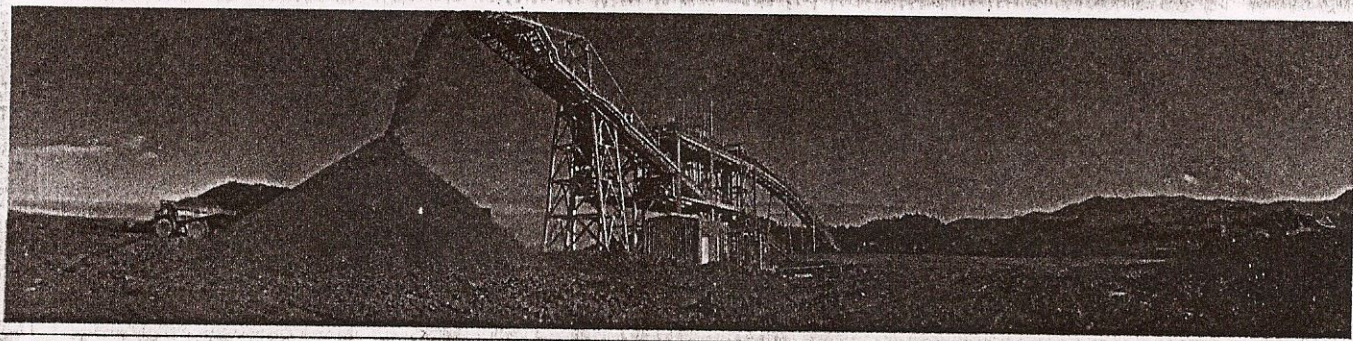


# Green, not gold

Almost unnoticed, landmark legislation bans mining in the Coromandel. BY TIM WATKIN



Shouts of joy have been ringing through the hills and forests of the Coromandel Peninsula over the past week. Environmentalists are celebrating a new law. Labour MP Judith Tizard describes it as a "watershed", Conservation Minister Nick Smith calls it a "landmark" and Thames-Coromandel district mayor Alasdair Thompson says it is "thrilling".

Yet, it went almost unremarked. New Zealand's green lobby won one of its most hard-fought battles on November 20 when the Crown Minerals Amendment Bill No 3 was passed into law, banning mining in all national parks, nature reserves, scientific reserves, wilderness areas, wildlife sanctuaries and marine reserves. Further, the act's protective arms embrace all the Department of Conservation land on the Coromandel Peninsula north of the Kopu-Hikuai Road (the highway that carries city-types through the Coromandel Ranges to their seashore playgrounds) and into the Firth of Thames.

Altogether, it puts three million hectares, or 40 percent of all crown land, off-limits to mining. Most New Zealanders will probably be shocked to learn that such land was not already protected. But, until now, it was legally possible, if not politically or geologically expedient, for a mining company to dig its fangs in Mitre Peak or Mt Tongariro.

"There's a lot of elation up here," says Thames lawyer and part-time eco-warrior Dennis Tegg, of the peninsula where the fight against a resurgent mining industry began in the late 70s. The Coromandel, with a pioneering history engraved in gold, is now looking forward to a future written in green.

The miners, however, are picking black days ahead. Minerals Industry Association chief Doug Gordon, who laments "emotion winning against intellect", says that the numbers are too big for the country to ignore. Coromandel's two existing gold mines are no bigger than an average

dairy farm, yet each year they pay \$90 million in wages to 4000 staff and provide \$120 million in export earnings — one and a half times that of the wine industry. "New Zealand can't afford to lock up most of its mineral estate," he says.

Political parties, even National, no longer agree. Smith says, "This has been in the pipeline for nearly a decade and has been the subject of intense controversy. The final legislation is a compromise, but represents a huge step forward for conservation."

Intense is right. For 18 months after the 1993 election, Chris Fletcher tried, and failed, to win support from her caucus for such a bill, after she and two other Auckland women MPs, Judith Tizard and Sandra Lee, found they shared a desire to see mining banned on the Coromandel's DOC land.

In October 1994, Fletcher passed the kauri branch to Tizard, who, with backing from Labour, the Alliance, New Zealand First and Fletcher, had the numbers to introduce a private member's bill. Fletcher then came under immense pressure from senior National MPs. Such was the depth of feeling, she was told that, if she crossed the floor, National would make the issue a confidence vote and she risked bringing down the government. Fletcher called her colleagues' bluff and Tizard's bill made it to a select committee in 1995. Yet progress was slow. It didn't leave the committee until August 1996, and then was kept off Parliament's agenda for another 15 months.

Its eventual success can be put down in large measure to persistent arguing and public mobilisation by Tegg, Thompson and the peninsula's eco-groups.

In 1995, Tegg boasts, MPs got more mail about this bill than any other. "When I started this bill, everyone thought it was a bit of a crazy idea. I still can't believe we got this under a National government."

The ironies go deeper. Note the names of the political cheerleaders: Tizard,

whose father Bob approved the Waihi mine as Minister of Energy in the 1980s; the Labour Party, partly formed by miners; and Fletcher, whose in-laws are famous for mining petroleum.

Thompson is relieved that this law removes the financial burden of mining applications and appeals from his rate-payers. All other non-DOC activities, including forestry and hotel development, have long been banned from conservation land. Now that double standard has gone.

As he and Tegg have argued to politicians, if you're serious about conserving these lands, either ban mining or dare to say that conservation doesn't matter and de-register the national parks.

Gordon replies that the problem with that argument, and with the claim that there is plenty of other land available to miners, "is that, underneath the conservation estate, is 70 percent of New Zealand's known mineral resources".

Minerals and nature's most beautiful features tend to go hand in hand. The Coromandel is rich in valuable metals. And in wildlife. Some 40 migratory birds, including kiwi and kokako, and two rare native frog species are attracted to the Coromandel.

Concern for those species and native flora remains. Environmentalists wanted the law applied to all land north of Te Aroha. They got the area north of the Kopu-Hikuai road. This means that an ecological corridor between the Coromandel Forest Park and the Kaimai-Mamaku park has been severed.

Tegg: "It's an arbitrary line, a road, for God's sake, and has no connection with anything natural."

So the fight for the rest of the peninsula goes on. "I don't want to foreshadow our next move," he adds, "but I think there are other legislative changes that are possible. We are not giving up the battle."

As they are fond of saying on the peninsula, Coromandel's wealth is above the ground, not below it. ■