

Molesworth Controversy

by Gerard Hutching

Molesworth Station, 182,000 hectares in size, has long been a mystery to the general public. Ever since the huge inland Marlborough farm block was taken over by the Crown earlier this century, it has proved difficult for people to gain access to this high country wilderness.

However, the appearance of the Molesworth Strategy Plan in 1986 led conservationists and recreationists to believe that the former "lock-out" attitude of the farm management would change. The Plan admitted that few of the conservation or recreation values of Molesworth were known, but pledged to open up the station to the public.

Such was the intention; however, when Society conservation officer Kevin Smith organised a Forest and Bird trip to Molesworth in Labour Weekend last year, he found that old attitudes die hard.

In early October he arranged with station manager Don Reid that more than 100 people could visit the Acheron Valley, noted for its many lizards and large nesting bird populations (stilt, oyster catcher, shag, black-fronted tern, dotterel, black-billed gull).

Two weeks later Mr Reid contacted Barbara Devery, Kevin Smith's wife, to pass the message on to her absent husband that access was now denied on the grounds that the Forest and Bird group were "stirrers". Two days later Kevin Smith telephoned Mr Reid, pointing out that as a management plan was about to be released, a visit to the area would help the public make informed comment in their submissions. After a half hour heated debate consent was grudgingly given.

When a Forest and Bird field trip finally reached the area, they were accosted by a farm worker who demanded an explanation for their presence on the property.

Access was also a problem in the western zone of the station, where supposedly the

public are allowed open access via the Electricity Corporation's road from Jacks Pass following the Clarence River past Lake Tenynson through to the Tarndale Lakes. At the weekend, however, there was a sign saying "private road, no unauthorized entry" at the first turn-off from Hanmer and a "road closed" sign and rope across the road at the St James Station, 30 km along the road.

Despite the discouragement, over 100 Forest and Bird members spent two marvelous days exploring Molesworth over Labour Weekend. They discovered many of the special plants of inland Marlborough, climbed mountains, watched many birds nesting in the Severn and Clarence riverbeds and came to understand a little of the past and present difficulties in farming Molesworth. For many the Molesworth visit was a nostalgic reunion. Nearly 60 years after his first trip through Molesworth on horse-back, Mr Alfred Gollan of Wellington came back to Molesworth and led many younger Forest and Bird members in a stiff two hour climb of Pudding Hill.

Hopefully the problems Forest and Bird experienced in gaining responsible access to Molesworth will be a thing of the past when the long promised management plan is finally released.

The 1986 strategy plan, on which the draft management plan is supposedly based, recognised the major public interest in access to Molesworth. It proposed opening up the western sector of Molesworth to public access at any time. The central sector along the Acheron-Molesworth station road was to be open to the public over January-February only. Public submissions on the strategy plan almost unanimously asked for more liberal access provisions. The Acheron road limitation in particular seems unfortunate. It is a good standard metal road built with public funds and should be available for use on a permit system at least for all summer.

Over this 1987-88 summer Conservation Department officials erected nearly 200 public information signs through Molesworth to guide visitors. They also operated a register of visitors.

Unfortunately in developing a management plan from the 1986 strategy plan officials have not consulted with conservation

and recreation organisations. In his February 1987 decision to retain Molesworth in Crown ownership Deputy Prime Minister, Geoffrey Palmer set up a Molesworth management committee comprised of two DoC officials and two Landcorp staff chaired by Southland farmer, Bernard Pinney. This committee was charged with supervising a team to prepare the management plan and required by Mr Palmer "to consult closely with interest groups in the preparation of the plan." This was reiterated by then-Conservation Minister, Russell Marshall, in response to our concerns about being shut out of the plan preparation.

However the planning team's work has been conducted in total secrecy. The draft plan has been finalised. We have been informed by staff involved in the exercise that conservation and recreation remain subservient to cattle ranching.

No specific provisions have been made to reserve important natural areas such as sensitive wetlands. The plan does not abide by Government policy to destock severely eroded Class 7e and 8 mountain lands. It appears to have completely ignored most of the 175 public submissions on the earlier strategy plan.

The draft plan will shortly be circulated for public comment. It will be very difficult to change at this late stage unless there is a major public campaign to elevate the status of recreation and nature conservation on Molesworth. Your help will therefore soon be vital in writing submissions to change the draft plan.

The Molesworth news is not all bad however. Above all else, the property does remain in public ownership after our huge 1986-87 campaign. Despite access difficulties 100 people have explored the vast interior of Molesworth and discovered something of its magic.

Molesworth's natural treasures are also at last the focus of more intensive scientific study. Molesworth is being surveyed at present as part of the Protected Natural Areas Programme. The important step following the survey will be to reserve areas identified for their high conservation value.

Submissions on the Molesworth Management Plan are invited to Landcorp Box 794 Blenheim by 29 February 1988.

Hitch almost stopped Molesworth field trip

BY JANE DUNBAR

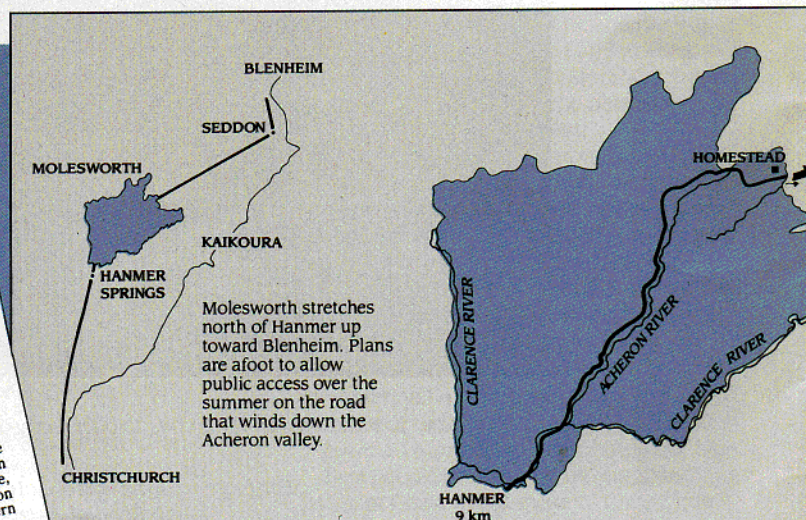
A last-minute hitch almost prevented a field trip into the vast 182,000ha Molesworth station, at the week-end. The trip was organised by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society and attracted 100 people from throughout the South Island. Last Monday, however, the manager of Molesworth, Mr Don Reid, telephoned the society to say that in spite of prior approval the group would not be allowed in after all. It was pointed out to him, however, that a man-

agement plan for the station was soon to be released and a visit to the area would help members of the public make informed comment in their subsequent submissions. He then agreed to allow access, and on Saturday morning the group travelled in by mini bus.

There were two field trips at the week-end. The first went up the Clarence River past Lake Tenynson up to the Island Pass and then down into the headwaters of the Waiau River at Tarndale. On Saturday evening there was a discussion

about Molesworth's future — the management plan and question of public access.

The society's director, Dr Gerry McSweeney, said he was disappointed from representatives of Landcorp and the Conservation Department had declined to go on the trip. "The era of shutting the public out of Molesworth is over," he said. The second field trip went down the Clarence River to the old Acheron house, accommodation then up the Acheron Gorge to the Severn River.



Molesworth access conservationists' aim

By JANE DUNBAR
Foot access by responsible visitors over the whole of Molesworth is one of the hopes the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society has for the future management of the high country station.

A management plan devised by Landcorp, the Department of Conservation and an independent chairman is reportedly complete and due for public release and submissions.

The director of the society, Dr Gerry McSweeney, said that

"there is a minefield of difficulties to traverse in order to get on to this public land, and we're keen to see it doesn't apply for future generations."

Access was not particularly easy for the society on its field trip over the week-end. There is supposedly free public access to the western zone of the station via the New Zealand Electricity Department's road from Jacks Pass following the Clarence River through to the Tarndale lakes.

At the week-end, however, there was a sign

saying "private road, no throughfare" at the first turn-off from Hanmer, and a "road closed" sign at the St James station.

Special permission was required, and obtained, for travelling up the Acheron Gorge.

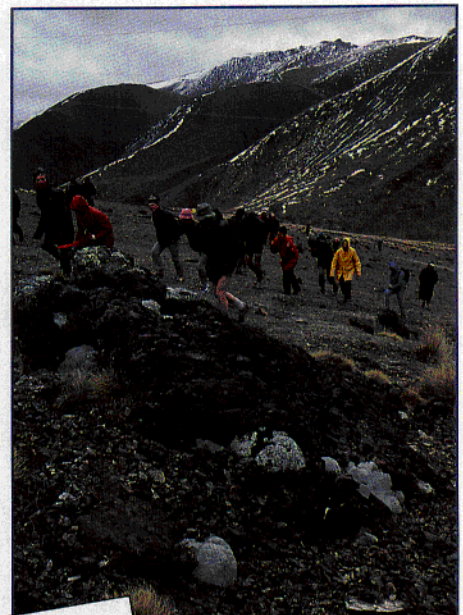
The society field trip was a "pioneering visit," said Dr McSweeney. It allowed people to learn about management problems and perhaps have some say on the station's future once public submissions on the management plan were called.

It had been disappointing that recreational and

conservationist groups had not been asked for comment while the planning had been done, he said.

"Molesworth is a common heritage, something we all have an interest in. We hope it's managed for farming as well as the conservation of nature, soil and water, and scenery, and is available for recreation."

Molesworth station is a Crown-managed farming enterprise which at 182,000 hectares is New Zealand's biggest farm and carries about 10,000 head of cattle.



Mr Alfred Gollan on one of the horses used to trek through the high country station, Molesworth, as Mr Gollan did himself nearly 60 years ago.

Molesworth

Sir.—Visiting Molesworth Station I discovered that this high country farm is far more than just cattle and has far greater responsibility than just farming. I was impressed by the vast expanse of tussock, shrub lands, and alpine herb fields. The geology and land forms are fascinating and spectacular. I commend the management that has undoubtedly brought about a dramatic recovery of the landscape and improved the farm's economy since the Crown took control 40 years ago. I sincerely hope that Molesworth's new guardians, the Department of Conservation and Land Corp, continue to wisely manage this high country gem. Management must continue to respect the total Molesworth environment and plan ahead for more than just cattle. Examples of each habitat should be reserved, the Government's policy of retiring class 7 and 8 land should be implemented, and immediate attention should address the threat of wilding conifers and pine plantations. Let us ensure that the unique values of this high country environment can be maintained for the future. — Yours,

JEREMY ANDERSON.
October 29, 1987.

Molesworth

Sir.—I have been privileged to visit Molesworth over Labour week-end. For a long time I have had an absorbing interest in the history and ecology of this vast area. To see at first hand the grandeur of the landscape, the effect of human intervention and the efforts of dedicated people restoring some balance has been inspiring and humbling. Obviously now is the time for decisions to be made to put every thing into perspective. The natural environment is fragile, climate extreme and management difficult, but there is a place, I believe, for people who are concerned and responsible to have a part in its future. The enthusiastic amateur would have a glorious time probing, investigating the environment and assisting the professionals to fill the gaps left by years of locked gates. Please let Landcorp, the Department of Conservation and conservationists get around the table to work out what is best for Molesworth. — Yours, etc.,

MICHAEL BEAVEN.
October 27, 1987.

Acquaintance renewed

By JANE DUNBAR

Nearly 60 years after his first trip through Molesworth, Mr Alfred Gollan was back again at the week-end to enjoy the vast grandeur of the 182,000ha high country station.

A member of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society's week-end field trip to the area, Mr Gollan recounted how he had travelled the outskirts of the station in 1929.

On a horse trek organised by Mr Joe Gibbs, of

Nelson, Mr Gollan joined nine others on a 10 day trip which took them from the station's Top House to Lewis Pass and on to Springs Junction.

"When we arrived at the old Top House we were met by a young girl of 19, Joe's niece Gladys, who had brought up the 10 horses with her brother from Nelson," he said. "Gladys was one of the five girls on the trip."

As the group travelled through the station they noticed rabbits had done a lot of damage to the

ground cover. There was no evidence, however, of sheep or people.

At Tarndale there were a few cattle, and near the Ada homestead there were about 100 wild horses.

A near disaster was averted when in the early hours of one morning the trek horses escaped, and were heading back in the direction of the wild ones. An avalanche had fallen through the beech forest, however, flattening trees, and blocking the valley. The horses

stopped there, and were recovered at dawn.

The party eventually reached the Lewis Pass where they saw the beginnings of the pick and shovel work being done to build the Lewis Pass highway.

Since 1929, Mr Gollan has made two return trips to Molesworth. In comparison with his first journey he said the vegetation was looking better, there were weeds, and the beech and tanekaha were the predominant trees and regenerating well.

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Top Right: Sub-alpine day trip, Molesworth Photos: Gerry McSweeney

Right: Acheron accommodation house.

