

Power Play

'The...project poses New Zealanders once more with the problem of where to strike a balance between development and preservation – if indeed a balance is possible. Many feel that too much plumbing has been done on nature to accept more without the strongest justification.'

With a spate of recent hydro dam proposals, you might be forgiven for thinking these words were written recently. But they date from the *New Zealand Herald* on 29 December 1979, at the height of the campaign to save the Motu River from hydro dams. Whitewater enthusiasts including well-known paddlers John Mackay and Graeme Egarr launched a highly-effective campaign to save the Motu, supported by FMC. Although, prior to the 1970s, the Motu was a relatively obscure, little-known river, they so effectively publicised the river in books and articles that hundreds of people took to their rafts and kayaks to experience the place for themselves. Awareness of the river's exceptional, remote and wild nature was raised to a national level. Later the Motu became the country's first 'Wild and Scenic River' and received the highest form of protection for a river, a Water Conservation Order.

The hydro engineers of the 1970s probably got a shock at the opposition to their intentions for places like the Motu River and Lake Manapouri. After all, in the preceding decades, New Zealanders were damming rivers left, right and centre with hardly a whiff of protest.

As New Zealand's population and industries have grown, our energy demands have increased, and during past winters we've often faced an electricity shortage. Where will future supplies come from? In these carbon-conscious times, several power companies are building wind farms. Certainly we need to increase the proportion of renewable electricity we generate; burning coal to make power is both wasteful and

inexcusable in the context of climate change. Little wonder then, that State Owned Enterprise Meridian Energy, which prides itself as a leader in renewable power generation, is looking at hydro again.

But how renewable is hydro? Meridian has plans to dam one of the West Coast's largest rivers, the Mokihinui, which flows into the Tasman Sea north of Westport. Recently they submitted a resource consent application to build an 85-metre high, 300-metre wide dam that would flood the lower Mokihinui River for some 14 kilometres upstream (between Welcome and Specimen Creeks – almost as far as Mokihinui Forks), and inundate some 330 hectares of riverbed and native forest. The dam would take three years to construct, and involve significant widening of existing roads. As well, 29 kilometres of power cables and poles would need to be put up over the Stockton Plateau and Waimangaroa area, which although modified by opencast coal mining, also has high landscape and ecological values.

Not only would the dam destroy an important, if under-used, whitewater river (see Quentin Duthie's article this issue) but it would affect blue duck and long-finned eel habitat, and forever alter what is a wild, natural landscape. A national assessment of rivers has recognised the Mokihinui as one of several nationally significant rivers on the West Coast, notable for its freshwater biodiversity.

What does an SOE like Meridian do to convince people that a hydro lake on the Mokihinui is a good idea? It downplays the area's recreational and ecological values, and offers bribes and sweeteners. To understand the issue fully, readers need some background about the Mokihinui catchment.

The Mokihinui Catchment

The Mokihinui River drains a great chunk of country to the south-west of Kahurangi National

Park. While the table-like, limestone expanses known as the the Thousand Acres Plateau and Hundred Acres Plateau in its headwaters are relatively well-known to trampers, most of the catchment has a more remote, back-country character and sees little foot traffic. Several branches of the Mokihinui converge at a large, open area known as Mokihinui Forks. The Hemphill and Mokihinui North Branch are particularly challenging terrain, country bristling with gorges and ravaged by slips from numerous past earthquakes. Larrikins Creek, which drains the 100-acre Plateau, is easier tramping country, while the Mokihinui South Branch has a rough back-country route up to a saddle that links with the Lyell, a tributary of the Buller. Gold prospectors frequented the area between the 1870s and 1920s, when pack tracks were constructed to connect the gold diggings at Lyell with those in the Mokihinui.

DOC's West Coast Conservation Management Strategy classifies the Mokihinui headwaters as a 'remote experience zone'. In other words, it's a back-country area with few tracks and huts; you need a certain amount of experience to venture into it. It's part of the 'recreation opportunities spectrum' in the north-west South Island that also includes the Tasman Wilderness in adjacent Kahurangi National Park.

Downstream of the Forks, where the Mokihinui tumbles through its wild gorge, the old gold miners' pack track sidles along the true left for some 15 kilometres. Reaching Mokihinui Forks Hut from the road end near Seddonville involves a reasonably demanding full-day tramp, with several slips (one nicknamed 'Suicide Slip') requiring care. Of the valley Derek Shaw wrote: 'The river gorges and tall podocarp-beech forest in the Mokihinui are particularly outstanding.' While most of the track is definitely back-country, the first section, as far as Rough and Tumble Creek, is still benched and suitable for families.

Certainly the nature of the track ensures it doesn't get extensive use, a fact that Meridian is exploiting to gain support for the hydro proposal. A hydro lake would inundate over 60% of the

existing track. As a sweetener, Meridian has offered to reconstruct the track through the gorge to Mokihinui Forks Hut, making it suitable for less experienced trampers. They've aligned themselves with a local group, the Mokihinui-Lyell Backcountry Trust, which is advocating for a shared-use, four-day, 58-kilometre track with three huts, linking Seddonville with Lyell. The trust plans it to be a heritage trail dubbed 'The Old Ghost Road' that celebrates the gold mining history of the area.

With the Heaphy Track still off-limits to mountain bikers, a multi-day, shared-use track has considerable merit. The trust proposes to raise money for building two new huts, but these would be managed and owned by DOC. Meridian also points out that the hydro lake would expand recreation opportunities by

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allowing kayakers or a water taxi. In addition, they have offered to partially offset the impacts of inundation by instigating a pest-trapping regime to improve habitat for native species, and relocate some of the historic relics to sites beside the new track.

Meridian representatives and Mokihinui-Lyell Backcountry Trust member Susan Cook presented these options to the FMC AGM in June. You can see where they are going here. Try to mitigate ecological impacts, reinstate the track lost to inundation...go even further and promote new recreational opportunities.

But look harder and these are smokescreens. Yes, a multi-day, shared-use heritage-themed track is a worthy concept. But it doesn't require a hydro reservoir. Indeed, a concrete dam and artificial lake would diminish the wild nature of what would be the most spectacular part of the track. Sure, the reservoir would create flat-water canoeing and boating opportunities, even the possibility of a water-taxi service to Mokihinui Forks. However, as the FMC submission opposing the Meridian's plan states: 'But these are contrived, engineered and available at other sites.'

Sure, interpretation panels explaining the area's history would be educational, but what about the loss of historic sites and relics – like the old Rough and Tumble Bridge – that can't

be relocated? Sure, trapping programmes would enhance habitat for some species in the area surrounding the reservoir, but these would not realistically compensate for the loss of forest and river habitat. Sure, hydro is a renewable resource on one level – but what is the carbon imprint of so many thousands of tonnes of concrete, the loss of 330 hectares of forest, and the emissions from three years of construction? And all that for 65-85 megawatts of power.

Yes, New Zealand's energy demands are growing. Yes, we need more renewable sources of power. But if we say yes to destroying a whitewater river like the Mokihinui, if we let ourselves become seduced by bribes, what are we inviting? More dams, more wild rivers lost, more acquiescence to the lie that we can continue unabated with economic growth and resource consumption.

The current energy crisis should be a wake-up call, not a call for more dams. We can't continue to make bloated demands that are beyond the Earth's capacity to meet. It is time for restraint, for energy efficiency and for saying no.

Shaun Barnett

Postscript: Grateful thanks go to adventurer and professional photographer Graham Charles, for the use of his photographs in this issue, including the cover. For more on Graham and his photography, visit www.imagematters.co.nz and www.adventurephilosophy.co.nz



Mokihinui means 'giant raft', probably a reference to the flax-stalk vessels Maori employed to cross significant waterways like the Mokihinui. Synthetic materials have replaced flax stalks, and recreation has superceded necessity for these modern-day rafters on the Mokihinui. Photo: Graham Charles/Image Matters

