

# Monorail effects won't be allayed

Forest and Bird Otago- Southland conservation officer Sue Maturin argues that pest control is not acceptable compensation for losing habitat to the proposed Fiordland monorail project

Bob Robertson, proponent of the proposed Monorail through Snowdon Forest in Te Wahipounamu South West New Zealand World Heritage Area gives the impression that he can make all the environmental impacts of the monorail go away (ODT 2 December 2013).

The proposal involves felling more than 20,000 trees to create a 6m wide corridor for the monorail and a parallel maintenance road, with interlinking tracks, through Snowdon Forest and its associated rare tussock grasslands and wetlands.

To make this happen, around 5,479 very old large beech trees are likely to be felled, some of which could be habitats for our critically endangered long-tailed bats, or trees with nesting holes for the threatened forest acrobats, Kaka and Mohua.

The proposed corridor has a significant population of long-tailed bats. These tiny creatures, which can fly at 60km an hour, nearly as fast as the proposed monorail, require large areas of forest,



(100km<sup>2</sup>) and many large old trees with cavities that have specific thermal characteristics. Like our houses they need to lie well to the sun and be well insulated. Bats can't live any old where, and move on out if their houses get destroyed. If a large proportion of breeding roost trees are felled, the effects on bats could be catastrophic, DOC's own scientists say.

The applicants say they will avoid felling trees when the bats are breeding and assess each of the large trees before they are felled. Imagine climbing more than 5,000 trees. Even if they did, it would be almost impossible to be certain that bats weren't in the tree, or that the tree wasn't a potential and future roost sites.

During the breeding season, more than a hundred female bats will congregate together to set up nurseries. A colony can be spread over a few local trees. Every day, they usually all move to a new tree, and over the season will use around 150 roost trees, many of which will also be re-used the following season, with the date of re use being similar from year to year. Come winter, the bats have separated and usually roost alone, although there can be quite a number of solitary roosts in one tree. To survive the cold winters, they go into a deep sleep, and are not easily roused. This means that trying to detect them outside the breeding season will almost impossible. It will also be pretty much impossible to detect if the tree is one of the nursery trees used in the breeding season.

The applicant has no plans to do a 5-year intensive radio-tracking study to identify all the roost sites, which is what would be needed if there is to be any chance of avoiding areas that are important for bat roosts. Because bats are so threatened it is important that their remaining habitats are cherished and not destroyed, particularly for something that is not necessary, which will ruin a wild area, and denigrate the world heritage values.

The route will also pass through some swampy forests, rare red tussock grasslands and wetlands, which are some of the special features that lead to the Snowdon Forest being added to Te Wahipounamu. Under the World Heritage Convention, New Zealand has agreed to protect these outstanding values for all of humanity for all time, and must maintain their integrity.

The applicant believes that they will be able to dig up some of the wetlands and tussocklands, store the turves and their plants, while the roads are made and then plonk them back intact.

Sir Alan Mark (Plant Ecologist and Emeritus Professor at the University of Otago ) has no confidence that this will work and concluded in his submission:

“All attempts at restoration of indigenous tall tussock (*Chionochloa* spp.) grassland through the transfer of tussock sods that I am aware of have failed to restore a grassland community.”

The hearing's Commissioner did not have the technical expertise to decide who was right, Sir Alan or the applicant's "expert", who considered that provided the revegetation was carried out correctly it would be effective. The Commissioner recommended that the Minister of Conservation seek further technical evidence on the effects of the proposal on the flora and fauna.

The application recognises that all the adverse effects can not be made to go away, so the applicant has proposed compensation, including offering to do a paltry 200ha of predator control. To be effective, predator control would need to be done in perpetuity every 3-5 years over thousands of ha, if it was to have any hope of making a significant difference to the survival of birds and bats.

Pest control however is not acceptable compensation for losing habitat. Pest control should be routine management by DOC and should not be paid for by allowing the destruction of irreplaceable forests, tussock-lands and wetlands that New Zealand has been entrusted to preserve as part of the World Heritage Area.