

Southland “study trip”

Garth Cumberland and Malcolm Mackenzie.

“That’s the Hump”. The hardy souls from the Otago Southland Section were showing us our destination – away to the west across Te Waewae Bay – as we traveled north along State Highway 99 towards Tuatapere in what to North Islanders is the truly ‘deep south’.

‘The Hump’ is the Hump Ridge, which rises from sea level near the now abandoned 1920s sawmilling settlement of Port Craig to 1000m twenty kilometers due north. It marks the southeastern corner of Fiordland National Park and is pretty much the part of NZ nearest Antarctica from whence you can still see the verdant green of Southland to the northeast. And they’re building the Hump Track along it.

The ‘hardy souls’ were those regular mad buggars who have for the past 22 years arranged an NZIF “study trip” to investigate the state of health of the forest remnants in the more picturesque parts of the southern South Island.

We stopped the night at the Tuatapere Motel; this year five North Island impostors and seven members of Otago Southland section.

The motel owner ran virtually everything in Tuatapere. Consequently he proffered sustenance, shelter and enlightenment.

The ‘they’ who were building the track, he explained, were not DOC as we had first imagined, but a locally based Charitable Trust set up for the purpose. ‘They’, to their great credit, have taken it upon themselves to establish what will undoubtedly become a world-renowned tourist asset. A track to rival – and to take much of the burgeoning load off – the likes of Milford, Greenstone, Kepler and Hollyford.

Three million dollars is being raised. Two new huts are included; along with much ‘board-walking’ to meet very stringent resource consent conditions; which itself cost over \$200,000 to have defined.

The Hump Track will be effectively a three day triangular walk involving a day on the coast, a day tramping north uphill from sea level to 1000m and a day completing the triangle in an easterly direction back to the starting point at the Blue Cliffs Beach road end.

The Tuatapere cafe provided a great sustaining meal and the last beer.

That evening food supplies were divided equally and packs, which were already tightly filled and overweight, were repacked to accommodate for food for two nights.

It was early February; so the temperatures were not too bad at daybreak for the drive to the end of the road and the western extent of civilisation, at



On the beach of Te Waewae Bay at the beginning of the trip. Prominent members are (from left) Ted Dawson, Jim Smith, Richard Thum and John Spiers. [Garth Cumberland]

Blue Cliffs Beach. The first day involved cruising on the beach or tramping the four-wheel-drive track alongside the beach or a striding from sleeper to sleeper on the old tramway, for a total of 25kms.

Memorable highlights included Hector’s dolphins surfing the ‘left break’ and the ‘heritage’ remnants of the Port Craig settlement. The last part of a big ‘day one’ was westward from Port Craig to Percy Burn along the line of the 1920s bush tramway.

The tramway traversed comparatively easy contours and traversed numerous hand-filled culverts and five substantial gorges on wooden viaducts. The DOC and NZ Forest Service (remember it?) repaired some of the viaducts. Even though now only used by trampers they are awesome in size and scale. Their erection, back in 1920, out of Australian hardwood imported



Ted Dawson inspects an imploded boiler on the site of the sawmill at Port Craig. [Garth Cumberland]

and manhandled to the site – took some contemplating.

The second day was a comparatively easy rise up the Hump Ridge.

We had been given instructions on how to find the beginning of the new track which branched off the Waitutu Track. The initial 500m was not cut or marked well. This, to deter users until the entire track is ready. It was substantially unformed but mostly cut through second growth forest. We had the pleasure of making our way through a wonderful variety of forest types as the altitude increased – from 70 - 80 year old cut-over to virgin beech and rimu stands before the goblin-like environment of the higher altitude forest just below the bush-line.

Occasional natural limestone escarpments were climbed and afforded views in all directions. There were the easy contours of the Waitutu Forest to the west, the bleak seas of the southern ocean and the more homely vista east across to Blue Cliffs and Te Wae Wae Bay.

As the sub-alpine grasslands took over timber walkways under construction indicated that had we left our tramp a year we might have found it easier going. However we were privileged to precede the tourist hordes into this wilderness.

The team slept on the floor of a 'Portacom' which had been helicoptered in to shelter workers construct the adjacent timber walkways and a new Hump Hut. It being a holiday weekend the temporary accommodation was free for our use.

A kea skating on the roof next morning announced a good frost and, over Southland to the east, a ground level fog hiding the province from view.

The last day tramping out was downhill although less of the track had been cut and cleared. Accordingly we were waist deep in ladder fern – watching for track marker ribbons at eye height hanging in the trees and quite unable to concentrate on or see logs lying below the fern canopy. Crunch! However, the gradient was pretty gentle on aging knees so what's a little adversity.

As far as the 'study' was concerned – it proved possible to verify that the regeneration of native bush – following harvest in the 1920s – is in very good heart.

The contrast in vegetation types was quite outstanding. There cannot be many parts of



On the 'Hump', enjoying the view of Te Waewae Bay. [Garth Cumberland]

New Zealand where the bush line and sub alpine grasslands are within one days tramp of the coast. In other words there is, on the Hump Track, the opportunity to walk from coastal vegetation to sub alpine grassland over a mere twenty tramping kilometres and 1000 vertical metres of gentle gradient.



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