

The Work of the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council

The Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council became established on the enactment of the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Act in 1941. This is an act to make provision for the conservation of soil resources and for the prevention of damage by erosion, and to make better provision with respect to the protection of property from damage by floods.

Object of the Council

The general objects for which the council is established are defined in the Act as:

- (a) The promotion of soil conservation.
- (b) The prevention and mitigation of soil erosion.
- (c) The prevention of damage by floods.
- (d) The utilisation of lands in such a manner as will tend towards the attainment of the objects aforesaid.

The objects of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society are to advocate and obtain efficient protection of our native forests and birds and the preservation of sanctuaries, and scenic and other reserves, in their native state, and to enlist the practical sympathy of both young and old in these objects.

The objects of the two bodies naturally differ but they have a great deal in common, and the activities of each help the other in attaining its objects. The efficient protection of our native forests and of the native birds that assist them to thrive, which are objects of the society, help the work of the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council because adequate protection forest is one of the means for preventing soil erosion. On the other hand, the work of the council to conserve the soil and to prevent damage to the land by floods aids the aims of the society by fostering the maintenance of a healthy vegetative cover, which provides the habitat of many of our birds. Further, apart from the direct effect of the council's work in encouraging the preservation of our native forest in fulfilment of its own objects, there is an important additional effect: all work to conserve soil and to prevent damage by floods helps the fuller use of the land for many necessary purposes

and so reduces the demand for the further clearing of native forest to provide more land for agricultural and pastoral purposes.

The information given in the rest of this article will give members of the society a better understanding of the work of the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council and of how this is related to the work of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society.

Historical Background

The indigenous vegetation of New Zealand developed in the absence of grazing or browsing mammals, the only vertebrate inhabitants of the land before the coming of the Maoris being birds, some of giant size, and two species of bat. With the coming of the white man the country, in little more than a century, suffered a tremendous ecological upheaval. Europeans introduced sheep and cattle to graze the native grasslands and later deer and opossums into the forests. Where grasslands were depleted the introduced rabbits thrived. Exotic grasses better able to support grazing animals were introduced and large areas of forest were cleared and sown to grass. This caused geological repercussions in a land already unstable, and there was a noticeable readjustment of slopes, particularly in the softer Tertiary mudstone country. The development of high-producing pastures, the clearing of native forests, and the draining of swamps led to the more rapid run-off of rainwater and stream channels became inadequate.

There have always been flooding and erosion and the two processes have produced New Zealand's fertile plains. The economic development of these plains, as in other parts of the world, has made it desirable to control these natural processes and slow down the rate of change. Almost from the beginning of settlement, works were carried out to alleviate flooding and river erosion, and various bodies were set up to control water. Even before the turn of the century some far-sighted observers recognised the incidence of accelerated land erosion; but it was not until the 1930s, when world-wide interest in the subject was aroused by disastrous dust storms in the United States, that serious consideration was given to soil