

# Research uncovers possibility of South Island kokako

Timberlands West Coast's (TWC's) ongoing research into indigenous forest ecology may be about to provide its first dividend for New Zealand, according to Chief Executive Dave Hilliard. This follows the finding of possible evidence of the existence of the South Island kokako (*Callaeas cinerea*), previously thought to be extinct.

As part of the development process for sustainable management prescriptions, intensive wildlife surveys have been conducted by the company over the past three years using a combination of independent experts and consultants, as well as university departments.

During one of these surveys evidence of the possible existence was observed by scientist Rhys Buckingham and his co-worker, Alan Knowles. In November 1995 an investigation targeted at confirming the presence or otherwise of the species was undertaken, and along with other evidence collected, a feather was acquired.

"The discovery of the feather is a by-product of TWC's research and investment into the forests under its stewardship and reinforces the quality of processes the company follows as it develops its management systems.

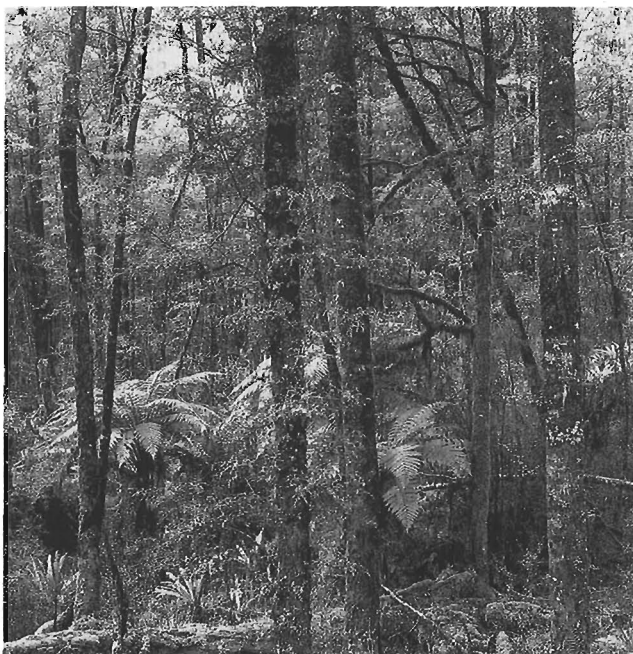
"It is an exciting, but apprehensive time as we wait for confirmation as to the origin of the feather. Nothing can be done



Slatey Creek, Paparoa selection single tree/small group beech extraction trial showing minimal damage. Stumps are tagged, and plunge cut, with urea applied to enhance breakdown, thus reducing suitability to pinhole brood.



Slatey Creek, Paparoa 0.5ha coupe. Coarse woody debris and 50% podocarp stems retained. Urea has also been applied to the area.



Waipuna production thinning trial showing stand interior following felling and extraction. 12% volume removed, 40-60 dbh.

until this happens, as it could well belong to another bird species.

"Whatever the outcome, all credit must go to Mr Buckingham and the small team that has worked on the project to date," Mr Hilliard said.

The feather is currently undergoing DNA testing to confirm absolutely whether it belongs to kokako. Even if confirmed, it will be an extraordinarily difficult conservation project since, if a bird does exist, a breeding pair would have to be successfully caught and almost certainly established in a predator-free environment.

Last confirmed reports of the South Island kokako were over 30 years ago. There have, however, been numerous unconfirmed reports over the last five years ranging from north-west Nelson to Stewart Island in the south, including Mount Aspiring National Park. All suggest the possible existence of the bird.

Conclusive evidence has been a frustratingly elusive goal for the small group of scientists who retained confidence in its existence, all of whom, along with the Department of Conservation (DOC) and TWC, were wary of the negative effects of any "false alarms".

By nature, the kokako has proven to be extremely evasive and calls can only be heard at certain times of the year. Approximately the size of a magpie, the South Island kokako differs from its North Island counterpart in that it has orange rather than blue wattles. Though it could be confused with a tui from a distance, it is considerably larger and has steel-grey plumage.

Dave Hilliard indicated that discovery of the feather came as no great surprise to Timberlands West Coast. "As we develop sustainable management programmes through other areas, there may well be more discoveries, for instance previously unknown or not-well-described insects. To date, we haven't discovered any rare and endangered plants but this may not be out of the question also as we get to know more about these forests.

Other research TWC is involved with includes looking at methods of bird predator control. Some studies have shown promising results for the protection of our native birds that when fully considered will be shared with officials whose role it is to look after our heritage.

"What we are seeing here is active conservation rather than preservation alone. TWC takes very seriously its responsibility towards international conventions on conservation and the recommendations of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment." Sid Ashton, Chief Executive of Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu, expressed Ngai Tahu's delight at the possibility of such an endangered



Waipuna production thinning trial – aerial vertical – following thinning.

bird existing within its rohe.

Mr Hilliard said: "What TWC is doing is a normal and natural part of managing resources on a sustainable basis. As a result the company may be able to provide New Zealand with a fleeting opportunity

to 'claw' back a previously thought extinct species. If confirmed, this discovery must surely serve as a 'wake-up' call to all New Zealand that investment in research and active management are the keys to protect rare and endangered species."

## Cabinet told DOC cutbacks affected ability

Conservation Minister Denis Marshall warned Cabinet last year that his department faced serious staff losses because of low pay rates and could not absorb further budget cuts.

In a letter to Finance Minister Bill Birch, obtained under the Official Information Act, Mr Marshall outlined his concerns for DOC, which had lost 280 permanent staff since 1991, 18 per cent of his budget since 1990 and faced a further 1.5 per cent cut this year.

"I have personally, for the third year running, gone line by line through the details of the Vote (conservation's core budget) and am convinced there is no room for further efficiency gains, nor opportunity to reallocate from other high-priority areas of the Vote," Mr Marshall said.

"For DOC, more so than any other department I am responsible for, my expertise is that baseline cuts in the name

of efficiency gains means reduced capacity and therefore performance in the field," Mr Marshall said.

A month later, DOC's viewing platform at Cave Creek collapsed, killing 14 people.

The ensuing Commission of Inquiry found the West Coast conservancy and the department in general to be seriously underfunded and understaffed.

"The lack of resources has given rise to a culture of doing more with less," the report said.

Mr Marshall had warned that DOC continued to "experience a serious increase in staff losses" caused by a number of factors – "specifically relatively low salaries and no pay increases since 1990".

**Alice Taylor**  
(Reprinted from The Evening Post)