

Hokitika Wild Food Festival
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First quarter

WILD WEST COAST FORESTS

The West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand is known for its geographical diversity and dynamic geological structures. The landscape has been sculpted over millennia by glaciers and earthquakes, and the Southern Alps have been folded like origami by the force of the movement of tectonic plates. In 2010 the 50th Anniversary of Westland Tai Poutini National Park was celebrated. This 'Turf to Surf' park is known as 'Glacier Country', but few people understand the significance of the lowland temperate rainforests or the national campaign that was fought to protect them.



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New Zealand detached from the supercontinent Gondwana 80 million years ago and set sail on its evolutionary adventure. Trees and birds developed unique physiological distinctions in a relatively predator-free land, and many haven't changed since the time of the dinosaurs. Before human intervention the only mammal was a short-tailed bat that had flown across the oceans. Today the lowland 'Goblin Forest' on the West Coast is an enveloping entanglement where you can still feel the magic of lingering prehistoric ghosts.

After the glaciers receded, the podocarp hardwoods were spread by bird-ingested seeds which were deposited across the lowland river terraces wrapped in a parcel of 'fertiliser'. The kahikatea (named the white pine by early settlers), loves the swampy flood plains and can live for five hundred years. Growing up to sixty metres, they are New Zealand's tallest native tree species and even inspired Peter Jackson's 'Ents'- the fictional race of tree people in the "Lord of The Rings".

The early settlers waged war against the forests: three hundred year old trees fell to timber mills

and farmers' 'matchbox' land management. Kahikatea swampland was seen as an unproductive wasteland that needed to be drained, tamed and cultivated.

Forestry on the West Coast began in the 1860's and by the 1890's was a boom industry. Before cardboard, kahikatea was used for butter boxes as it wouldn't taint the milk products. In the 1940's it was so precious to the New Zealand economy the government prohibited its export. The rest of the West Coast's accessible forests were used to build everything from houses through to timber supports in coalmines. By 1959 over 89,000 hectares of forest had been devastated and a further 2,000 hectares were being destroyed every year. In the North Island 98% of kahikatea forests had been felled or burned and the prevailing view that 'there is plenty more forest down South' seemed entrenched.

In 1975 the conservation debate over the West Coast lowland forests flared into life. In an effort to preserve jobs and the local economy, the Forestry Service tried new 'scientific methods.'

Selective logging, strip felling and the planting of exotic trees came into vogue. The West Coast sawmills were the heartbeat of many towns and arguments between the 'Coasters' and Greenies' were heated and bitter.

In 1981 the irreplaceable scientific value of the lowland forests was formally realised and a forestry moratorium was placed on native trees. Many Westland milling blocks became part of the Westland Tai Poutini National Park. The battle for the hardwoods was validated on a world scale in 1990 when UNESCO created Te Wahi Pounamu World Heritage Area. The founding documents made references to the "dinosaur forests... an outstanding example of a major stage of the earth's evolutionary history.... the Southern Ark."

Thanks to the vision of a handful of scientists and conservation activists the West Coast native forest assets are the last stronghold for podocarp biodiversity, and these unique lowland forests have been protected for our own descendants and further generations of visitors.