A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE VEGETATION OF THE WAIHOPAI RESERVE, INVERCARGILL

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In 1844 the surveyor Frederick Tuckett described the Invercargill region as "a mere bog and unfit for habitation". The land bordering the New River Estuary and the lower reaches of the Waihopai River was certainly swampy, but most of the future town site was covered with thick bush. Today only one substantial area of this bush remains. The Waihopai Reserve, or Thomsons Bush as it is popularly known, covers an area of 33 hectares and is only three kilometres from the centre of Invercargill.

For many years the Waihopai Reserve was preserved and maintained by the family of John Turnbull Thomson, Chief Surveyor for the Province of Otago, and being close to the town it was a popular picnicking and swimming place. In 1912 approximately 12 ha were taken under the compulsory provisions of the Public Works Act and the land vested as a scenic reserve. Later a further 21 ha were purchased and the whole area was designated as a scenic and recreation reserve. The western boundary was planted with Pinus radiata for shelter, although it is doubtful whether that was the wisest thing to do. Later, roads, paths and a picnic area were formed and for many years it proved to be a popular area. In 1963 the Invercargill City Council, which controlled the area, requested that the scenic reserve be revoked and accordingly the Waihopai Reserve was gazetted as a recreation reserve.

The reserve is situated along the northern bank of the Waihopai River and it is bisected in a north/south direction by Queen's Drive. The portion lying to the east of Queen's Drive covers an area of approximately 5 ha and it is one of the least disturbed areas. The main portion of the reserve lies to the west of Queen's Drive and while its central portion appears to be relatively undisturbed the remainder has in various ways suffered disturbance of one kind or another. Quite obviously the marginal areas have been milled; the pine trees planted on the western and southern boundaries may have given the bush some shelter from the prevailing winds but they have also suppressed the regeneration in those areas. Species not native to the area have been planted in years gone by and in some of the clearer areas various exotic trees were planted. The foregoing may seem to paint a rather dismal picture however, there are still two quite large areas of the bush which are substantially intact and they provide a very good example of the vegetation which formerly covered the Invercargill area. As for the remainder, it is considered that much of that is not beyond redemption. With sympathetic treatment, replanting and the removal of adventives there is no reason why, in time, it cannot be restored to something more akin to its original state.

In some ways the vegetation of the Waihopai Reserve is similar to that of Riccarton Bush. It is a lowland forest, in parts tending to be almost a swamp forest and with a relatively small number of species. The dominant trees are matai (Podocarpus spicatus) and kahikatea (P. dacrydioides) with the occasional totara (P. totara). Rimu (Dacrydium cupressinum) is not common in many Southland forests and it would appear that this was the main species milled from around the reserve area. So far I have managed to locate only one specimen of this species in the reserve. The other large tree of the bush is the pokaka

(Elaeocarpus hookerianus). It does not attain the height of the podocarps but what it lacks in height it makes up in girth. The thickness of the trunks appearing to be out of all proportion to the height.

Some species familiar in Canterbury are lacking - for example mahoe (Melicytus ramiflorus) appears to be completely absent from the Invercargill area and its place is taken by the mahoewao (M. lanceolatus). Likewise Pseudopanax arboreus does not occur in this area, its place being taken by P. colensoi. However, in the Waihopai Reserve even P. colensoi is not to be found and the pate (Schefflera digitata) is the common representative of the Aralia family.

Asplenium flaccidum is virtually the sole epiphyte, although the occasional Astelia fragrans may be found in the fork of a tree. Pyrrosia serpens often grows on the branches of matai and kahikatea and at lower levels Phymatodes diversifolium is the principal climbing fern. On the forest floor Astelia fragrans grows in abundance. It is different to the Canterbury plant in that the panicle is displayed on a much longer peduncle so that it is a showier plant when in fruit.

Muehlenbeckia australis and two species of Rubus are the main lianes with Clematis paniculata and Parsonsia heterophylla also being present. However, apart from the bush margins lianes do not appear to form a conspicuous part of the vegetation.

Two adventives, in particular, have made a considerable impact. The Chilean flame creeper (Tropaeolum speciosum) is the most conspicuous and festoons some of the smaller trees with large masses. Somewhat less conspicuous but having more of an impact is the bittersweet (Solanum dulcamara). It tends to form large smothering masses over some of the lower vegetation, particularly in the more open parts of the bush.

The other main adventive species are Berberis darwinii, blackberry, (Rubus fruticosus), holly (Ilex aquifolium), ivy (Hedera helix), elder (Sambucus nigra) and an occasional Myrtus luma.

Below is a list of the species so far recorded.

Dicksoniaceae

Dicksonia fibrosa

Polypodiaceae

Pyrrosia serpens

Phymatodes diversifolium

Grammitidaceae

Ctenopteris heterophylla

Dennstaedtiaceae

Hypolepis tenuifolia

Pteridaceae

Histiopteris incisa

Aspleniaceae

Asplenium bulbiferum

Asplenium flaccidum

Blechnaceae

Blechnum capense

Blechnum sp.

Blechnum discolor

Blechnum fluviatile

Dryopteridaceae

Polystichum vestitum

Polystichum sylvaticum

Podocarpaceae

Podocarpus dacrydioides

Podocarpus spicatus

Podocarpus totara

Dacrydium cupressinum

Gramineae

Microlaena avenacea

Cyperaceae

Uncinia uncinata

Liliaceae

Astelia fragrans

Agavaceae

Cordyline australis

Phormium tenax

Urticaceae

Urtica incisa

Polygonaceae

Muehlenbeckia australis

Ranunculaceae

Clematis paniculata

Winteraceae

Pseudowintera colorata

Pittosporaceae

Pittosporum tenuifolium

Escalloniaceae

Carpodetus serratus

Rosaceae

Rubus schmidelioides var. subpauperatus

Rubus cissoides

Leguminosae

Sophora microphylla

Rutaceae

Melicope simplex

Icacinaceae

Pennantia corymbosa

Elaeocarpaceae

Elaeocarpus hookerianus

Aristotelia serrata

Malvaceae

Plagianthus betulinus

Hoheria angustifolia

Violaceae

Melicytus lanceolatus

Myrtaceae

Leptospermum scoparium

Neomyrtus pedunculata

Onagraceae

Fuchsia excorticata

Fuchsia sp.

Araliaceae

Schefflera digitata

Pseudopanax crassifolius

Cornaceae

Griselinia littoralis

Myrsinaceae

Myrsine australis

Apocynaceae

Parsonsia heterophylla

Scrophulariaceae

Hebe salicifolia

Rubiaceae

Coprosma propinqua

Coprosma rotundifolia

Coprosma sp. aff rhamnoides