New Zealanders have always considered it their birthright to go to the beach, climb or ski the mountains, tramp (a New Zealand term for backpacking) the forests and wildlands, hunt for introduced deer, goats, and pigs, and fish the rivers for introduced salmon and trout. We relish the ability to get away from all the stress of civilization, relax in a simpler, natural, and more stress-free environment, and choose our own level of challenge, whether it be climbing, tramping, skiing, or hunting. Access to the backcountry, rivers, and beaches is a fundamental component to what New Zealanders see as quality of life and as part of our identity as a fit and free outdoors people.

A Beautiful but Rugged Land

New Zealand’s 27 million hectares (100,000 square miles) makes it about the size of the United Kingdom, or the average U.S. state. This smallness belies the major range of landscapes, climate, and vegetation types. This is because New Zealand is on the edge of two major tectonic plates—the Pacific and Australo-Indian plates (Stevens, et al. 1988). The Southern Alps result from the Australo-Indian plate sliding under the Pacific plate. These Alps rise to over 3,500 meters, the highest peaks in Oceania. New Zealand mirrors the range of climates and landforms of an east-west transect across North America, in only 160 kilometers across the South Island.

New Zealand is separated from the nearest major land mass, Australia, by over 2,000 kilometers. As a small piece of the old southern super continent, Gondwanaland, it has evolved separately for the last 70 million years, with a large range of unique native plant species but almost no mammals.

Because of the tectonic and ice age glacial activity most mountain areas are young, rugged, and often rapidly eroding. Some 30% of the country is mountain land or steep land forest still in its natural state and is unsuitable for productive use such as pastoral agriculture or timber production. Almost all of these “wildlands” are in public ownership as national or forest parks (15% of New Zealand), protective reserves, or as public conservation land. The philosophy of management of these public wildlands, called the Public Conservation Estate, is one of preservation and protection, not production. Subject to protecting native ecosystems, the public has the right of free entry to enjoy and recreate in these wildlands.

New Zealand was one of the first countries to set up national parks, with the first being initiated in 1887 over the North Island’s Tongariro volcanoes. Setting up these parks was a lengthy battle against development interests (Thorn 1987; Burrell 1983). But it has only been during the second half of the 20th century that New Zealand recreational and conservation users realized that if public land was not protected by local and national parks, it would be lost to development.

Cathedral Peaks, Fiordland National Park. The Cathedral Peaks (foreground) is just one of hundreds of mountain ranges in the vast 1.25 million hectare wilderness of Fiordland National Park. The lake in the background is lake Manapouri, the center of a major controversy during the 1970s when conservationists successfully persuaded the New Zealand government not to raise its level to generate hydro-electricity. Photo by Les Molloy.
of the country. Protecting the remaining 3% of predominantly dryland mountain grassland (tussockland) is a current campaign.

New Zealand’s Wilderness Ethic

New Zealand has been colonized by humans for only 1,000 years. At first it was by the Polynesian Māori tribes and for the last 225 years also by Europeans. In that time vast changes have been wrought to the native bird life. The giant Moa and giant New Zealand eagle have been exterminated, along with many other bird species. The native forest cover has been removed over 60% of the country, turned initially to grassland farms, with more recently an increasing area being planted in exotic pine for timber.

Since European arrival there has been an ethic of exploration, adventure, and going into the unknown, both for pragmatic reasons of finding grazing land or gold and as recreation for exploring untrodden areas and climbing virgin peaks. The rugged and inaccessible nature of much of the land, coupled with the wet and stormy climate makes such expeditions challenging. (Spearpoint 1996; Crothers 1987).

New Zealand wilderness advocates have adopted a purer concept of wilderness, often in a more difficult and hostile environment: than their North American colleagues.

The Federated Mountain Clubs (FMC) of New Zealand is the national alliance of tramping (backcountry walking), mountaineering, skiing, and deer-stalking clubs, with some 15,000 members throughout the country out of a total population of 3.7 million. The FMC is the major advocate for wilderness in New Zealand. In an endeavor to address this confusion over the wilderness concept, the FMC executives concluded in 1960 that there was general and widespread desire by trampers and climbers to have some large undeveloped areas of public wildlands set aside as wilderness areas (Burrell 1983), to give future generations the same opportunities to “pioneer.” Consultation with member clubs gave rise to six proposed areas, of which two especially-the Olives and the Hooker-Landsborough—were designated “Mountaineers Wildernesses.” But in spite of forwarding to the minister no progress was made.

Concern continued in the 1970s. It centered on the increase in huts, tracks, and tourist and deer recovery aircraft flights (fixed wing and helicopter) that were diminishing wilderness values (Molloy 1976) and the threat of hydroelectric damming and large-scale mining (Molloy 1983). In 1977 FMC resolved to promote the concept of a “Wilderness Commission” to set up a wilderness system.

Federated Mountain Clubs’ 1981 Wilderness Conference

The Federations landmark 50th Jubilee Wilderness Conference in 1981 (Molloy 1983) proposed 10 major new wilderness areas throughout New Zealand, covering lands that were largely de facto wilderness. But rather than being small, peripheral, uninteresting lands, they were large core areas pioneered and used by the tramping and mountaineering fraternity for their wilderness recreation. Some were up to 100,000 hectares and all were more than 30,000 hectares in extent (Molloy 1983), the total area encompassing 3% of New Zealand.

Wilderness areas are at the difficult end of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum. Users are, of necessity, more fit, more capable, and more experienced than the average backcountry user who is used to easier terrain, huts, and tracks. Wilderness users need to be fully self-sufficient, able to cope with rugged country, and possess the skills and stamina necessary to carry all their gear and food for at least five days. Skills, such as river-crossing, route-finding in inclement weather and through rough country, glacier travel, snow- and ice-climbing, and survival in storms, are necessary as is the ability to carry a 60-pound (25-kilogram) backpack and travel for 10 to 12 hours a day.
Within the 10 wilderness proposals there is, however, a significant gradation of difficulty. Four areas—Kaimanawa, Tasman, Garvies, and Pegasus—are relatively open tramping wildernesses, without glaciers, that are not particularly difficult outside winter. Another three—Raukumara, Paparoa, and Poteriteri—are more rugged, with occasional difficult rivers, but do not involve glaciers. The final three—Adams, Hooker-Landsborough, and Olivine—are the toughest, with extensive glaciers, very rugged terrain, high passes, and difficult rivers.

The conference made progress because it led to the formation of a Wilderness Advisory Group of both nongovernment officials (NGOs) and departmental officials, which developed a joint wilderness area proposal and appraised the 10 wilderness area proposals.

Progress: 1982 to Present
The 1984 change of government, and subsequent amalgamation of government backcountry recreation and conservation agencies into a new but underfunded Department of Conservation (DOC), slowed progress toward designation of the FMCs' wilderness areas. Only strong political lobbying led to the designation (gazettal) of the Raukumara and Tasman wildernesses in 1988. The approach of a general election led to the successful gazettal of the Hooker-Landsborough wilderness in 1990.

Lack of DOC funds, and other conservation board and departmental priorities have heretofore stalled progress on the remaining six proposals. This underfunding has been crippling to the department's performance (Barr 1996). By 1996 DOC's staff had been cut to half of that of the agencies it replaced in 1987. But it is now legislatively required to carry out significantly increased responsibilities, and there has been greatly increased use of the estate. DOC's "Visitor Strategy" (Department of Conservation 1996) supports wilderness as part of a Recreation Opportunity Spectrum approach, and the department will seek designation (gazettal) of the remaining five wilderness proposals on the public conservation estate, namely Olivine, Paparoa, Tin Range-Pegasus, Southern Fiordland, and Adams. The 10th proposal, Garvies, is on Crown grazing leases and cannot be considered for wilderness until surrendered from these leases. The DOC's Conservation Management Strategies for Stewart Island and the West Coast (Department of Conservation 1996 [2]) advocate gazettal. These wilderness proposals are generally supported by the tourist industry and not opposed by the main South Island Maori tribe, Ngai Tahu.

Maori Land Claims
The New Zealand government has embarked on a program of compensating Maori tribes for perceived wrongs in government purchases and confiscations of land from tribes, during the establishment of New Zealand as a British Colony from 1840. Up to that time the Maori population had been greatly decreased by intertribal wars, cannibalism, and introduced disease (Evison 1993). As a primarily stone age, hunter-gatherer society supplemented by some agriculture, most Maori settlement was near the coast, or in the fertile river valleys. There were no permanent settlements in the areas proposed at the FMC conference for wilderness. The lack of productive value of these areas is precisely the reason they have been left alone by Maori and colonial developers alike. They are viewed as wasteland by both cultures. The government and the Ngai Tahu tribe agreed in principle to settle the tribe's claim just prior to New Zealand's 1996 general election. This claim concerns the greatest land area of any claim, the lower half of New Zealand. It contains eight wilderness areas, but no actual or proposed wilderness areas are involved in the settlement.

Changing User Perceptions
In recent years New Zealanders have had one of the most capitalistic governments in the Western world. Unemployment has soared, and working hours have increased significantly. Those with jobs have less leisure time, and a consequent desire to use air access or guides, rather than rely on their own efforts and skills (Gabites 1996).

The interests of the New Zealand backcountry user also appear to be changing. The elite are as interested as ever in challenge and feats of endurance. But many now see this as a "man (or woman) conquering nature" short duration fitness challenge, not the more symbiotic and
skills-based philosophy of primitive wilderness users (Spearpoint) (Crothers). Two day “Coast to Coast” and “Mountains of New Zealand.” Also, for climbers, there is the lure of South American, Himalayan, and European climbs, as travel is relatively cheaper now than in the past. Hard climbs and transalpine wilderness expeditions still provide vital experience and training just as they did for Sir Edmund Hillary, joint first conqueror of Everest, more than 40 years ago. It is likely that the current reduced activity phase will pass, and New Zealanders will return in greater numbers to enjoy the challenge of their primitive wilderness recreation in the future.

Threats to the Ecosystem
The threat of overdevelopment has vanished with the major reduction in DOC funding. Overseas tourist numbers have more than doubled. This has led to government directives to DOC to “withdraw from the backcountry” (Department of Conservation 1996) and instead provide more services to peripheral users and overseas tourists. This is a major setback for New Zealand backcountry users generally. But it removes any threat of over-development of wilderness areas.

The threat of mining will be greatly diminished in the future. Legislation is now being passed banning mining in national parks, as well as in gazetted wilderness areas. The hydroelectric damming threat has diminished, because of the difficulty, remoteness, and expense of most sites, although it will probably re-emerge in the future.

The major conflict is that contradiction in terms, Adventure Tourism—guided activities such as white-water rafting, heliskiing, fishing, and hunting, all usually seeking air access. Air access for white-water rafting and tahr hunting are issues in the Hooker-Landsborough wilderness, as are air access for commercial fishing guides to the mid-Karama river, in the Tasman Wilderness. Heliskiing was a threat on the Ramsay Glacier of the Adams Wilderness (FMC Bulletin September 1985). But attractive heliskiing opportunities outside the wilderness area proposal are now being used instead.

Both North Island wilderness proposals, Raukumara and Kaimanawa, face threats of air access by recreational hunters seeking deer and other introduced wild animals. This is presently allowed by the wilderness policy to provide wild animal control. The desire for a primitive wilderness hunting experience is not strong in the North Island, in contrast to the wilderness Wapiti hunters in Fiordland National Parks rugged wildernesses.

Conclusions
The struggle by users and administrators to set up adequate wilderness areas to preserve the challenge of primitive backcountry recreation in New Zealand in perpetuity has been a lengthy rollercoaster ride. But it is nearing completion. New Zealand wilderness advocates have adopted a purer concept of wilderness, often in a more difficult and hostile environment, than their North American colleagues.

Threats to wilderness such as creeping development, overuse, mining, and hydroelectric development have receded, at least for the time being. There is a consensus among users and administrators in favor of designating more wilderness areas, as well as acceptance from Maori and tourism groups.

This is likely to translate into passage of most of FMC’s remaining wilderness proposals by the year 2000. If this occurs, New Zealand will have adequately recognized the outstanding and varied wilderness qualities of its natural wildlands, and preserved their major recreational challenge not only for New Zealanders, but for a world in which wilderness is forever diminishing.

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