

# ST. MARYS RANGE

## 1. Landforms

The St. Marys Range, above the Waitaki Valley in the north-east corner of Otago, is more reminiscent of the Canterbury mountains than of Otago's block mountains. Parallel faults on a N.W.-S.E. axis separate the foliated schists of the rest of Central Otago from these greywackes and argillites which tend to fracture into angular blocks.

The range is incised by short, steep drainages into the Waitaki River and by the Otematata catchment to the west. The gently rolling northern crest is from 1520 - 2010 m, with the outlying twin peaks of Mt. Domet (1942 m), Grayson Peak (1660 m) and Cone (1563 m), towards the low Danseys Pass (900 m) to the south. Most of the penneplained crest and many faces are barren lands, consisting of fellfields and coarse scree. Numerous shattered rock outcrops occur along upper faces, and on southern crests.

## 2. Vegetation and Wildlife

On the highest tops only the sparsest of vegetation occurs. Stunted tufts of blue tussock and occasional alpine herb communities occur amongst scree and rock pavement; lichens grow on most bluffs.



Fly camp on Mt. Domet. Photo: Donald Lousley

Snow tussock grassland, usually in a very depleted condition, occurs between 1000 and 1500 m. The narrow-leaved snowgrass dominates lower and sunnier sites, with slim snowgrass on higher, colder sites. Below 1000 m, fescue tussock and low producing pasture dominate, with matagouri and *Olearia* scrub in gullies.<sup>(1)</sup> The tussock grasslands are moderately to severely depleted.<sup>(2)</sup>

The range is within the St. Mary district of the Waitaki Ecological Region.

There is a diverse population of insects and lizards, including a number of insect species endemic to the range.<sup>(1)</sup>

Pigs, deer and possibly chamois are present in low numbers. Pig rootings on the lower, western country causes widespread damage. Rabbits, hares and opossums are also present.<sup>(1)</sup>

## 3. History and Land Use

Pastoralism dates from 1854 when the large Otekaieke Run was first taken up. By 1858 the range was divided up between four runs. Between 1880 and 1883 three of these properties were subdivided by the Government for closer settlement. Subdivision by the Crown has largely produced today's settlement patterns.<sup>(3)</sup>

The St. Marys Range presented something of an obstacle for access to the extensive upland plateau between the Hawkdun and St. Marys ranges. This led to pack-horse tracks being formed across the range, one climbing to over 1500 m.

Gold mining occurred in the Maerewhenua catchment to the east of Danseys Pass, as well as in the Kye Bum to the west. There is some evidence of small scale prospecting along stream beds and terraces. A stone hut once occupied by Chinese miners remains in the upper Otekaieke Valley.

### 3.1 Land Tenure

Present tenure is a mix of pastoral lease, pastoral occupation licence, and properties under freeholding action (deferred payment licences). Many of the earlier Crown leases were small grazing runs, with rights to freehold predating the introduction of the 1948 Land Act. These rights have been exercised up to as recently as 1976, resulting in extensive high altitude lands passing out of the public estate. Crests over 1700 m on the northern end of the range, Mt. Domet and Cone are now privately owned, although the upper Domet slopes are retired from grazing.

In 1981 two pastoral leases in the Danseys Pass-Ben Lomond area were reclassified, but the lessees declined to relinquish their pastoral leases in favour of renewable lease or freehold.

Over 5000 ha of the western crests or eastern flanks are held in pastoral occupation licences.

Within a 33 ha area of Unalienated Crown Land (UCL) in the west branch of the Awakino River, the Waitaki Ski Club has a recreation permit to operate a skifield.

### 3.2 Land Use Capability

The range is predominantly Class 7 and 8, with only small areas of Class 6 in valley floors and on lower slopes. Erosion severity increases with altitude from severe to extreme.<sup>(1,4)</sup>

Catchment authorities conclude that the best treatment for soil conservation and water management is destocking. Some Class 7 land could be subject to grazing permits, but only under rigorous control.<sup>(1)</sup>

### 3.3 District Scheme Zoning

The Waitaki County Council has zoned the bulk of the range Rural D (permits uses compatible with conservation of soil, water, and vegetation cover), being flanked by Rural C (extensive farming and scenic) on the northern, eastern and southern flanks, and Rural E (water quality) on the western Otematata slopes. Within the Rural C and D zones many farm developments require the consent of Council. @)

## 4. Recreational Opportunities

### 4.1 Skiing

The first recorded skiing in the St. Marys Range was in 1939, with the newly formed Waitaki Ski Club using a roadman's hut on Danseys Pass as its base. This continued until 1945 when the hut was blown down, forcing the club to look for new ski grounds.<sup>(6)</sup>

In 1946 the club moved to the west branch of the Awakino Valley where a relatively small basin at 1460m, overshadowed by a short, steep face provided the main skiing area. Wind drift rather than direct precipitation is responsible for most snow accumulation on this slope. Although the runs are of short duration, interesting skiing is available on steep terrain.



Awakino Skifield.

In 1949 the first rope tow was installed and by 1954 a tractor road was extended into the basin. @) The tow was re-aligned in the 1960's and provided a longer run with a vertical height of 274 m. There are also beginners' and access tows. Earlier attempts to extend the ski grounds into a higher basin and across the range into Hut Creek were defeated by winds demolishing a shelter hut and tow lines.

It is most unlikely that any new skifield developments could be successful on the range, due to the severe wind conditions, and the limited extent of suitable slopes.

The existing Awakino field fully warrants continuation, despite its small size, as it meets a local demand and provides a friendly and unsophisticated style of skiing which is appreciated by visiting skiers and locals alike.

The main recreational potential over the greater area is for ski-

touring, both on alpine and cross-country equipment. Dependent on the severity of winds and their effect on snow cover and condition, a variety of tours are possible along the crest of the range.

A climb to the summit of Kohurau (2010 m) and a return run to Awakino is popular. The undulating crest of the range continues northwards from Kohurau, providing up to 20 km of terrain for cross country skiing.



Approaching summit of Kohurau; Waitaki Valley below.

### 4.2 Climbing

Mountain clubs regularly use Awakino as a base for snowcraft instruction, as well as the Cone Peak area near Danseys Pass. The high and low peaks of Mt. Domet can provide interesting winter routes and the mountain is a frequent objective of climbing parties. The range is the closest alpine mountain area to Oamaru and Dunedin, and is within day trip range from these centres.

### 4.3 Tramping

In summer the range provides fewer attractions for foot recreation, in comparison to winter. However the upper Otekaieke Valley approaches to Mt. Domet are visited from the Danseys Pass Road, providing easy tramping in interesting terrain. Problems are sometimes encountered obtaining landowner consent for access to this area. Ben Lomond (1052 m) and other local hills are often objectives for holiday-makers at a private camping ground in the upper Maerewhenua Valley. Gold fossicking in old workings and river beds is a popular activity in this locality.

### 4.4 Hunting

The southern St. Marys Range in particular provides significant opportunities for deerstalking which is of considerable interest for local shooters.

## 5. Zoning

### 5.1 Natural Experience

The higher altitude 'wild lands' of the St Marys Range are zoned *natural experience*. The extensive screes and alpine barrens of this range give it a character quite different from the other ranges described in this volume.

The zone should be managed primarily for soil and water

conservation, with a variety of compatible recreational activities encouraged. The existing skifield is relatively smallscale, and an acceptable element in this zone.

Much of the zone is held on pastoral leases and licences, and roughly coincides with a catchment management area identified by the Waitaki Catchment Commission. Wherever possible such tenures should be surrendered to direct Crown control. Limited grazing by permits may be acceptable on less depleted portions of this zone. Reversion to Crown land status is necessary to ensure continued availability for public recreation.

Private land tenures over a large proportion of the range potentially provide an obstacle to recreational use. This needs to be rectified by the Crown purchasing the major interest in these high-altitude lands as opportunities arise.

## 5.2 Open Space

The large scale mid-altitude tussock grasslands are zoned *open space*. Substantial portions in the east and south are in private ownership.

A mix of Crown and local government landscape advice and/or land use controls are desirable to maintain the open settings as viewed from the Waitaki Valley and the Danseys Pass Road. The latter area is particularly sensitive to poorly located farm roading, shelter belts and buildings. Assistance and advice from the Department of Conservation (DOC) and use of district scheme provisions are desirable.

Public foot access requires to be negotiated in key localities for access to the *natural experience zone*.

## 6. Recommendations

6.1 Government progressively apply the Destocking and Surrender Policy on Class 8 and severely eroded Class 7 lands within pastoral leases and licences.

6.2 The Crown negotiate the acquisition of high-altitude private lands equivalent to those in 6.1, as opportunities arise.

6.3 This pool of Crown land be vested in DOC as a Conservation Area.

6.4 Management planning procedures be implemented by DOC to address the issues of skifield activities, recreational use generally, soil and water conservation, permit grazing, and protected natural area requirements. Further roading within the *natural experience zone* should be actively discouraged.

6.5 The Crown negotiate public foot access to the Conservation Area, with priority to the upper Otekaieke Valley from the Danseys Pass Road.

6.6 Wilding pines and their seed sources in the West Branch of the Awakino Valley be removed.

6.7 The Waitaki County Council identify a scenic corridor along the Danseys Pass Road, with assistance from DOC, and extend the adjacent Rural C zone to include this corridor.

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