

# Significant Natural Areas and Timberlands West Coast production forests

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Published by  
Department of Conservation  
Head Office, PO Box 10-420  
Wellington, New Zealand

This report was commissioned by West Coast Conservancy

ISSN 1171-9834

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Reference to material in this report should be cited thus:

Miller, C., 1999

Significant Natural Areas and Timberlands West Coast production forests. *Conservation Advisory Science Notes No. 241*, Department of Conservation, Wellington.

Keywords: Significant Natural Areas, production forestry, habitat protection, Resource Management Act

# 1. Introduction

- On 20 April 1998 Cabinet directed the Department of Conservation to work with other agencies in establishing interim provisions for the beech proposals consistent with current Significant Natural Area (SNA) requirements (CAB(98) MI 3/5B(2)). SNAs can be any of those "matters of national importance" specified in section 6 of the Resource Management Act 1991, but for the purpose of this exercise are taken to refer to the areas of "significant indigenous vegetation" in section 6c.
- The Director-General of Conservation then required, 26 June 1998, the West Coast Conservancy to work with Councils and other parties to reach agreement on District Plans and their provisions for indigenous forestry, in particular the provision of appropriate management of significant natural areas within the Timberlands West Coast production forests. Specifically the Department was to ensure that the three West Coast District Plans had provisions for the identification of SNAs, that SNAs on Timberlands West Coast (TWC) land were mapped, and that techniques for the appropriate protection of significant natural areas were identified.
- The Ministers for the Environment, Conservation, and Agriculture and Forestry have appealed to the Environment Court requesting amendments to the Buller District Plan, specifically recognising and providing for SNAs under section 6c of the Resource Management Act for 'West Coast Accord Forests'.
- The West Coast Conservancy is entering discussions with the local and territorial authorities, and TWC, with regard to these issues.

## 2. Section 6c and the Resource Management Act 1991

Section 6c of the Resource Management Act 1991 requires all persons exercising powers and functions under it to recognise and provide for the "protection of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna". The intent of this provision is to *achieve the purpose of the RMA*.

The purpose of the RMA (s 5) is to promote the sustainable management of natural and physical resources. This provides for use of natural resources as long as (a) the reasonably foreseeable needs of future generations can be met, (b) the life-supporting capacity of ecosystems is safeguarded, and (c) any adverse effects of activities on the environment are avoided, remedied, or mitigated.

Therefore it is important to note that the provision for the protection of SNAs is not the same as in the Reserves Act 1977, National Parks Act 1980, or the Conservation Act 1987. This point appears to be being missed by many. Section 6c is not about obtaining *more* reserves, it is about sustainable management of natural resources.

*Protection* of SNAs identified under the RMA *does not* preclude use of natural resources within an SNA, as long as that use does not impact adversely upon the values for which the area is considered significant. The issue is sustainable management, not reservation. Therefore there are a greater range of opportunities for protection, which may include reservation of parts or all of an area, if deemed desirable and agreement of all parties is reached, or use and management which provide for the avoidance, remedying or mitigating of potential adverse effects.

### 3. Significant Natural Areas and Timberlands West Coast Ltd

Recently the Department of Conservation undertook a desktop, coarse-scale, evaluation of all TWC forests (indigenous and exotic) gazetted for production, on behalf of the Office of Treaty Settlements. This assessment ascribed high, medium, or low priority for protection, but showed that all of the indigenous forests managed by Timberlands West Coast, and possibly parts of the exotic estate, can be regarded as significant indigenous vegetation or significant habitat of indigenous fauna.

Therefore I suggest that, rather than seek to identify significant areas within the forests, all of the indigenous forests managed by TWC should be regarded as SNAs, as per section 6c of the RMA. Then, because these forests are gazetted for production, the issue becomes not one of trying to identify further reserves, but managing these forests for timber harvest while safeguarding the life-supporting capacity of the forests for indigenous fauna and flora. There is also a further responsibility to avoid, remedy or mitigate any adverse effects of timber harvest (including, for example, road building). This is the intent of the Resource Management Act.

Management measures to achieve the intent of the RMA may include the setting aside of certain key functional areas (e.g. riparian zones, wetlands, podocarp stands in beech forest) from timber extraction, while extracting only a certain proportion of a range of age classes of trees over time. Mitigation measures could also include things such as pest control or the active restoration of degraded sites. It is my understanding that TWC is seeking to manage the production forests allocated to it in a way that achieves the intent of the RMA, and specifically addresses issues such as these within its forest management plans.

The West Coast Conservancy of the Department of Conservation is involved in ongoing consultation with TWC, as per its advocacy responsibilities in the Conservation Act 1987, and is actively seeking to ensure that indigenous biodiversity values are protected in production forests through information sharing and collaborative research and monitoring.

## 4. Conclusion

The Department of Conservation has been directed by Cabinet to engage in a process of assisting District Councils in identifying Significant Natural Areas on the West Coast, for inclusion in District Plans. The directive seeks to identify these in Timberlands West Coast forests as a priority.

It is my contention that many people are confusing the requirement for identification and protection of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna, as per section 6c of the Resource Management Act, with the reservation of areas as required by the Reserves Act, National Parks Act, or Conservation Act. Given that the forests managed by Timberlands West Coast were gazetted for production following agreement reached during the West Coast Accord process, then the objective should be to ensure that the intent of the Resource Management Act is met in these forests. The Department of Conservation has a key advocacy role here.