

TODEA BARBARAMarjorie Seddon

At the end of January, Elizabeth Bowie and I, while holidaying in the North, were fortunate enough to find 3-4 clumps of the now rare and endangered Todea barbara - "that living fossil" or "dramatic link with Mesozoic times" as it has been designated.

For those who know Todea superba and Todea hymenophylloides only, Todea barbara comes as a distinct surprise, for it is a fern with leathery, hard foliage - the only similarity being the slightly narrow, feather-like shape of the fronds. Perhaps the dissimilarity can be understood when one reads in an article written by Lucy M. Cranwell in 1937 that Todea barbara belongs to the family Osmundaceae which is represented by two genera - Todea, with one species, and the very closely related Leptopteris, with hymenophylloides and superba, both large and beautiful ferns of membranous texture. Bruce Hamlin's "Native Ferns" published in 1963 explains in the index that the names he gives in roman type (e.g. Leptopteris superba) are those currently accepted as the correct names. They are used in Allan's "Flora of New Zealand" Vol. 1. These names are used in Hamlin's book with the "old names" or synonyms given in italics in the index as reference (e.g. Todea superba).

While the two Leptopteris are endemic and widely distributed in moist forests of New Zealand, the Todea is found only sparingly, in areas north of the Bay of Islands. Cheeseman in 1925 says "It is abundant in open gullies from North Cape to Mangonui and from thence, more sparingly, south to Whangaroa."

In 1937 Lucy Cranwell found it "in comparative abundance on Orangi" (the second largest island of the Poor Knights group) and growing locally, in a variety of situations - on sunny but sheltered slopes in fine fern tussock amongst pohutukawas, other ferns and second storey plants such as elicystus ramiflorus, Pseudopanax lessonii, Macropiper excelsum &c - or on poor rock amongst crumbly, greyish-white boulders and exposed to strong winds and sunlight - or else on steep, shaded slopes.

Generally speaking it has been considered a plant of gumland gullies and hollows. E.B. and I found it in a narrow ditch that had been left undisturbed when cultivators moved in to prepare this former gumland for pine plantations. Later, Vic Hensley of Northland found more clumps in the same locality, on land as yet uncultivated. On learning that AHI were planning to extend the pine forests to this next area he set about trying to get these Todeas protected for, sadly, it is the advance of economic development that has caused this handsome fern to become one of New Zealand's endangered species. And yet, in the 1963 edition of Crookes and Dobbie one may read that "Todea barbara seems in little danger of extinction. Its deeply growing substantial rhizome, thickly covered with adventitious rootlets, enables it to flourish undeterred in the face of repeated burnings." But this was before the day of the giant cultivator!

S. Since this article was written, V.H. has reported to E.B. that AHI have agreed to set aside an area free from development for the protection of the Todeas.