and around designated wilderness areas. Some questions are also raised about the distinction between wilderness areas and wilderness perceptions. Additional information, which is now not otherwise widely available, is also provided in Appendices on the fundamental concepts underlying the development of a wilderness policy for New Zealand in the 1980s. The compilation addresses a contemporary gap in the wilderness story in New Zealand, and provides a baseline resource for consideration of future wilderness management issues and research.

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