

Chapter Six

A recreation and conservation journey along Dunedin's skyline

Early human fires denuded most of the Silverstream catchment and the Flagstaff-Swampy Summit ridge of its native forests to have it replaced by snow grass. Later repeated burning for sheep grazing weakened the dense snow grass and allowed the successional invasion of manuka and kanuka. The area is well below the natural timberline and the re-forestation has reached the top of the hills except on Flagstaff where a snow grass association is being artificially maintained. The last fairly massive fire occurred in the 1930s when a tramping party's safely prepared billy boil was hit by one of those little summer whirl winds. The resultant fire swept Three Mile Hill, Flagstaff Hill and was last seen heading over Swampy Summit.



1900. Flagstaff Hill from Where Flat showing the then extent of fire-induced snow grass and lack of native forest. *ODT*

In 1949 the Otago Tramping Club's purchase of the Ben Rudd property on the western side of Flagstaff prevented the closing of the upper Whare Flat Road and the planting of the whole area in pines for 'water conservation.' With legal access to the Ben Rudd property, the Dunedin City Council accepted tramping on Powder Ridge and Burns Track 'paper roads' and within their proximity in adjoining water catchments.

Our journey begins in Flagstaff Creek on Three Mile Hill. In the mid 1970s pine forest expansion around Flagstaff Creek was very much at the expense of tall, relic silver beech forest and kanuka with its healthy South Island Robin population. Otago University-based Ecology Action, of which I was a member, only found out



planting plans in 1977, in time to save fragments. In 1998 the Dunedin City Council formed a new forestry enterprise, City Forests.

Students for Environmental Action planting silver beech to extend the beech forest.
KDM

In 1999, remembering Ecology Action unfinished business, I brought together City Forests and Students for Environmental Action (SEA), with Forest and Bird backing, for a joint beech restoration project adjacent to Flagstaff Creek on Burma Road. Fieldwork started in August 1999 and continued for several years. Hundreds of beech seedlings were grown to expand the mature beech stands. A further six hundred went to the Ben Rudd property 2.3 km away. Much elder was removed as well as self-sown pines, Douglas fir, blackberry, broom and native broad-leaved species invading damaged beech forest edges. There had been an agreement to log the adjacent mature Douglas fir stands in such a way that the relic South Island Robin population could migrate and have favoured habitat. This was broken and a couple of other factors made me feel City Forests was not fully deserving Forest Stewardship Accreditation so restoration work stopped.



Cross country skiing during the new walkway's first winter. *KDM*

Flagstaff Hill would be Dunedin's most cherished high point. The only reason Flagstaff Hill is not a sea of pines, roads, carparks and buildings is that generations of

Flaggy lovers had fought to keep it that way since at least the 1930s. I was the OTMC contingent leader of one particularly large wilding pine sweep from Flagstaff to Swampy Spur in March 1992.

In December 1973 the New Zealand Electricity Department in Wellington wanted to build a road and transmission tower on Flagstaff to relay data to a tower at Hyde Rock on the Old Man Range. The Nature Conservation Council in Wellington gave its blessing. On 14 April 1975 there was a large Dunedin public meeting over the proposal and a vote of no confidence was given to the Nature Conservation Council. The claim was that line-of-sight was needed to reach Hyde Rock. Our engineers were pitched against NZED's engineers. We proved that line of sight was not possible as the curvature of the Earth caused the Lammermoor Range to block the line. It was just another case of things having to be built on summits. A fully operational tower was then built 100m lower down on the Dunedin City side beside Spiers Road. The Post Office had been watching in the wings hoping to expand its 'empire' to Flagstaff. It did the sensible thing by upgrading its facilities on Swampy Summit.



Previous Page: Ranger Mason at the rear 'wondering' how the sign got there, when it did! Minister of Lands, MP's, Commissioners of Lands, Rangers etc inspecting the Flagstaff Walkway and proposed communication tower site. I heard a hand-wringing Lands and Survey official say to the Minister,"If it is not wanted by NZ Electricity we will make it a scenic reserve." *KDM*

Flax bushes were exploding loudly on March 21, 1976. The whole very dry summit of Flagstaff was ablaze. To the firefighters it was only tussock and they were getting paid double-time. The casualness ended abruptly as the initially containable fire started to jump the road and into the pine plantations. That night it was panic stations when the fire flared up again. It was only headed off from Swampy Summit by a skilled night attack with a bulldozer. The fire vastly expanded the gorse and broom which had been brought in by dirty earth moving equipment used on the western fire break track.

The new bulldozing meant that the upper section of the new Pineapple Track and the start of our Skyline Walkway had to be reformed. Fortunately the Walkway Committee declined DCC's request to widen the whole track so that gravel could be spread from the back of trucks. There was no apparent understanding of the aesthetics of walking. Had an inspection of the upper section of track been done in heavy rain, proper drainage needs would have been understood and a lot of money and ongoing repairs saved over the years. Fortunately the summit section remain a narrow walk through snow grass and rock.

Ben Rudd was a fiery little hermit that lived on 112 acres (45ha) on the western flank of Flagstaff from 1921 until his death in 1930. The Otago Tramping Club befriended him in its formative year of 1923. On May 5, 1947 the property's freehold title was transferred to the OTC. The Dunedin City Council very much resented a



On top of old Flagstaff... Ben Rudd ruled, OK!

Dunedin Star Midweek
25/5/95

small block of private land in the middle of their 'empire'. The DCC repeatedly tried to get its hands on it. They were going to invoke the Public Works Act and take it for water conservation. Fortunately a city councillor and the Town Clerk were club members who quietly worked behind the scenes. By 1960 the OTC had planted 20,000 pines to satisfy then water conservation concerns and so keep the Ben Rudd property. Today it is well known that pines greatly decrease water yield.

In July 1959 the Town Clerk placed a “strictly enforced entry prohibition” on all, including trampers, to Flagstaff water catchments. The description included the Ben Rudd land and legal road access. The objective to get out the wild cattle was good, but the attitude was that the DCC owned everything.

In the meantime the DCC Water Department bulldozed both across the Ben Rudd property and right down the hill to the Whare Flat Road without club consent. Using dirty machinery resulted in a gorse and broom invasion. Small fires actually spread along the weed-lined 'firebreak'.

In 1971 Douglas fir were planted five-wide in the snow grass and flax along the upper south boundary and the length of the eastern boundary of the Ben Rudd property. At the time it was thought they would act as a firebreak. Some of us were raising, with other members of the renamed Otago Tramping and Mountaineering Club, the ecological and aesthetic wisdom of this as we planted. It takes time for a diverse group's thinking to evolve especially amongst older members. In this case it was 5 years and we were back removing these plantings. In this same transitional period older club members were still planting ornamental exotic trees while some of us younger members were discretely removing them the same day.

With native vegetation restoration on the OTMC's Ben Rudd property being the new policy eyes turned to removal of the plantations and other conifers. In January 1989 contractors felled and removed the main plantation and established shelter belt.

“We are still having trouble with (our legal) vehicle access to Ben Rudd's In September 1989 the OTMC Outdoor Recreation Subcommittee writes:- DCC have put in a locked gate Of course, they happily drive through (the private) Ben Rudd's without asking permission! . . . perhaps we need a pair of club bolt cutters?”

Twelve years later when the DCC were again flouting the OTMC's property rights of legal access, my brother Peter and I cut the heavy gate-chain and installed the club's own lock.



In September 1990 Forest and Bird's Kiwi Conservation Club pulled out 500 small pines and 2000 Himalayan honeysuckle in one hour on the harvested plantation site. This area has now regenerated as dense broad-leafed forest. *KDM*



Developing ten year-old silver beech forest.
Ben Rudd and me
at actual size.
B Rudd's PA

In 1997 the OTMC struggled over keeping or selling Ben Rudd's. At a special meeting it was decided to keep the property.

At the OTMC's 75th Anniversary Dinner on 29 August 1998, the club symbolically handed over the management of the Ben Rudd Property to the newly formed Ben Rudd's Trust. Over the next few years thousands of pines were removed and 600 more silver beech were added to the new forest. A QEII Covenant was established. Today the Trust and OTMC are continuing transforming the property's native biodiversity.

In 1985 the DCC began a move to build a 5 metre wide all-weather road from the 'Bullring' carpark on Flagstaff to Swampy Summit and thence down the upper Rain Gauge Spur. In a letter from the City Engineer to the OTMC it was claimed that such a road was "a vital part of our catchment infrastructure." Stock-piling of road metal began at the Bullring. Roading was contrary to the Flagstaff Scenic Reserve Management Plan, the draft Silverpeaks Reserve Management Plan, and the objective behind the Flagstaff-Skyline Walkway. There was also no permission to cross the Club's Ben Rudd property. On June 26, 1986 work commenced without OTMC permission. Club action stopped this.

In June 1988 the DCC tried another ruse. Telecom needed to lay a fibre optic cable across to Swampy Summit. Formal written trespass warnings were given to both the DCC and Telecom as no consents from the Club had been given. On August 9 1988, a trespass notice was served in the field where the contractors were working on Club property. Without club ownership we would have been left with a fate accomplished. Telecom later negotiated an easement.

As happens in many of these cases payback soon began. In December 1988 the DCC tried a Noxious Weed Control Act threat against the OTMC. Ironically the worst of a broom invasion had been where the DCC had, without permission, bulldozed a 50 metre wide section of the Ben Rudd's property firebreak track, before settling on the current alignment. No road upgrading to Swampy Summit took place.

In the 2000s the DCC nearly gave in to one walker's pressure to upgrade the walk to Swampy as their very light footwear was suffering. I supported a DCC recreation officer in his suggesting the walker either stay on walk-grade tracks or wear more suitable footwear as people preferred the track as it was. In earlier years I believe the DCC would have catered to his request and have progressively manipulated the situation to get their all-weather road. In 2016 the largely un-groomed track is very popular with mountain bikers who use it at night time.

I made a presentation to DOC and the DCC to artificially maintain the Flagstaff summit snow grass associations by appropriate spraying to prevent both invasive exotic and pioneering native woody species. I disagreed with botanist Alan Mark's

suggestion of using controlled burns. This would be a very risky procedure, and would cause the spread of gorse and broom.

It was early human fires that caused the snow grass ecosystem to be here at such a low altitude. The public very much enjoyed the short summit plateau vegetation which, if left alone, would eventually revert to forest. Subsequently all parties have worked to achieve this. The Firebreak Track on the Ben Rudd property is the holding line to prevent the upward migration of native forest.



At the Swampy-Flagstaff turnoff. 27 February 2003. I was the guide for the 150th celebration of pre-1863 pack horse mail delivery to Dunedin over the Mountain Track. To prevent the introduction of weeds Otago Boys High School pupils gathered up the dung. KDM

In the 1960s a road was formed up the Rollinson's Track and then up onto Swampy Summit for the installation of aviation safety structures and NZ Post communications. In places the road could have been cut less deep to preserve the water table and the six or more summit plateau tarns. Initially, reinforced concrete power poles were used to carry the 11,000 volt power supply lines. Swampy's 130 kph winds and snow and ice soon buckled these. A fellow trumper and I had to jump high voltage lines as they lay sizzling unearthed in the snow. Underground power cables were installed with more suitable wooden poles lower down. It was planned to road all the way down the power line to Leith Valley but the road reserve they were using reached a point that was too steep. Roading stopped here. Leith Valley farmer Jack Thomson would not allow a deviation out onto his farm so stopping an unnecessary road down to Dunedin. Jack and I marked a new foot track line up to the end of the road above from the Morrisons Creek water intake road.

Jack Thomson and I were friends. His family had the farm next to Forest and Bird's Moores' Bush property in Leith Valley which I had been honorary manager since 1973. Jack very much had his ear to the rural ground and passed on items of concern to me. Jack's family heard kiwi calling up until the 1950s. They recognised the calls from the National Radio's morning bird call. A friend who was familiar with Fiordland kiwi is certain he saw one in his headlights on the upper Leith Valley Road in the early 1950s.

In December #### some 90 hectares of reserve-quality bush above Leith Valley was advertised by the DCC as being for sale as lifestyle blocks. It was classic strategy by the DCC Water Department. Jack Thompson noticed the small add in the *Otago Daily Times*, placed in late December, when the public would have been preoccupied with holiday plans. Technically the bush was unneeded as water catchment as any rain falling on this block went neither into the Morrisons Creek catchment or to the Left Branch of the Leith. It was like waving a red rag to a bull when the Water Department asked Jack why he didn't want to add the land to his farm, "as there was plenty of good rimu in there to be logged."

Being unable to track down any helpers still in Dunedin, I got the press to approach Water Department head Nigel Harwood over the matter. It was gloves-off-time when the press came back and accused me of making it all up.

I was very angry as my reputation was at stake. I marched into Mr Harwood's office and felt like a gun-fighter when I called him and his deputy out of his inner office to front up to me, all in front of his staff. There were two silent bowed heads standing before me as I effectively 'court marshalled' them before all and sundry. Nigel Harwood went on to be acting Dunedin City Council CEO. Strangely we got on well after that.

If he had not taken over the Leith Valley family farm after WW2, Jack would have used his new degree as a mining engineer. In the 1990s the Water Department engineers must have thought of him as a naive cow cocky. A land swap to protect water catchment had been negotiated with him and the documents taken away for formal drafting. On bringing back the papers for signing, Jack insisted on fully checking them. Substantial changes had been snuck in. It just happened that Jack had a small extension of land across the access road to the Morrison's Creek water intake. Jack's blocking of this access brought about a quick remedy.

Meanwhile the Skyline Walkway was extended out to the knob of Swampy Spur and down through the mountain cedar forest to Dunedin's North Motorway at Leith Saddle.

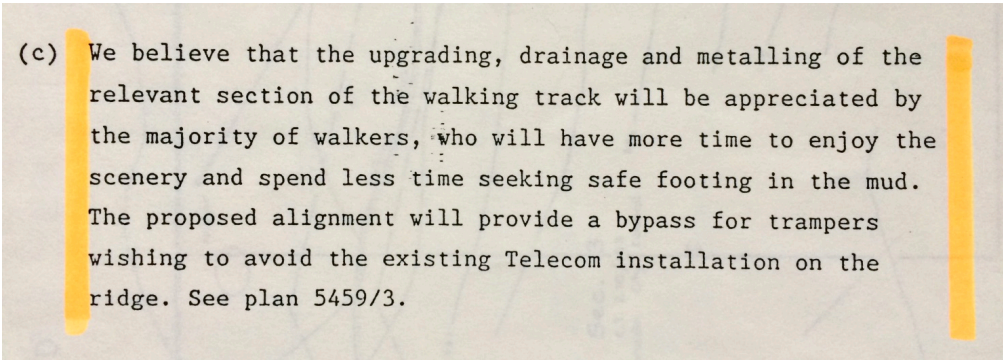
The people of Dunedin do not really appreciate the uniqueness of the mountain cedar forest either side of the motorway. This lovely, conical, cloud forest tree

should have official status as a Dunedin icon, along with penguins, albatrosses and sea lions.

The Walkway Committee had a series of meetings with the Ministry of Works regards the public crossing the motorway. Prior to the motorway the public has unimpeded foot and cycle access from the Leith Valley to the Waitati Valley road and down to the coast. To me the Ministry had caused the problem and had an obligation to fix it. An underpass 50m downhill on the city side of the saddle was a solution. The Ministry was not keen and threw rather off-putting costs around. In the end nothing came of it. In 1983 the Swampy Spur track was brought down to the Waitati Road some 50m short of the motorway.

On August 12, 1989 the privately owned Radio Otago Ltd applied to erect a 30m FM tower, building and access road on Swampy Spur. It was to be a shared facility with their opposition, the public radio station 4ZB. Roding would obliterate part of the Leith Saddle Walkway.

DCC staff had quietly agreed but Dunedin City councillors had been kept in the dark. We had a tramping friend within 4ZB. A letter to the *Otago Daily Times* 'rocked' the 4ZB manager who stormed into the staff morning tea on August 22 and demanded (observed by our informant) to know who had leaked the financial and technical details. After two weeks of intensive



(c) We believe that the upgrading, drainage and metalling of the relevant section of the walking track will be appreciated by the majority of walkers, who will have more time to enjoy the scenery and spend less time seeking safe footing in the mud. The proposed alignment will provide a bypass for trampers wishing to avoid the existing Telecom installation on the ridge. See plan 5459/3.

The usual shite

work the OTMC knew so much about the proposal that the 4ZB manager 'came clean' and talked openly about their problem with the exorbitant charges Broadcast Communications Ltd wanted for shared usage of its Mt Cargill TV transmission tower. Public disclosure brought about the sharing of the existing facilities on Mt Cargill at a fair rate.

The five kilometre section of Dunedin's Skyline Walkway from Leith Saddle to Mt Cargill was put on hold because of motorway crossing problems, the demanding nature of the country and the legal status of the land under Pigeon Hill. In the 1970s Lands and Survey gained full control of the former Cowan farm around

Pigeon Hill. It would have been so easy to create Scenic Reserve additions before selling the rest off.



Sliding track metal down from the Mt Cargill summit into Bethunes. *KDM*

A group of Dunedin accountants and solicitors bought the upper land on Pigeon Hill, with a view to pine planting incentive subsidies, tax arrangements and future rock quarry sites. Much of the planting above and along the Pigeon Hill escarpment was a disaster as it proved totally unsuitable for forestry. It was hardly if never pruned, and many trees fell over in the wet and wind. In later years DCC's City Forests got landed with it. Much of the timber was unsaleable. Other native forest on the steep lower half of the escarpment was sold to others. A hotch-potch of pine plantations resulted.

In the meantime there was action to protect the aesthetics of the Sullivan's Dam-Leith Saddle area. A bid in August 1996 to develop a new quarry by Palmer and Son Ltd on the north face of Leith Summit was defeated. Palmers already had plenty of quarry capacity to develop in Dunedin.

The DCC misled Dunedin Forest and Bird claiming that a substantial area of native forest being cleared adjacent to pine harvesting above Sullivan's Dam was not

DCC's but belonged to a Dunedin Service Group. It *was* the DCC's. Through my personal connections a block harvested was allowed to revert to bush above the dam. I took a Kiwi Conservation Club party in to remove many self-sown pines. Others subsequently removed wildings we missed or couldn't handle. The site's regenerated bush is looking great today, being part of the key backdrop to the reservoir.

In 1978 the Mt Cargill cluster of peaks was the focus of the Skyline Walkway concept. The short A. H. Reid Memorial Track on Mt Cargill's summit was already in use. I had bush-bashed down Bethunes Gully and seen the basis for a good walk up from the Bethunes Gully picnic area, 550m below. However the resultant walk-grade track was kept low and brought up through unstable ground. Over subsequent years there were a series of very expensive slips that closed the track for months on end. My chosen route would have gone higher on stable ground with more variety of gradient, terrain and vegetation including a stand of silver beech.

Lands and Survey had needlessly failed to take reserve needs into consideration when disposing of Mt Cargill lands under its control. I suspect their reserve rangers did not have much say in the matter. So much was hurriedly sold off that when Forest and Bird pushed the Department into saving a key chunk in the middle of the Bethunes Gully catchment it had nothing to 'horse trade' with. The private owner didn't want money, he wanted equivalent land. We got there in the end.

The walkways were extended in March 1983 to Mt Holmes with its columnar jointed volcanic organ pipes. A feeder walkway was then constructed down through Grahams Bush to Sawyers Bay. During this development much more bush gained protected status. The Grahams Bush walkway was opened in October 1984.

In August 1981 Mr Gavin Henderson, DCC Director of Parks, sanctioned the illegal clearing of 12 ha of Signal Hill's Burns Park Scenic Reserve, adjacent to the future Dunedin Skyline route. This was rapidly regenerating to bush through old-man gorse.

There had been other mismanagement of Dunedin's Town Belt.

In 1996 there was an expanding goat problem on Signal Hill as the result of failed goat farming. Led by Dunedin Forest and Bird we had all the adjoining landowners and DOC willing to work together to tackle the problem. A DCC administered block was a crucial part of the plan. The DCC were unwilling to cooperate. With the goats having a refuge the whole plan fell over. As can be seen in these writings the Dunedin City Council had an enduring attitude problem during these times.

Suddenly in April 2002 the means to complete the Leith Saddle to Mt Cargill section of Dunedin's Skyline Walkway arrived some 27 years after the Flagstaff section opened in April 1975. This event warrants its own chapter. See *'Cloud Forests of Leith and Escarpment Track.'*

Forest restoration benefits evident

O.D.T. SAT. 27/04/01

By Andrea Jones

A joint project to restore a silver beech forest area along Flagstaff Creek, near Three Mile Hill, is starting to show results.

City Forests Ltd, the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society's Dunedin branch and Students for Environmental Action have been involved in the project since June 1999.

The relict silver beech forest at Flagstaff Creek was the closest such area to the city and was the remnant of more extensive stands which existed in the catchment before plantation expansion in the 1970s, project adviser Ken Mason, of the Royal Forest and Bird Society, said in a statement.

The trees, which are on City Forests land, also provided a habitat for the South Island bush robin.

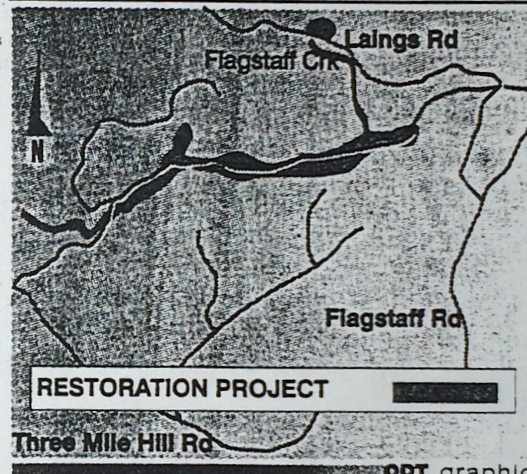
The project covered about 1.2km along the Flagstaff Creek river bank, ranging in width from 20m to more than 100m.

It included areas which were deemed unsuitable for production forestry, City Forests tree crop manager John Speirs said.

The student group and young forest and bird members had done a lot of work clearing broom and opening the area to native regeneration.

Work to date had focused on removing wilding exotic trees which were competing with silver beech

SILVER BEECH RESTORATION PROJECT



saplings and seedlings in stands, such as that by Laings Rd, a forestry road.

Larger exotic trees within the project boundaries were being removed and further definition of the project's boundaries would take place as the pruning and thinning of plantation trees took place.

Originally, silver beech forest survived along the creek as it was surrounded by kanuka and snow grass, Mr Mason said in the statement.

Some native broadleaf species had been trimmed as they were crowding out the beeches.

By managing competing exotic and native trees, those involved in the project were giving the silver beech ecosystem a "chance to reclaim" some of its former area, he said.



Seven years' broadleaf regeneration on the KCC cleared area. *KDM*



Seven year old beech plantings amongst pine plantation stumps. *KDM*



Replacing Pine Trees with Silver Beech

KEN MASON describes two unusual restoration projects in Dunedin.

In 1990 the Otago Tramping and Mountaineering Club clearfelled four hectares of pine plantation on its 40-hectare 'Ben Rudd' property. Here, high on Dunedin's beloved Flagstaff Hill, 200 silver beech were trial planted



KEN MASON

Prior to treatment this remnant of Flagstaff beech forest was becoming dominated by Douglas fir, pines, Himalayan honeysuckle and broom.

amongst the pine stumps.

Spurred on by the trial's success the club founded its Ben Rudd Management Trust, beginning regular beech plantings in 2000 with the idea of creating a silver-beech ecosystem.



KEN MASON

Author Ken Mason in a ten-year-old silver beech planting at 600 metres on the site of the former Ben Rudd pine plantation.

At an exposed 600 metres the trees have grown a little bushy. So trees behind the forest edges are being form-pruned to develop fewer individual stems and a higher canopy.

Another 5000 exotic trees were dropped in 2001. The bulk of the property is now returning to kanuka and broadleaf. One area is having its narrow-leaved snowgrass association restored, including celmisia and speargrass reintroductions. The property is to be covenanted with the QE II National Trust.

Ben Rudd beech seedlings are sourced from Flagstaff Creek, some 2.3 kilometres away on Three Mile Hill. This is the nearest silver beech forest to Dunedin, and the next for restoration.

Sadly, the 1970s pine plantations were expanded around Flagstaff Creek at the expense of tall relict silver-beech forest and its healthy South Island robin population. Ecology Action, a former Otago University-based group, found out in time to save fragments. Unsympathetic plantation logging, roading and windthrow took a further toll of the beech.

By 1998, however, there was a



KEN MASON

In one hour in 1990, members of Forest and Bird's Kiwi Conservation Club removed 800 pine and 2500 Himalayan honeysuckle seedlings from this section of the logged Ben Rudd plantation. Today it is covered in dense broadleaf regeneration.

change within the Dunedin City Council's new forestry enterprise, City Forests Ltd. Now, City Forests, with Dunedin Forest and Bird and the tertiary group Students for Environmental Action, are involved in a joint silver-beech forest restoration project. The project covers about 1.3 kilometres along the banks of Flagstaff Creek in a strip, ranging in width from 20 metres to over 100 metres, and from 200 to 400 metres above sea level. This includes riparian zones and areas deemed unsuitable for production forestry.

Further project definition and expansion is occurring, as the pruning, thinning and harvesting of plantation trees takes place.

Beech regeneration is very light-demanding. With the beech forest's fragmentation the remnants were laid open to invasion by both exotic and native broadleaved species.

Work to date has focussed on removing exotic trees which are either competing with silver-

beech saplings and seedlings, or preventing regeneration. Where native broadleaved species are doing the same they are either being thinned or removed. Blackberry is being cleared and replaced by beech.

The chainsaws of Dunedin Forest and Bird's wilding tree group have removed the larger exotic trees.

This project has helped City Forests Ltd gain Forest Stewardship Council certification for meeting environmentally and socially responsible forest-management practices. FSC certification adds to the plantation's marketable value. Even higher certification is sought.

By managing competing exotic and native trees, a silver-beech ecosystem is being given a future, and a chance to reclaim some of its former extent. Hopefully, the robins will also benefit.

— KEN MASON is vice-chairman of Dunedin Forest and Bird, a Ben Rudd Management Trustee, and an adviser to the New Zealand Ecological Restoration Network.

