

Bain, 2008

Manapouri: A Green Awakening

The Save Manapouri campaign has been lauded as "the birth of a movement" in New Zealand. Helen Bain talks to some of the pioneers of this groundbreaking campaign.

1970 Quote



Former Dominion cartoonist Eric Heath's cartoon says it all: a hand waving desperately above the waters of Lake Manapouri, with the caption "All those in favour of raising Manapouri raise your hand!"

Heath's cartoon was one of many striking images from the campaign featured this year in the National Library exhibition Manapouri: Art Power Protest "exploring the powerful place Lake Manapouri holds in New Zealand culture." The exhibition brought back many memories for an entire generation of conservationists – and still has important messages that are just as relevant to the conservation cause today.

The Save Manapouri campaign began in the late 1950s with the proposal to build a power station to supply power to an aluminium smelter in the far south of New Zealand, and gained momentum in the late 1960s when it was proposed that the level of Lake Manapouri would be raised 8.2 metres to harness its hydro-electric potential for the project.

Opposition to the proposal became New Zealand's first mass environmental movement, and the Save Manapouri campaign has been credited with awakening a "green consciousness" in New Zealand.

As part of the National Library exhibition, Save Manapouri campaigners, Forest & Bird Distinguished Life Member and former President Alan Mark and Executive Member, publisher and photographer Craig Potton, gave a public talk with Forest & Bird Advocacy Manager Kevin Hackwell on the impact of the campaign on political and environmental debate.

Forest & Bird was a key participant in the fight to save Manapouri. In 1970 Forest & Bird delivered a petition bearing a then record 264,000 signatures (almost 10% of the population) to Parliament, demanding that the Government reconsider its decision to raise the lake level.

Manapouri became a major issue in the lead-up to the 1972 election, and soon after winning the election Labour Prime Minister Norm Kirk announced that the lake level would not be raised.

He also established a group of Lake Guardians, its members drawn from among the leaders of the Save Manapouri campaign, to advise the Government on lake management – a move Alan describes as "courageous". The Electricity Department was to use "best endeavours" to manage the lake in accordance with guidelines agreed by the Guardians.

As Alan put it, "We were now calling the shots."

During the 1975 election campaign, National Leader Rob Muldoon promised that his party would not alter Labour's stance if elected, and was true to his word.

Alan, who chaired the Lake Guardians for 26 years, says there is no doubt that the resolution of the Manapouri conflict, by integrating conservation with the demands of hydro-electric development, was a milestone in sustainable management of important natural resources.

The Manapouri debate foreshadowed today's emphasis on sustainable management that has become enshrined in legislation such as the Resource Management Act, he says. It also demonstrated that the power of public opinion could make a significant difference in the democratic process.

He also believes that the passing of the Official Information Act was in large part due to the public reaction to the Government's veil of secrecy over issues such as Manapouri. And the Commission for the Environment (the precursor to the Ministry for the Environment) probably wouldn't have been set up without the Save Manapouri campaign, he believes.

"We've come a long way."

Craig Potton, who cut his teeth as an environmental campaigner by collecting signatures for the Save Manapouri petition while still a schoolboy, says Save Manapouri demonstrated that you can achieve change through activism.

"The fact that it was successful is incredible ... The fact that we won is something that I am eternally grateful for."

While Craig describes himself as "a fledgling hippie" at the time of the campaign, he says that one of the Manapouri campaign's biggest achievements was that it took conservation mainstream. It wasn't only passionate activists who supported Save Manapouri – middle New Zealanders were just as strong in supporting the cause.

Kevin Hackwell agrees: "The campaign worked because New Zealanders have an incredible love of nature and of 'our place'. Ordinary New Zealanders were saying 'This is absolutely not on'."

But, while much was learned from the Manapouri experience, demand for power generation (and other activities such as intensification of agriculture and mining) in New Zealand continues to threaten our natural environment. As Kevin Hackwell says, there are still plenty of modern-day "Manapouris" to be fought.

"We may have saved a beautiful lake but New Zealand has done a very poor job in using our power efficiently so that we don't have to keep generating more. We have been profligate, and if we don't resolve this issue we will lose more of our precious natural resources."

Fact box: Today's "Manapouris"

Current power generation proposals still pose serious environmental threats to New Zealand's natural environment; demand for water for irrigation of farmland is also an increasing threat:

Mokihinui West Coast

Power Commission plans to build an 80-metre-high dam across the Mokihinui River gorge that would flood the river valley, which

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is clad in native forest, including rimu, kahikatea and beech, and is important habitat for native birds, including kiwi and blue duck. The proposal would also have a serious impact on fish and recreational use of the river, and, in the event of an earthquake, could potentially unleash a "tsunami" on the town of Seddonville, below the proposed dam site.

Wairau River, Marlborough

Power company TrustPower has sought to build a hydro scheme that would re-route a significant proportion of the Wairau River's flow through a 49km canal system – a proposal that would cause significant harm to one of New Zealand's most magnificent braided rivers, and the wildlife that lives there, including endangered black-fronted tern and wrybill. Interim consent has been granted but has been appealed to the Environment Court.

Hurunui River, Canterbury

A proposal has been made by a consortium of power companies and irrigators to dam Lake Sumner and the South Branch of the Hurunui River. The proposal threatens a range of native birds and fish, as well as some of Canterbury's best recreational opportunities amid stunning landscapes.

Waimangaroa Valley, West Coast

State-owned coal mining company Solid Energy plans to expand mining into the untouched Upper Waimangaroa Valley. Forest & Bird is lobbying for mining to be confined to the Stockton Valley, which is already being mined.

Project Hayes, Lammermoor Range, Otago

Resource consent has been granted for Meridian to build a 176-turbine wind farm (which would be the world's biggest wind farm) on the Lammermoor Range. However this decision has been appealed to the Environment Court on the grounds that it would cause irreparable harm to the environment and landscape of this stunning Central Otago environment. While wind farms may appear to have less environmental impact than other forms of energy generation, this is only true if they are developed in areas where their environmental and visual impact does not outweigh the benefits.

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