

News

BSO submission on proposed Mt Watkin/Hikaroroa Reserve

Robyn Bridges & Allison Knight

Our recent field trip to Mt Watkin (p13) was a delight – seldom-seen upland native plants, spectacular lichen-covered rock glaciers, and fabulous views of rural North Otago. We looked down from the tussock grassland and shrubland into the forested gully of the north branch of the Waikouaiti, which is still home to the stately podocarps such as kahikatea, matai, rimu, and totara that used to clothe this land. A herd of goats came out to browse the shrubs at the foot of the peak and we were very disturbed to realise that these irreplaceable remnants of once-widespread indigenous vegetation had no protection from browsing by wild or domestic animals. No wonder the *Gingidia montana* has retreated to the least accessible rock crevices. Another concern was that we found 2 species of invasive *Hieracium* that were becoming established amongst the native tussock grasses.

So when the Mt Watkin Working Party invited us to their next meeting we went to find out more. The area has an interesting history. The local Maori called the imposing volcanic plug Hikaroroa, and regarded it as their sentinel. In 1894 approximately 2000 acres of land at Mt Watkin was set aside by an Act of Parliament as endowment land for recreational purposes in the then Hawkesbury district. Around 1913 more than half the original endowment was partitioned off for farming, leaving 900 acres, which were subject to a rolling farm lease. Now only 500 acres are left with the original native vegetation.

As far back as 1986 a report from the Botany Division of DSIR recommended protection of the indigenous vegetation. It noted that it included the best and largest of the very few remaining examples of podocarp forest in all of coastal Otago today. Since then numerous groups have supported the call for a Mt Watkin Reserve, including the Department of Conservation, the Otago Tree Society, and the Geological Society of New Zealand. The Mt Watkin Working Party even commissioned a management report, with boundary agreements and estimates of fencing costs, which was prepared by Wildland Consultants at no cost to the Dunedin City Council, who now manage what is left of the Mt Watkin endowment land. This year the council has responded by commissioning another vegetation report.

When we reported back to the last BSO committee meeting we were urged to put in a submission to the LTCCP Annual Plan, and to speak to it, which we did. You may have seen the report by Allison Rudd in the Otago Daily Times, 16 May. She thought it was such an important issue that it should be followed up with a full-page feature in the ODT. We think it is important, too. There are many features at Mt Watkin that are rare, vulnerable and irreplaceable, and if we sit back and do nothing they may continue to be eroded away. So we hope that you, the members, will support us in pressing for the Council to act rapidly towards forming a reserve to protect what is left of the indigenous vegetation at Mt Watkin before it disappears altogether.

Please, write letters, talk to people and groups, and let us know if you have any additional information that could be used in the feature page or by the Mt Watkin Working Party. For instance, are there native invertebrates that are important for pollination, and native birds essential for seed germination or transport? A full copy of our submission is on the BSO noticeboard and our web page. You can get more information from Robyn or Allison, contact details inside back page.



Ian Radford and Allison Knight enjoy helping Eve clamber up a lichen covered rock glacier towards the top of Mt Watkin.



View from the upper slopes of Mt Watkin down a vegetation gradient from upland tussock grassland through native shrubland to lowland forest.

Photos by Robyn Bridges