

The back of beyond belongs to all

By Brian Turner

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Just as people are drawn to one another, they are also drawn to places and the experiences they instil. Myself, I've long been drawn to the high country of the South Island, and by high country I mean most of the land starting no more than a few kilometres inland from my home in Dunedin and rolling and arching west as far as the often sombre, yet equally as often lustrous, forests of the West Coast.

I love the expansive open hill country of Central Otago, especially those hills that look as if they've been shaped and smoothed and edged by giant plasterers working with trowels. And in areas—far fewer than when I was a lad—where tussock grassland is still healthy and thick, the tussock ruffling and surging in the wind on the hillsides is like a coat on the bodies of prehistoric beasts slumbering, biding their time.

The mountains get higher and the valleys deeper the further west you go, and the journey increasingly takes on the nature of a quest, at times almost an odyssey. The heat quickens and the mind takes flight the more the mountains loom; expectancy and apprehension vie with each other when people are about to heft a pack and set out on a tramping trip in the mountains. The thought that crosses many minds is, "Am I up to this both physically and mentally?"

When I was stropy, gangly and callow—as opposed to my current state, gangly, bemused and cussed—I was passionately into angling, tramping and mountaineering. I'd read of early Maori, then European explorers, and wanted to visit places that they might not have got to. Certainly to see valleys and set foot on peaks that few before me had seen or stood upon. I wanted to be bold and adventurous in my own land; to be self-reliant, independent, to exult in the clear air and green and blue (they being the predominant colours) magnificence of our natural world.

In time—and it didn't take long—my experience in the outdoors, along with a developing love of literature and the arts, imbued in me an ardent sense of what New Zealand offered, and what was possible for a New Zealander.

Thirty years ago people still referred to sparsely-populated places as the "wop wops" or the "back of beyond," and people like me as going on trips "off the beaten track." To me the "wop wops" and the "back of beyond" were terms used by people with no sense of adventure and little imagination. I discovered places "off the beaten track" that seemed as close to paradise as any to be found on earth. (Ironically, some of those places now have well-worn beaten tracks leading to them.)

In forest glades sunlight danced and lanced in the cool of the forest, on springy trails, beech leaves lay like scuffed medals, birds snickered and sang; clouds of mayflies darted and dithered along rivers and streams where water was fresh, cool and spangly, and where the sun sometimes turned previously blue-green pools into smarting sheets of silver.

In the sixties, when I began to explore with a vigour that now seems to have belonged to another self, there were fewer "beaten" tracks, fewer and smaller huts, fewer bulldozed tracks for vehicles, loss of a clamour to "develop," "interpret," "open" things up. More people camped out, carried their own gear.

Companions were mainly hunters, anglers, trampers and mountaineers. Musterers worked with horses and dogs, not helicopters, planes and four-wheel-drive vehicles. Tourists were still something of a novelty, had yet to discover New

Zealand, and had yet to be provided with the "facilities" they "need."

"Adventure tourism" had hardly begun and "concessions" were rare.

Now I'm not going to get into a lengthy debate here on the merits or otherwise of the changes that have taken place in the back country and mountain valleys in my time, save to say that to me they have brought more bad than good. In my experience what is termed "progress" often results in loss rather than gain; sometimes the most progressive thing we can do is resist.

And sort out our priorities. The first priority should be to maintain the quality of our environment and the experiences to be gained from access to it. By this I mean taking all possible steps to ensure that environmental degradation and pollution cease, and that the quality of recreational opportunities remains high.

I am inclined to think that providing more and more tracks, huts and roads only works against those aims. Of course such talk doesn't appeal to the rabid utilitarian element in society, those to whom the phrase "intrinsic value" is about as persuasive as a tick on the hide of an elephant. Unfortunately, this utilitarian faction, which is still politically powerful in New Zealand, refuses to take a wider view of its responsibilities. It includes those who think that stripping native vegetation and replacing it with grass suitable for intensive grazing is "improving" and "developing" land. Another view, which I share, is that in today's world it is short-sighted and destructive.

If we want to protect the natural values of our mountain valleys, then don't make it any easier for people to get there. Two of my favourite Otago valleys, the Greenstone and the Caples, were inaccessible by road when I first got to know them in the 1960s. To get there you had to walk, or take a boat across Lake Wakatipu. The Caples, in particular, with its lovely grassy flats and clearings, its chuckly river and high mountains at the head of the valley, seemed remote and charming. The hunting and fishing were superb. Nowadays the hunting is mediocre, to say the least, and the fishing varies from good to only so-so. Increasing numbers of trampers use the valleys.

As far as the slump in the quality of hunting and angling is concerned, it related directly to the extension of the road down the lake from Kinloch.

Nevertheless, these are still wonderful valleys to visit. Until recently they were part of three pastoral leases. In 1992, after overtures from Ngai Tahu tribal leaders, the government bought the leases, saying the land would go into a "land bank" for "possible use" in part-settlement of Maori land claims.

Negotiations with Ngai Tahu have been carried out in secret, yet these are publicly-owned lands.

Extraordinarily, the Minister of Justice, Doug Graham, says the public's not going to be consulted because it doesn't have a "clear and appropriate interest."

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To me, and thousands like me, these valleys should remain in public ownership, either by adding them to the Mt Aspiring or Fiordland national parks, or by putting them under DOC's banner. It is not in the public interest for the Greenstone and Caples valleys, whose conservation and recreational values are of major national significance, to be given to any private organisation on either a freehold or leasehold basis.

The Waitangi Tribunal found that these valleys were not wrongfully or illegally purchased from Ngai Tahu, so it has no valid claim to them. These valleys, if they are "owned" at all, now belong to all New Zealanders, irrespective of where we hail from, or how long we have been here. I find it culturally insensitive and unjust of government to say otherwise.

We all live with a sense of both past and present, and with hopes for the future. In the Greenstone and Caples one senses presences which swirl like fog around the tops and in the valleys, and one sees the imprints of animals and of human feet and hears the sounds of water, insects, birds, wind, and human voices. There is a mingling that transcends all efforts to fix things in a linear interpretation of time. It seems to me that all of us, Maori or Pakeha, have a right to be there and that no one has more right than another.

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