

WHATAROA - WANGANUI - WHITCOMBE

"... all the terrors of a Westland hell were condensed into the first gorge below the flats; ... giant boulders choked the course of the river, ... bush nearly interlocked the sky above the boulders, and ... they were almost deafened by the roar of the cataracts. It seemed appropriate to name this gorge "Eblis" after a monarch of the spirits of evil, who lost his high estate as an angel of light when he refused to worship Adam. It was written in Vathek in 1784 that Eblis was "tarnished by malignant vapours and caused the powers of the abyss to tremble".

John Pascoe, describing their exploration of the Adams Valley in "Great Days in New Zealand Exploration".

5.1. LANDFORMS

The landforms are basically the same as those to the south, outlined in Chapter 4. To the east of the Alpine Fault, the heavily glaciated mountains consist of feldspar or biotite schists of the Haast Group. To the west are a complex of glacial features, derived from these glaciations. However, there is one major formation standing up above these fluvio-glacial features - hills consisting of a block of greywacke (Greenland Group) and granite/granodiorite (Tuhua Group) between the Wanganui and Hokitika valleys, primarily in the Mikonui and Totara valleys behind Ross.

North of Elie de Beaumont, the main divide is rarely above 2500m in height; however, there are three large névés in the region - the Gardens of Eden and Allah and the Bracken Snowfield. None of the glaciers extend below bushline, and with their retreat they have left some of the most difficult bush gorges - such as the Poerua, Lambert and Adams - in Westland.

The major rivers - Whataroa, Wanganui, Waitaha and Hokitika are large, glacier-fed and turbulent. With their steep gradients they are prone to flash-flooding which is little surprise in view of the fact that mean annual rainfalls in excess of 8,000 mm have been recorded at the Ivory Glacier in the head of the Waitaha valley.

The coastline is not as dramatic as further south, but a series of moraine lakes - Ianthe, Kaniere and Mahinapua - is reminiscent of similar lakes further south.

5.2. VEGETATION AND WILDLIFE

The vegetation pattern is similar to that described in Chapter 4. Most of the dense podocarp forest of Ianthe and Wanganui State forests is cutover and currently, there is controversy about the extent of reservation / production in Saltwater State forest, the last major terrace podocarp resource in the region.

Red deer, thar and chamois have in the past reached high levels in the region; helicopter hunting, and to a

lesser extent recreational hunting, have now reduced numbers of deer and thar markedly. Opossum numbers are high in most bush and scrub communities and have had a pronounced destructive impact on the rata/kamahi forests, easily seen on the steep hill slopes between Harihari and Whataroa. Goats are present in the Evans Creek - lower Wanganui area.

5.3. EXPLORATION HISTORY

The earliest recorded European crossing of the divide in the region by John Whitcombe and Jakob Lauper in 1863, ended in disaster when Whitcombe drowned at the mouth of the flooded Taramakau River. With many of their contemporary explorers, they were seeking the ideal pass between Canterbury and Westland. Like so many others they were ill-prepared for the rigours of the weather and the West Coast gorges.

Later, in 1875, Evans explored the Wanganui up to the present day Evans Glacier. Further south, A. Gunn, J. Bettison and "Harry the Whale" made an unsuccessful attempt to cross from the Perth to the Havelock branch of the Rangitata River. It was not until 1908 that J.R. Dennistoun and his companions, in two pioneering trips from east and west, proved that the Perth did actually saddle with the Havelock by a crossing of "Dennistoun Pass". Even the outstanding West Coast surveyor, G.J. Roberts, considered that the Havelock saddled with the Wanganui.

During the 1890's West Coast interests pushed for a major route over the Whitcombe Pass and between 1892-99 Charlie Douglas explored the route for the track. His last major trip to the area was up the Wanganui with William Gunn in 1900 when they climbed to Blue Lookout on the end of the Lord Range from the Wanganui - Adams - Lambert confluence. In the preceding years Douglas had already made important explorations of the Wanganui, Whataroa and Butler valleys. His friend, Dr. E.

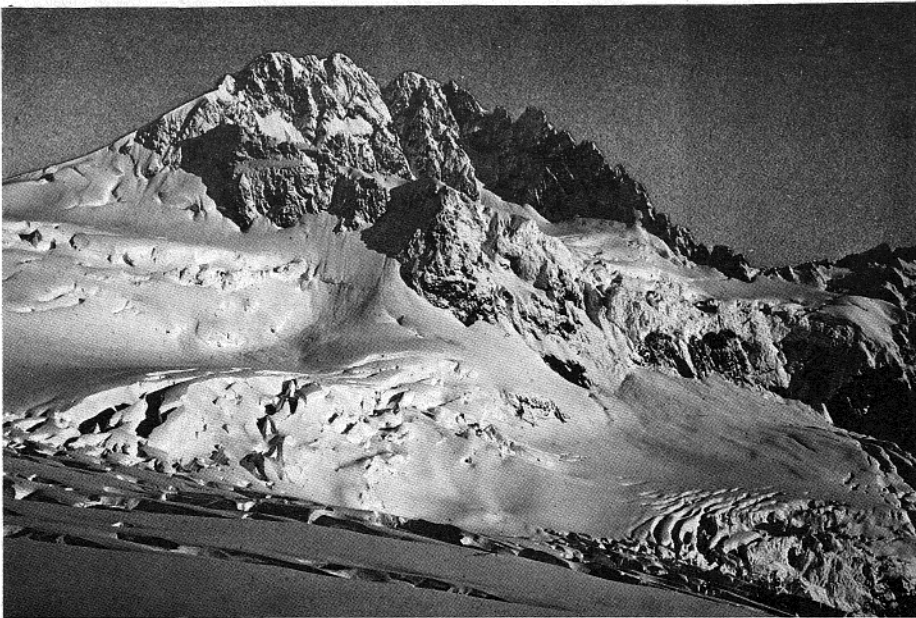
Teichelmann, and others continued his work early in the 1900's piecing together the puzzling, complex topography of the main divide. Lloyd Wilson and his companion H.W. Cormack made the first crossing from the Clyde branch of the Rangitata to the Perth in 1933. In the succeeding few years John Pascoe, and companions from the Canterbury Mountaineering Club (C.M.C.) explored the Garden of Eden and made a crossing to the Adams River, finally making an arduous route out via the Speculation Range and the gorges of Hot Springs Creek.

Since the 1930's many mountaineers from the N.Z. Alpine Club (NZAC), C.M.C. and Wellington tramping clubs have gradually unravelled the topography of this wild part of the West Coast.

5.4. RECREATIONAL ATTRACTIONS

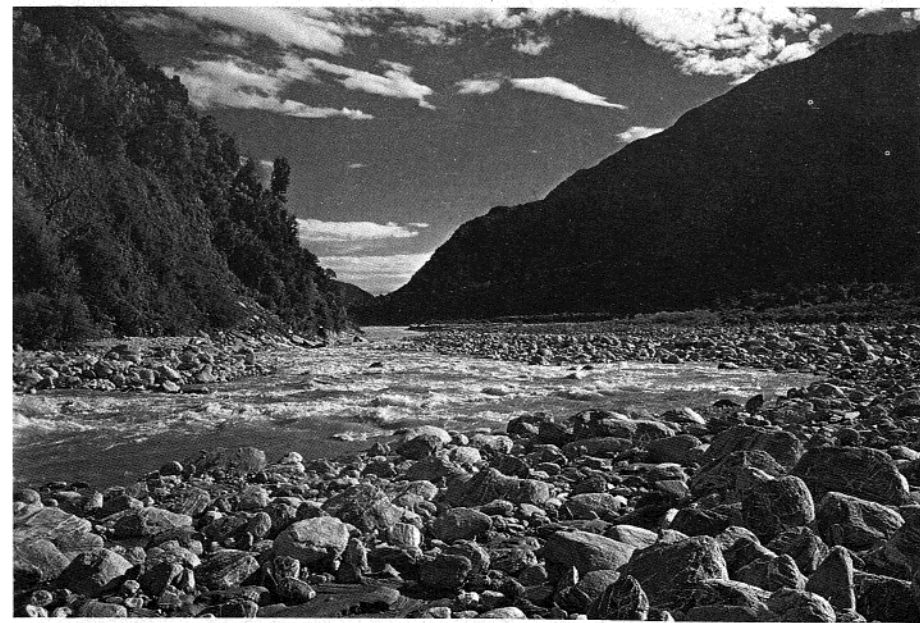
The outdoor recreational attractions of the Whataroa - Hokitika region are not so obvious to the visiting motorist. The Whataroa and Wanganui Rivers issue from narrow mountain valleys which only give tantalising glimpses of the remarkable mountain wilderness in their headwaters. Between the Waitaha and Hokitika the lowland forest has been largely removed, with the land now in various stages of agricultural development; the forested ranges turn inland and the rural cultural environment becomes dominant. Nevertheless, the Lake Ianthe and Mt. Hercules Scenic Reserves are attractive natural forested areas along S.H.6 and although they are small in size their visual importance is considerable.

The most important coastal features are the lakes and lagoons in Saltwater State forest. Saltwater forest contains the last extensive tract of virgin terrace podocarp forest in the region and there is the possibility, with careful planning and selection logging, for forestry roads to double as access roads for recreation on lakes and lagoons. These remarkable waterways are difficult to appreciate on foot - canoeing is by far



Mt. Evans from NE rim of Bracken Snowfield

Geoff Spearpoint



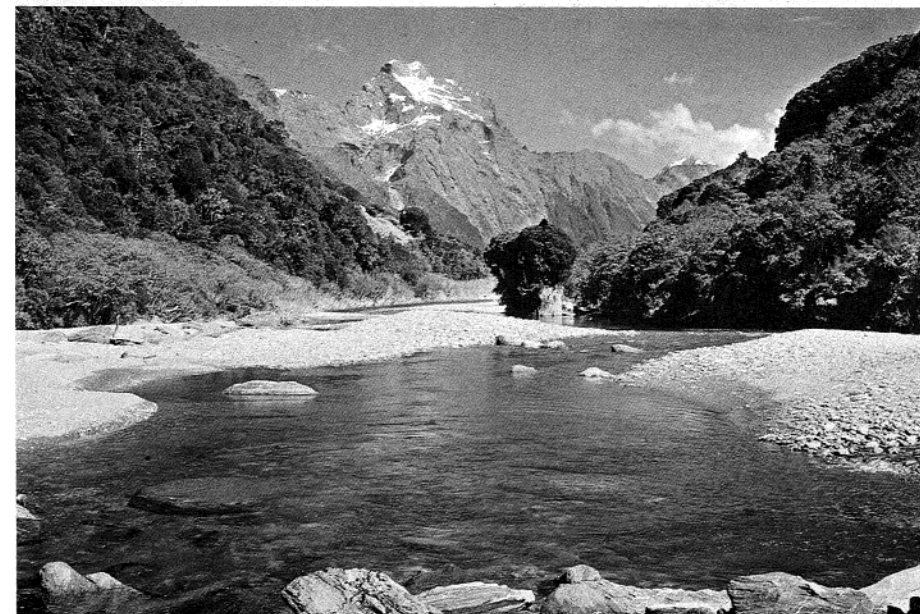
Wanganui River below Lambert/Adams junction

Geoff Spearpoint



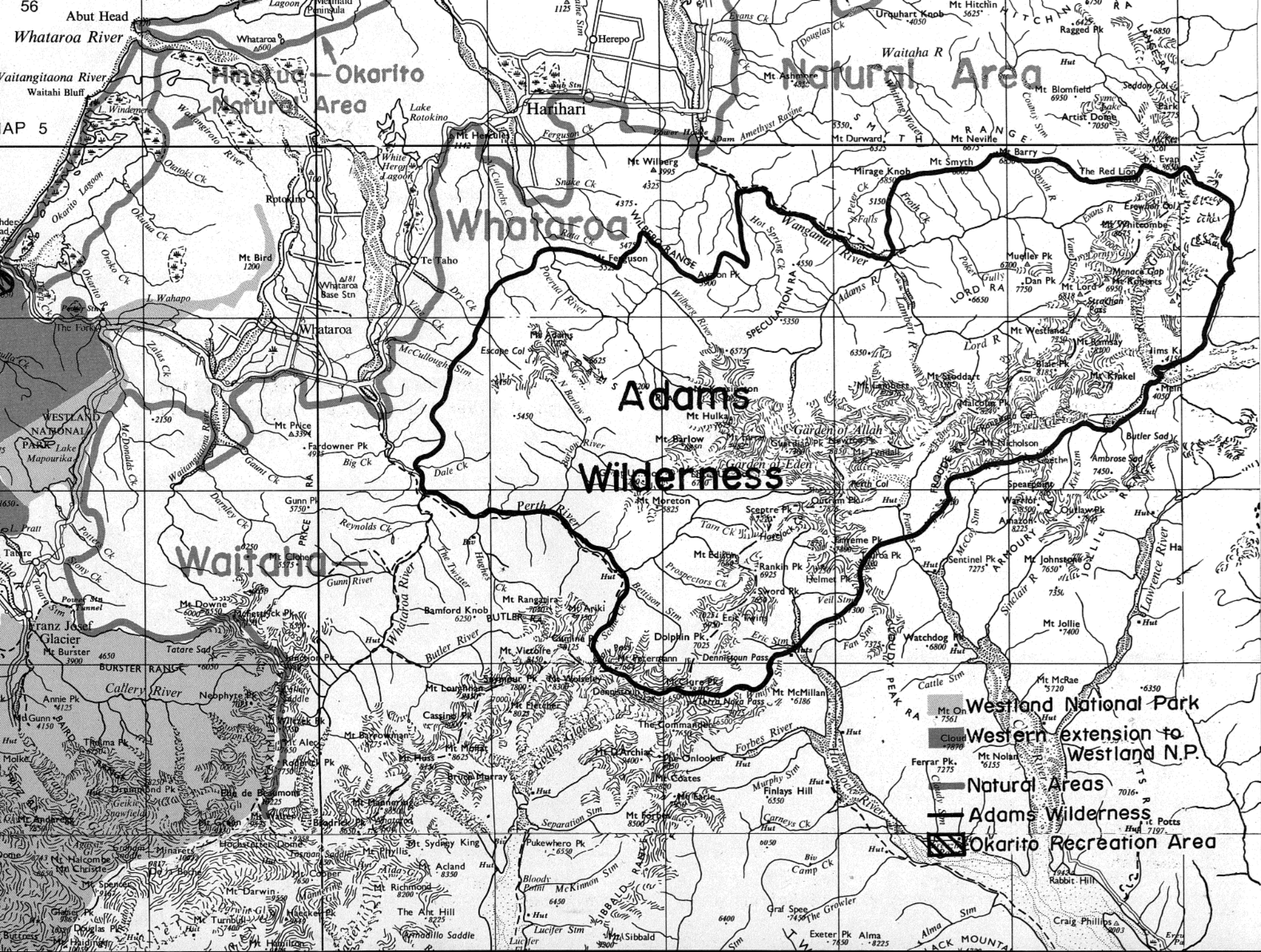
Old Wharfshed, Okarito Lagoon.

Les Molloy



Karangarua River at Troyte Fork. Mt. McGloin in distance.

Matt. Johnston



Okarito Natural Area

Waitaha Range

Whaitara

Adams Wilderness

Waitaha

Westland National Park

Western extension to Westland N.P.

Natural Areas

Adams Wilderness

Okarito Recreation Area

the best form of travel to appreciate Saltwater and Hikimutu Lagoons, the slow, deep Hinatua River and the Lake Rotokino / White Heron Lagoon complex. It is an intimate landscape of kahikatea, flax, pakihi and water - currently only the recreational preserve of the adventurous but worthy of sensitive development which will allow a wider section of the public to appreciate this interesting mosaic of lowland swamp forest.

5.5. ZONING

5.5.1. WILDERNESS

Adams Wilderness

The Adams Wilderness (map 5) rivals that of the Hooker and Olivine Wilderness Areas, far to the south, in scenic grandeur and the challenge of trans-alpine travel. While the wilderness area is primarily in Westland, it also includes the main divide and the headwaters of the Havelock, Clyde and Rakaia Rivers in Canterbury. The core of the wilderness is the vast névés of the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Allah, draining to the Perth and Wanganui Rivers in the west. From the western slopes of Mt. Adams to Mt. Evans and Whitcombe Pass in the east is a distance of 40 km, encompassing some of the most complex mountain country in the Southern Alps. Travel through this maze of gorges, icefalls, glaciers and dense sub-alpine scrub is slow and only suitable for well equipped parties. The severe weather and high precipitation (typically that already quoted for the Ivory Glacier) means that parties must be prepared to weather-over for considerable periods.

Apart from wild animal control, there are two major management problems affecting the wilderness:

- (a) recent hut, track and bridge development by NZFS;
- (b) tourist flights and landings, especially on the Garden of Eden and Garden of Allah.

(a) Extent of hut, track and bridge development

In the last eight years the N.Z. Forest Service have opened up the Whataroa and Wanganui valleys, whether for wild animal control or recreational use is not clear. None of this development has been publicly discussed in forest management plans and this intrusion into the wilderness has been protested by FMC and its member clubs to little avail. Again, this recreational development/wilderness conflict was not discussed in the South Westland Land Use Study since the study team largely ignored the alpine zone.

This concern at haphazard development is not to deny the case for some development of huts and bridges along well defined routes within the region; but such development should have been based upon consideration of public opinion - a co-operative effort between user and manager. Sadly, while the NZFS have opened State Forest Park management plans to public comment and consultation, there has been no parallel effort to date in the vast areas of State forest in South Westland.

The Whataroa and Perth (to Scone Creek) are now tracked and hutted, providing reasonable all-weather access into the heart of this region. It is a good day to either Scone Hut (Perth) or Butler Junction Hut (Whataroa). To this extent the Perth hut and track system defines the south-west boundary of the Adams wilderness; within the wilderness the upper Perth Valley has been used as access to and from the Garden of Eden for many years, while in recent years several tramping parties have used the Barlow River to give similar access to the Garden of Eden via Vertebrae Col as well as access into the Poerua Valley. The Poerua River is completely untracked and unhutted. The up-valley access is almost impossible via the Lower Poerua Gorge and the old stock track from S.H.6 near Harihari to Wilberg Peak via Harold Creek is now overgrown.

The main Wanganui valley has been developed almost to the same extent as the Whataroa, but fortunately the

Lord, Lambert and the Adams (to some extent) remain unmodified. Although a good high level route exists to the Garden of Allah from the junction of the Adams and Lambert Rivers, NZFS have recently chainsawed a very rough track up the Adams (Eblis Gorge) to Adams Flat. This route should be allowed to grow over. The rough track up the Wanganui from the Lambert junction should also be allowed to revert to a route which will be kept open by parties crossing from the Waitaha to the Wanganui.

(b) Flights to Gardens of Eden and Allah

According to the 1977 Lands and Survey Report on the 'Mid Southern Alps Reconnaissance Area', Mount Cook Airlines made 17 skiplane flights into the névés in 1976, usually landing climbing and ski-mountaineering parties near Adams Col where they snowcave. Furthermore, the area is increasing in popularity for scenic flights from Franz Josef, Tekapo and Hokitika. The use of the névés by skiplanes cuts right across their wilderness value, even though the ski-mountaineering potential is very high. The conflict is similar to that already described in Westland National Park, except that it is not so acute as yet. The above-mentioned study report also recognises the wilderness value of the region and the detrimental impact of the aircraft. It is certainly true that this use of aircraft can be an extremely valuable aid to a climbing or skiing party which has only limited time. However, it impinges on the quiet enjoyment and wilderness experience of other users; the potential for litter is high as it is with all air-assisted parties and there is also the likelihood of search and rescue if bad weather stops the return trip of a party which is not sufficiently experienced or equipped to travel out of such difficult country on foot.

This is a particularly difficult problem, which has already sharply divided mountaineers using the region. There could be a compromise solution by regulating the use of say, the Garden of Eden for airborne parties,

while such access to the Bracken Snowfield and the Mt. Evans massif would be restricted to foot only. While it would be unreasonable to immediately stop such landings, as an interim measure they should be regulated by restricting numbers of landings and the numbers of months for such activities.



Garden of Allah and Beelzebub Icefall from the west.

N.Z. Geological Survey

(1) Waitaha - Whataroa Natural Area (Map 5)

The Waitaha - Whataroa Natural Area is a western buffer zone to the Adams Wilderness, stretching from the Whataroa in the south to the Whitcombe / Hokitika catchment in the north. Most of the valleys in the region have been hutted and tracked by NZFS and many are popular with hunting parties. In the south, the Whataroa has long attracted hunters of deer, chamois and thar although animals have decreased markedly in recent years through helicopter hunting. The Butler huts are well used by hunters but there is little attraction for them in the head of the Whymper and the Whymper Hut should be removed, since it is not used and is out of place with the wild surroundings. The limited number of mountaineering parties visiting the head of the Whataroa would probably be equipped for trans-alpine crossings of Whataroa or Whymper Saddles to the Classen and Murchison Glaciers in Canterbury, or else climbs of the magnificent Elie de Beaumont from the Maximillian Range.

The Waitaha catchment is now well tracked and hutted and suitable for a round trip to the Wanganui, via the County Stream and Smyth Range. As with the Waitaha Catchment, the Whitcombe area has a pattern of huts and tracks and is extensively used by trampers, hunters and climbers. The Whitcombe Pass/Rakaia route is a popular one and, with the proper clothing and equipment, not a normally difficult undertaking. There is scope within the catchment for more challenging mountain travel, e.g. the Wilkinson River and the Katzenbach ridge route to the Bracken Snowfield. In the past, the wild, introduced animal population in the Whitcombe/Hokitika catchment was one of the highest on the West Coast; the saturation hutting of the catchment - 19 huts in all - is testimony to the control efforts in ground hunting days. Today, this intensive network is of considerable value for tramping and hunting parties content to recreate without the rigours of travel in the Adams Wilderness to the south.



(2) Okarito - Hinatua Natural Area (Map 5)

The other important natural area in the region is the coastal forest zone around the two large lagoons, Okarito and Saltwater. Much has been written on the diverse values of Okarito lagoon and its wildlife during the last three years of controversy over selective logging of its forest catchment. Sound arguments have been presented for the Lagoon to also be added to Westland National Park. Although the lagoon and its remarkable forest surroundings are extremely rich in birdlife (it harbours over 50 of the 62 birds recorded by the Ornithological Society in the Westland National Park vicinity), it is probably more appropriate to manage it as some form of wildlife management reserve because of its considerable recreational value for fishing, boating, whitebaiting and duck shooting.

Although the lower farmed reaches of the Wanganui, Poerua and Whataroa Rivers have been infested with gorse and weeds, the regions where they reach the coast are very beautiful, with considerable potential for easier canoeing. Logging is progressing further into Ianthe and Saltwater State forests from S.H.6 and it is essential that it not progress into the coastal natural area as defined in map 5. If the logging in Saltwater State forest is done to a high standard, the roading could be a valuable recreational asset giving better access to the lagoon country without impinging upon the ecological reserve proposed around Saltwater Lagoon.

The mouth of the Poerua can be reached by canoeing from the roadend or by a short walk around the coast from the old sawmill at the La Fontaine roadend in the Wanganui (via the pack track over Mt. OneOne which is being reopened by NZFS). The Poerua can be crossed about 0.5km from the coast but, except for the sandy coast, travel in

the forested hinterland is very wet. It has great potential for cross-country canoeing in Canadian canoes. Hikimutu Lagoon is a long, tranquil backwater (formed by the lower reaches of the Hinatua River) lined with kowhais and windshorn forest. There is a good portage on grass to Saltwater Lagoon which is very attractive, especially the prominent Mermaid Peninsula, but there are no beaches except for the coastal side. It is conceivable that ultimately one of the logging roads could be extended to the shore of the lagoon for recreational purposes, thereby allowing a round canoe trip to or from Poerua. There could also be a good recreational case for a well-constructed limited access road to extend to Lake Rotokino from the logging area. This would give another excellent round canoe trip via the White Heron Lagoon and Lake Rotokino.

Ianthe State Forest is heavily cutover between the Waitaha River and Pukuturo Cliff. From the roadend near the Cliff the forest is virgin to the mouth of the Wanganui and the coast is an attractive walk, with cliffs cut by many small streams. At the south end of Greens Beach (7km from the roadend) is a seal colony and there is an interesting old store site at the mouth of the Whakaikai River. Because it is so difficult to do a round trip by crossing the Wanganui River, the best recreational activity is a day walk to the seal colony and back to the road end.

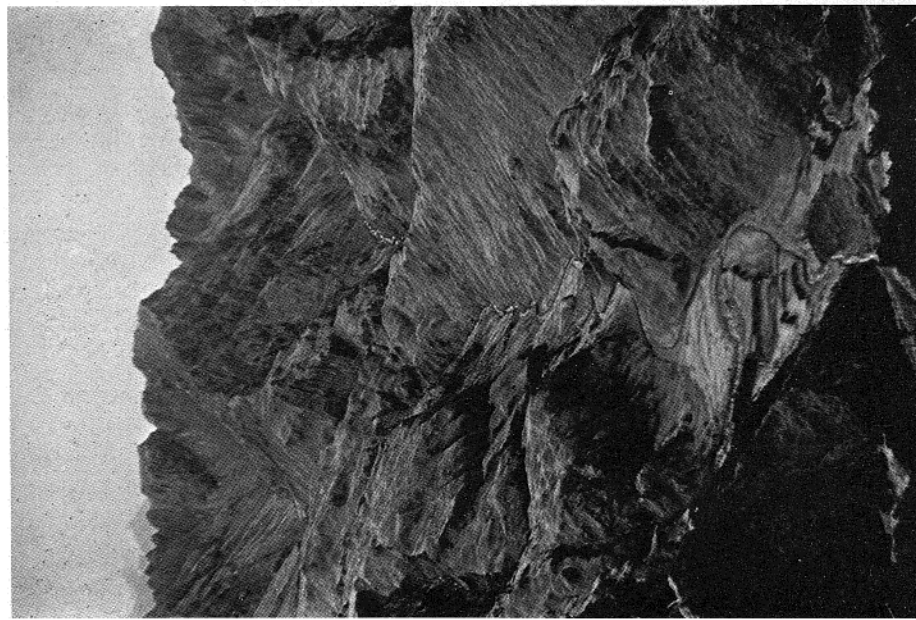
5.5.3. RECREATION AREA

Although north of Map 5, there is one outstanding area worthy of development for intensive recreation in the region and that is the Ross Goldfields around Donally Creek. Lands and Survey Department have recently opened a short Walkway which interprets the rich history of the Ross Goldfield which had its heyday in the late 1860's.



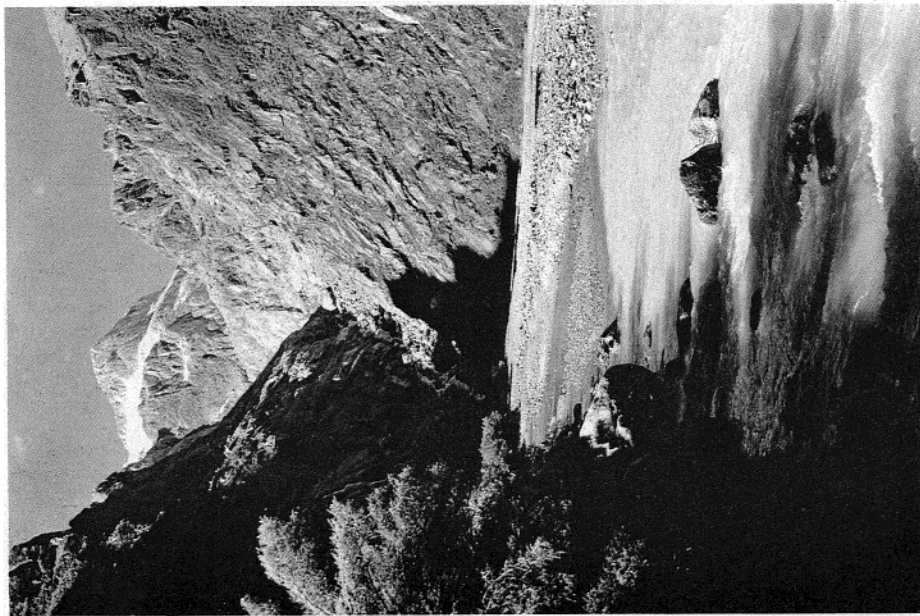
Lord and Lambert Gorges, Wanganui Valley.

Les Molloy



Speculation Range across Hot Springs Basin from
Wilberg Range.

Les Molloy



Guardian Peak above Adams Flats.

Geoff Spearpoint



Malcolm Peak in winter above Lambert Gorge.

Geoff Spearpoint

there is potential for joining this local system with the track to Mt. Greenland at the head of Donally Creek in Totara State forest to the south. Another historic feature worthy of investigation is a benched track further south still in Mikonui State forest associated with silver-mining on Mt. Rangitoto.

Another recreation area near Hokitika has been developed by NZFS through Mahinapua State forest, a variety of exotic species planted in the 1930's. Mahinapua Scenic Reserve surrounds most of the adjacent Lake Mahinapua and an interesting walkway has been developed through a mixture of scenic reserve, State forest and private land. Most of this walk is on an old logging track and saw-milling is a major interpretation theme. The lake has an interesting catfish population and the remains of an old paddle steamer. There is considerable scope in this recreation area for appreciation of both indigenous and exotic forest.

5.6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Crown Lands in the upper Whataroa, Wanganui, Waitaha and Hokitika/Whitcombe Catchments eventually be transferred to State Forest -

to enable N.Z. Forest Service to manage this large block of protection forest and alpine tops as a large natural area. In the meantime, a joint management plan should be prepared by Lands and Survey Department and N.Z. Forest Service.

2. That the central core of this State Forest be designated an "Adams Wilderness" -

under the Forests Act with an extensive buffer zone which has been called the "Waitaha - Whataroa Natural Area". Within this wilderness area the Adams and upper Wanganui valleys should be allowed to revert to their

former wilderness state. The problem of unrestricted air access to the Gardens of Eden and Allah needs attention.

3. The coastal lagoons - Okarito and Saltwater - should be protected from selective logging within 1.5km of their margins.

An appropriate status, in recognition of their value for biota conservation and recreation, should be given them under the Wildlife Act or Forests Act.

4. Logging in Saltwater and Ianthe State forests should conform to a public management plan -

which attempts to enhance the potential of the rivers, lagoons and coastline for forms of recreation which are compatible with biota conservation.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

GEOLOGY:

N.Z. Geological Survey, D.S.I.R. 1967: "Geological Map of N.Z.", Sheet 17 (Hokitika), 1:250,000.

RECREATION:

N.Z. Alpine Club, 1954: Spotlight on the Whataroa. N.Z. Alpine Journal 15: 490 - 513.

LAND USE - MID-SOUTHERN ALPS:

Lands and Survey Department, 1977: Mid-Southern Alps Reconnaissance Area. 48 pp.