

# Rivers, Wild and Free

by Quentin Duthie

The Federated Mountain Clubs has a proud tradition of advocacy for the places that make recreation in New Zealand special, from mountaintops to rainforest, from wilderness to popular walks.



One type of landscape we sometimes take for granted – but value and enjoy as much as any other – is our wild river landscapes. Rivers are central to our identity as New Zealanders, to the land we know and love, and to our recreation – be it with boat, boots or rod. From the Motu to the Landsborough, our wild rivers also form part of New Zealand's '100% Pure' international reputation. Take for instance, the recent surge of kayaking interest in the rivers of the West Coast, now recognised as one of the world's great whitewater destinations. New Zealand is also renowned for its protection of rivers, but this impression is misleading.

The New Zealand conservation movement, with FMC to the forefront, crystallised in the 1970s through major campaigns to save wild water landscapes, particularly the Lake Manapouri and Clyde Dam campaigns. The campaigns were only partially successful: while the worst was avoided, both the Clutha River and Lake Manapouri were developed.

In its scale and nationwide nature, the battle to save Lake Manapouri was largely unprecedented. Crucially, it also brought conservation, recreation and hunting advocacy groups together to fight for a common cause: Forest and Bird, FMC and the Deerstalkers put aside differences to speak with one voice. The

Clyde campaign added professionals, whitewater enthusiasts and acclimatisation societies (now known as Fish & Game) to create a force greater than the sum of its parts.

A lesser known but more successful campaign was the 1970s one to save the Motu River, one of the North Island's most important wilderness whitewater rivers. There were proposals for two or more dams that would have destroyed the river's integrity and one of the best multi-day whitewater trips in the country. The NZ Canoeing Association and FMC fought against the dam proposals, and the campaign ultimately led to the 1981 Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation. The Motu became New Zealand's first 'Wild and Scenic River', and in 1984 the first river with a Water Conservation Order (WCO). The successful campaign remains *the* significant landmark in the conservation of wild rivers.

But even today, 25 years later, we have only 15 WCOs. Surely there are more than 15 wild rivers and lakes in New Zealand that deserve maximum protection? Look at that another way: would we be happy to settle for all but these 15 to be dammed and abstracted? Of course not. Trampers, fishers and kayakers alike treasure all our remaining wild rivers.

Even those 15 rivers and lakes with WCOs are not safe. Embryonic proposals exist to resurrect

Above: The upper Waitaha River, West Coast. A proposal for a hydro dam exists for the lower Waitaha's Morgan Gorge. Photo: Shaun Barnett/Black Robin Photography

## WCO Legislation in a Nutshell

the old dam plans for the Motu; the Rakaia and Rangitata have increasing irrigation pressure downstream of their respective WCOs; the Grey regularly has cows walking around in it; Meridian has eyes on the Mohaka for a hydro-dam; and the Buller WCO is continually under threat.

Take the Buller. After a long, 15-year campaign, the Buller gained its WCO status in 2001. Flowing from two national parks (Nelson Lakes and Kahurangi), the Buller is a hugely important for its recreational whitewater values, and is the focus of a growing tourism industry based on river recreation. However, only recently the WCO was defended (successfully – with much effort and money) from an application to suspend it and use the Gowan tributary for hydro. But right now there are more applications for hydro-schemes on the nearby Matiri, Matakitaiki and Maruia tributaries.

Clearly, despite current legislation, and despite our history of protection, many of our remaining wild rivers face threats. Every river dammed for power is one less river unmodified and free. Every river modified is one more wild landscape lost.

With so many rivers already converted to hydro generation and agricultural use, we have a finite number left. And the pressure to sacrifice more is rising rapidly. Unless we arrest this slide, our grandchildren may be left to defend the last wild river in New Zealand. Such a claim may seem melodramatic, but it is not without precedent. Tasmania has a similar latitude and climate to New Zealand, with a post-glacial and riverine topography. It once had numerous wild rivers running from mountains to sea. Incremental damming of Tasmania's rivers throughout the 20th century, including the loss of jewels like the rare pink quartzite beach of Lake Pedder, led to a proposal to dam the last major unobstructed wild river – the Franklin. Tasmania, indeed Australia, suddenly woke up to the finality of what was being lost.

If we do not engage in active protection of our remaining wild rivers, New Zealand could end up like Tasmania. Damming a wild river is irreversible – we can't make a modified river wild again. You can drain the water from a dam, but the river is forever altered; while

According to Les Molloy in *New Zealand's Wilderness Heritage* (2007) a Water Conservation Order first became possible in 1981 following the 'Wild and Scenic Rivers' amendment to the 1967 Water and Soil Conservation Act. The Motu River was the first test case for the new legislation, and in 1984 became the first New Zealand River with a WCO, protecting its entire 115-kilometre length – from source to sea – and all its tributaries. In 1991, the Resource Management Act (RMA) became the overarching legislation for creating a WCO.

The Ministry for the Environment administers the RMA. The following summary comes from their website ([www.mfe.govt.nz](http://www.mfe.govt.nz)):

'Any person may apply to the Minister for the Environment for a WCO. Orders may be applied over rivers, lakes, streams, ponds, wetlands, or aquifers, and can cover freshwater or geothermal water. If granted, a WCO can restrict or prohibit water 'takes', discharges and other uses of the water.

'WCOs can be used to preserve that natural state or protect characteristics such as:

- the water body's value as a habitat or fishery
- its wild and scenic nature
- its value for recreational, historic, spiritual, cultural or scenic purposes.

'A water body may also hold particular significance for Maori.' New Zealand rivers and lakes with a WCO include: Motu River (1984), Rakaia River (1988), Lake Wairarapa (1989), Manganuioteao River (1989), Lake Ellesmere (1990), Ahuriri River (1990), Grey River (1991), Rangitikei River (1993), Kawarau River (1997), Mataura River (1997), Buller River (2001), Mohaka River (2004), Motueka River (2004), Rangitata River (2006), Oreti River (2008). FMC is currently supporting a proposed WCO for the Hurunui River.

water is renewable (with ongoing rain), a wild river landscape cannot be renewed.

Which brings us to the present. In April, representatives of conservation, recreation and hunting groups met to take stock of this situation, find solutions and build strength in unity as in the Manapouri, Motu and Clyde campaigns. A new Wild Rivers campaign has begun, with FMC again to the forefront. Expect to hear more on this campaign including how New Zealand can meet its energy needs without sacrificing wild rivers, and practical ideas for how you can get involved.

Our remaining wild rivers need the same protection as our national parks – together, we can make this happen.