



# *Kārearea*

## *Protecting a southern land*

July 2021

## **Here we go again** Jane Young

Coal makes the largest single contribution to global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. And whether it's the International Energy Agency, the G7 leaders or the NZ Climate Change Commission, the message is the same: **Coal must go!** So why is the Southland District Council encouraging Bathurst Resources to build a new coal mine?

**L**ast April, environmentalists pricked up their ears at the news that coal mining expansion was once again planned for Southland. The Southland District Council (SDC) had granted New Brighton Collieries access for coal exploration to a council-owned forestry block. In short order, members of Coal Action Network Aotearoa (CANANZ), 350.org, Forest & Bird, Extinction Rebellion and the rest of the troops let it be known that proposals for new coal mines in Aotearoa New Zealand wouldn't be going unchallenged.

So what is New Brighton Collieries (NBC)? The name might be evocative of coal mining in days gone by, but NBC has in fact never mined a single lump of coal. It was set up in 2009 as one of the spider's web of L&M companies. NBC's only significant asset was the exploration rights to 658 hectares of land near Nightcaps, 60 km north of Invercargill.

Brash, young Australian company Bathurst Resources (Bathurst) moved into New Zealand in 2010 and snapped up a number of assets including the Nightcaps mine, rechristened Takitimu. Then, in 2015 it acquired NBC with its handy exploration permit, although the permit expired in September 2017. NBC/Bathurst, applied for a mining permit to be issued for the area, but that hasn't happened yet. In June 2020 Bathurst also applied to Zealand Petroleum and Minerals (NZPAM) for an exploration permit over the 553 ha that lies between the Takitimu mine and the NBC permit area.

No coal mine lasts for ever. After all, there's a reason why fossil fuels are described as non-renewable resources. Bathurst has continually expanded its Takitimu mine but can't legally do any New Brighton exploration work until it has all its ducks in a row – access, permit and resource consents (*see p2*). However, a *Stuff* article of 26 April 2021 'Plans for extension of Southland coal mine' refers to a report released under an OIA request in which a council manager Ashby Brown states that drilling indicates that there is an "economically minable deposit". Did this mean that Bathurst had done some exploratory work before access was granted?

The same article quotes SDC Mayor Gary Tong as saying, "We're going to hear from others, and the Government, who say we shouldn't be using fossil fuels. I'm on the side of the fence of the Ohai/Nightcaps community. We have to keep our communities alive."

"Jobs and growth" – that's the mantra always chanted by supporters of expanded coal mining. But a century of coal mining certainly hasn't brought sustainability to Nightcaps. On a 1–10 Index of Deprivation, in which the higher the score the greater the deprivation, the town scores 9, while nearby Ohai gets a 10. Most Takitimu mineworkers don't live anywhere near the mine that provides their well-paying jobs.

Another reason given for supporting a new mine at Nightcaps was that the coal was needed for local

Takitimu/Nightcaps mine *David Russell*



## Here we go again Cont from p1

industries. At a council meeting where the issue was discussed, some members were surprised to learn that most of the coal produced from the mine would actually be shipped up to Canterbury for use in Fonterra's giant milk-processing plants. At first glance that seems rather surprising, given that Bathurst's Canterbury mine is much closer to the factories, and that the company's 2020 annual report described it as having seen "solid results, with all operational targets met and financial targets exceeded". However, despite all the money that Bathurst had invested in the Canterbury mine, the shock announcement came last February that the mine would be closed by the middle of the year.

And the reason? According to acting CE Russell Middleton it was the "onerous, regulatory burden" of meeting the Resource Management Act. The company had been involved in a long-running battle with Selwyn District Council, which claimed that Bathurst only had consent to mine 20,000 tonnes of coal a year, as opposed to the 100,000 tonnes that the company freely admitted to having extracted. In addition, Bathurst had also been fined for numerous breaches during the previous five years involving run-off in local streams.

Coal mining is not a reliable source of employment, as seen during the debacle of Solid Energy's collapse. In 2014, after a protracted legal battle, Bathurst succeeded in opening the Escarpment mine on the Buller Plateau, along with the promise of lots of jobs. But coal prices nosedived, and a year later the mine was mothballed.

Bathurst has always been poised on a financial knife edge. It has been in the red for most of its existence,

and has only once made a (tiny) payout to shareholders. Most of the shares are held by Asian financial institutions. Apart from a 6.9% holding by a mixture of Kiwi shareholders, the only New Zealand owner is Talley's which has a 12.1% share in Bathurst and also has a one-third stake in BT Mining, the company that was set up with Bathurst to buy the lion's share of Solid Energy's assets. Yes, that's right. The Talley's that on its website claims to be, "Bringing you the best of New Zealand." That "best" includes seafood, vegetables and icecream, but oddly enough there's no mention of coal.

A major source of uncertainty for Bathurst is the long-awaited result of its appeal against the 2018 High Court Judgement, which found it liable to make a USD \$40m payment to L&M Coal Holdings Ltd. This arose from Bathurst's purchase of permits for the Escarpment mine from many-tentacled L&M, which came with a conditional \$40m performance payment that L&M claimed was due, but which Bathurst has refused to pay.



Environmental destruction for zero gain – Bathurst's Escarpment mine on the Buller Plateau Neil Silverwood

### Starting up a new coal mine isn't a simple business. Here are the bare basics of what you will need to do.

1. Apply for an exploration permit from NZPAM, or acquire a pre-owned one. Public consultation isn't required, but you'll need an acceptable plan for exploration work.
2. Get access approval from the land owner.
3. Obtain the necessary RMA resource consents from the local and regional councils. These give you permission to carry out activities that disturb the environment.
4. NZPAM may issue a mining permit once the exact nature and extent of the coal resource is determined, provided you have the money and the technical know-how needed to operate a mine.
5. An opencast coal mine causes a lot of environmental damage. New RMA consents will be needed, and usually your application will be notified, meaning that ordinary people can have a say. And they will.
6. Face the legal hurdles. Appeals may be lodged at various levels – the Environment Court, High Court, Court of Appeal or the Supreme Court.

The New Zealand Government may have declared a state of climate emergency, but the SDC doesn't seem to have grasped the fact that continuing to support a sunset industry that is doing active harm to our country and our planet is, to say the least, shortsighted. Of course they're not alone in this regard. As recently as 2016, CANA and other groups were bringing expert evidence to Waimate hearings in an attempt to drive home the folly of Fonterra's plans to construct new coal-fired boilers.

After intensive consultation, the Climate Change Commission He Pou a Rangi has recently published 418 pages of advice to the NZ Government. In order to do our fair share to try and keep global heating below 1.5 degrees, we need to get serious about reducing our emissions. Among the actions recommended by the commission is the elimination of coal from use in food processing before 2040. Coal use would need to decline at around 1.4 PJ per year to 2030 – the equivalent of converting one to two very large dairy processing plants away from coal each year. Of course dairy isn't the only food processing industry that uses coal, but it's by far the biggest, accounting for almost a third of New Zealand's domestic coal useage.

Nobody said it was going to be easy. But in the end there is no escaping from the statement that heads the Commission's report: ***Ināia tonu nei: the time is now.*** ■



# Maukahuka: Pest Free Auckland Island

Department of Conservation

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/our-work/maukahuka-pest-free-auckland-island/>

**F**ollowing the successful eradication of mice from Antipodes Island, DOC and Ngāi Tahu have completed an investigation into the feasibility of eradicating pigs, cats and mice from Auckland Island. The Auckland Islands lie 465 km south of the South Island, within the New Zealand subantarctic islands area. A World Heritage Site (1998), the islands contain some of the world's most extraordinary natural heritage and include some of the world's least modified islands.

We have a vision of New Zealand's subantarctic islands area thriving, free of mammalian pests.

## Why aren't the islands thriving?

- Feral pigs, cats and mice have inflicted severe ecological damage over the past 150–200 years.
- Pigs have devastated plant communities, greatly reduced seabird survival and recruitment, restricted understorey regeneration, and damaged soils.
- Of the 44 species of native birds that breed in the archipelago, only 12 persist on Auckland Island, and none of them are endemic to the island group.
- Pigs and cats have caused the local extinction of 32 native bird species, including the burrowing seabirds, which majorly disrupts nutrient cycling.
- Mice have altered the abundance and composition of invertebrate fauna, compete for food with native birds and pose a risk of future attacks on seabird chicks.



**The Maukahuka project** proposes to eradicate pigs, cats and mice from Auckland Island to help native flora and fauna to recover and thrive so it can be preserved.

The project is a huge challenge. Mice and pigs have never been eradicated on an island anywhere near this large, and eradication of cats has only been attempted on one larger island, in Western Australia.

A four-year feasibility study has concluded that, yes, it's technically feasible, but there needs to be further development of eradication tools to give the greatest possible chance of success. These tools would include thermal camera technology, improved helicopter bait bucket and automated image processing software. Then there are the less hitech, but just as important, requirements – cat detection dogs and their handlers.

Maukahuka will be a challenging and long term project. There have already been delays because of Covid. The isolation of this rugged site will make life tough for the conservation team, but will also make it easier to maintain pest-free status once that is achieved.

As the report concludes: *The wero of kaitiakitanga has been laid down to restore the mana of Auckland Island.*



White-headed petrel





# Introduced pests fuel climate crisis

**P**est control is about much more than protecting native wildlife by killing small, furry animals such as stoats and rats. A new Forest & Bird report gives a stark warning that ongoing damage by browsing pests causes native habitats to bleed stored carbon. *Protecting our Natural Ecosystems: Carbon Sinks* reveals that the West Coast's kāmahi-podocarp forests alone are presently bleeding 3.4 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> every year because of browsing by deer, goats, chamois and possums. The report also estimates that controlling plant-destroying pests – which also include tahr, pigs and wallabies – to the lowest possible levels would increase the carbon sequestration by native ecosystems by 8.4 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. That's equivalent to nearly 15% of New Zealand's 2018 net emissions.

Forest & Bird CE Kevin Hague points out that once pest animals were released into the wild and started chomping their way through forests, shrublands, and tussocklands, native ecosystems started to lose their



Inspecting deer chew marks at Lenz Reserve

## An added problem

There's little debate about the need to get rid of invasive predators such as mice or weasels, but when it comes to browsing animals it's a different story. Many recreational hunters and some tourist operators are bitterly opposed to any suggested eradication of destructive feral animals such as deer or pigs. In fact it's not unknown for pigs to be deliberately released into forests. In recent years, however, much of the controversy has arisen from Department of Conservation plans to cull the Himalayan tahr.

Tahr were introduced into the Southern Alps in 1904 to provide sport, especially for tourists, but cause major damage to vulnerable native plants. Tahr grazing can kill entire plants, and has been linked with decreases in snow tussock, changes in the composition of grasslands, and increases in bare ground. Large groups of tahr trample alpine vegetation and destroy the soil structure.

The 1993 'Himalayan Tahr Control Plan' stipulates that there should be a limit of 10,000 tahr within the tahr feral range, with zero density within national parks. But



Damage from pig rooting at Forest & Bird's Lenz Reserve in the Catlins

natural ability to lock in and store vast amounts of carbon. Kevin says, "The range of browsing pests are out of control across the country with both deer and goat numbers increasing significantly over the past decade. When native forests collapse, huge volumes of carbon dioxide are released as trees die and rot. By eating seedlings and killing young trees these introduced pest animals also consume future generations of forest, and our future carbon sinks.

"Acting now to turn around the destruction caused by browsing pests would restore natural carbon sinks and protect native plants and wildlife. This work needs to be over and above New Zealand's climate commitments to eliminate fossil fuel emissions and substantially cut agricultural emissions as part of our fair share of global efforts to help keep warming below 1.5°. It could even help make Aotearoa carbon positive within a few decades."

We need increased control, coordination and research to reduce browsing pests and to restore the carbon sequestration of native ecosystems. "Healthy native habitats are our biggest ally in the fight against climate change. Also, farmland that is currently being retired and allowed to regenerate as well as newly planted permanent native forest sinks will need protection from browsing mammals too or all that work will be wasted."



Tahr in the Southern Alps DOC

in practice, numbers have been allowed to explode until by 2018 there was an estimated population of 35,000 on public conservation land alone. DOC staff and helicopter pilots tasked with enforcing the statutory plan by culling the animals faced threats from enraged hunters. Nevertheless, in 2020 DOC culled more than 7,400 tahr, which sounds like a lot until you do the reproductive maths for the remaining population. Recreational hunters won't be short of targets any time soon.

Pity about the environment though. ■

# And some good news



Black petrel in the Hauraki Gulf  
Ron Knight

## Transparency at sea – cameras on boats

Oceans and Fisheries Minister David Parker has announced plans to roll out cameras across the bulk of the inshore fishing fleet. This means inshore fishers using methods that harm protected wildlife like long lining, trawling, and set netting will have cameras to monitor catches and practices. Forest & Bird CE Kevin Hague says, "Minister Parker's announcement is great news for Aotearoa New Zealand's seabirds and marine mammals, and is important for the industry to re-establish trust with New Zealanders. Too often what happens at sea is out of sight and out of mind. There is a chronic, widespread problem of illegal misreporting that needs to end." Areas with endangered species including the habitats of Hector's dolphins, Antipodean and Gibson's albatross, black petrels, and hoiho penguins will also be covered by camera monitoring.

<https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO2106/S00148/finally-transparency-at-sea-cameras-on-boats.htm>

## A win for tarakihi

Tarakihi stock of the entire eastern coast of the country has been fished down to just 15% of their natural population. And the good news? Forest & Bird has won a High Court legal decision confirming tarakihi



catch limit decisions must put sustainability before commercial interests of the fishing industry. The court found that Stuart Nash, the former minister for

Oceans and Fisheries, shouldn't have taken commercial fisheries input ahead of the advice of his officials. The ruling means the minister will be required to first assess the biology of the fish and the requirements for sustainability before taking into account economic factors and the industry's commercial interests.

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/125497786/court-strikes-down-ministers-tarakihi-catchlimit-decision>

## Fish dumping ban

In 2016, Operation Achilles, a Ministry of Primary Industries report on fish dumping, described serious, widespread offending in the South Island. Between 20–100 percent of some quota fish were being discarded every time a net was pulled up. That's bad enough, but fishing crews have also been able to dump fish without breaking the law. Current discard rules mean commercial skippers can return quota species that are below legal size to the sea – the problem is most of these fish don't survive. There will now be a review of the relevant legislation, resulting in it becoming compulsory for all fish caught, regardless of size, to be brought back to port. Some boats now use Precision Seafood Harvesting technology, but an independent report states that although there is some evidence to verify lower mortality of unintended catch, science-based evidence didn't support claims of survivability for all the species tested.

<https://www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/44356-Precision-Seafood-Harvesting-Programme-Evaluation-Report>



Amaltal Apollo Greenpeace

## Talley's brought to book

Last November, Talley's was found guilty of bottom trawling in the Hikurangi Marine Reserve. It's not the first time the *Amaltal Apollo* has been brought to account over illegal trawling – the other case involves trawling in a Tasman Sea marine protected area. Greenpeace

## And from the other side of the world ...

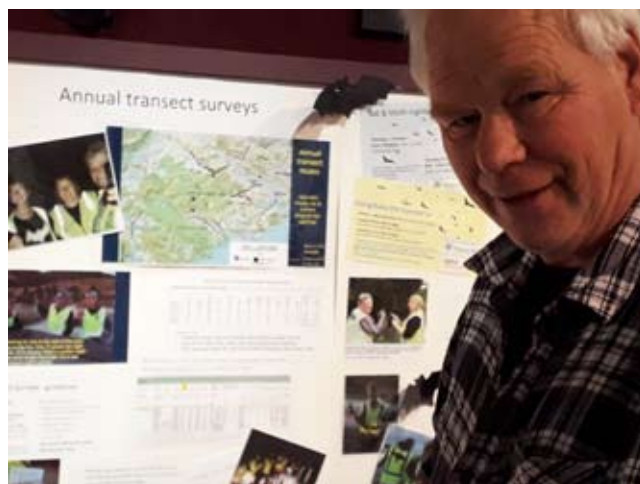


seppo.net

Finnish cartoonist Seppo Leinonen



# Conservation in Catlins-Clutha



## LOCAL CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

- South Otago Forest & Bird members talk about bird conservation with students at St Mary's School, Milton.
- Weeding day with Forest & Bird at Otanomomo Scientific Reserve.
- Students at Stirling School busy planting a restoration area near the school.
- Catlins Bats on the Map exhibition at the Owaka Museum



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### ***Kārearea: protecting a southern land***

Contributions welcome. Copy for Sep due on 20 Aug. Editor Jane Young: janejimyoung@slingshot.co.nz

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