



# OBITUARIES

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## Activist 'in best and most creative sense'

■ **KENNETH DAVID MASON**  
Dedicated environmentalist

DURING more than 50 years dedicated to the environment, Ken Mason built up an impressive knowledge and experience of the important task of restoring our vanishing natural heritage.

Persistent and sociable, independent in thought and observation, Mr Mason left a lasting, tangible legacy in the many enhanced natural environments in the greater Dunedin area and the love of the outdoors he instilled in hundreds of young people, including his two sons.

Mr Mason died in Dunedin on April 17 aged 71.

Born to Marjorie (nee Burt) and builder David Mason in Dunedin on August 30, 1945, he was the first of the couple's three sons, his younger brothers being Bruce and Peter.

As a child, he faced a variety of physical challenges. He spent six months in Karitane Hospital after contracting the drug-resistant "H Bug", had poor eyesight and wore surgical boots.

"He was different, not well placed to survive inevitable playground savagery," his brother Bruce said.

"I remember seeing him regularly running home from school, bruised and bloodied. That had a lasting impression on both of us — bullies must be stood up to, and we have, throughout our lives."

But Mr Mason outgrew his childhood limitations. He was shaped by his early contact with nature and by strong parental influence: from mother Marjorie, her father's mastery of horticulture and the Burt family history of Sunday excursions wandering the local hills; from father David, a strong community focus as a sportsman in providing facilities for tennis in particular.

As youngsters, the brothers holidayed with their parents and other families at Peel Forest. The two older brothers climbed their first mountain, Ben Lomond, from the Dansey Pass camp on the Duntroon side of the pass.

When he was about 7, Mr Mason was profoundly influenced by Dr Lance Richdale, the saviour of the royal albatross at Taiaroa Head, who took nature studies in St Clair.

The young Ken was taken to "poke around in rock pools and elsewhere near St Clair". And at home, he had "a variety of creepy crawlies, crabs and lobsters scuttling around the skirting boards in the morning and spiders everywhere", brother Peter said.

Primary schooling at St Clair was followed by four years at King's High School in the early 1960s.



About 1963-64, the brothers discovered "the great outdoors" and the Otago Tramping Club. Mr Mason's first serious tramp was to George Sound with a King's High School party in 1963.

But the "make or break" trip for him and brother Bruce was the Otago Tramping Club's 1964 tramp of the Beans Burn-Rock Burn circuit west of the Dart Valley. Eleven of the 12 days were wet; all the gear including the sleeping bags was sodden; there was a near drowning; the group leader fell over a bluff in the Rock Burn Gorge; and a week later, someone died there.

Decades of ambitious tramps throughout the South Island, particularly the Otago high country, followed that "character-building" venture and Mr Mason documented more than 600 of those expeditions. He was a life member of the Otago Tramping Club, later to become the Otago Tramping and Mountaineering Club, and also chief guide.

He became the Federated Mountain Clubs' chief representative on the Otago Walkways Committee and saw through the gazetting of the Skyline and Silverpeak walkways.

He and brother Bruce were largely successful in using walkways to prevent skyline communication installations, forestry and roading and to obtain protection through the setting aside and proper management of public reserves.

"This required decades of forceful effort by Ken, ensuring that officials did their jobs and censoring them when they didn't," Bruce said.

In 1991 he received an Old Blue Award from the Forest and Bird Society and in 1997, his Moore's Bush restoration won him a Merit Award at the Otago Regional Council's Otago Environment Awards.

Nominations for the Loder Cup, New Zealand's premier conservation award, in 1999 and 2000, were both unsuccessful, prompting someone to suggest Mr Mason had "upset the wrong people".

Mr Mason's response was he had "upset the right people".

His first employment was as a photographer, technician and field assistant with the University of Otago geology department. It was the pre-digital era of photography, when large-format cameras were used, but some of his published works featuring sections of rock and fossil were works of art as much as records.

Because of his outdoor skills, he accompanied senior geology students and staff on exploratory mapping expeditions to the Otago Alps and Fiordland, "some of the roughest country on the planet", his job being essentially "to prevent researchers killing themselves in their single-minded quest for rock samples".

Invariably, the best rock exposure was where there was least vegetation, which meant scrambling up waterfalls hundreds of feet high, hanging on for dear life to whatever there was in the form of fern and vine. And Mr Mason had to keep the tape straight, "irrespective of cascading water and obstacles".

A call for older males to join the teaching profession resulted in a change in career direction for Mr Mason. He went to teachers' college and, after graduation, was posted to a variety of primary and intermediate schools around Dunedin. But he ended up permanently on relief teaching and was frustrated at being on daily call.

A season down in the Antarctic as a snow-craft instructor and field assistant saw him chasing and tagging seals. He also managed to visit all the historic hut sites on Ross Island and had a good look at the wildlife.

After his permanent employment ended, Mr Mason increasingly applied his green fingers to native forest restoration in the greater Dunedin area. His archives comprised a meticulous record of ecological restoration, on both a minor and major scale.

The value of his environmental work was probably best described by Colin Meurk, an ecologist with Landcare Research in Christchurch, when he wrote in support of Mr Mason's 2000 Loder Cup nomination.

Dr Meurk described Mr Mason as an activist "in the best and most creative sense", someone who embodied "the qualities of selfless dedication, guided by reason and experience".

Two of the important requirements in achieving successful outcomes in any land-based activity, and especially one as complex as rebuilding a working ecosystem, were to have actually done it in real life and learnt through trial

and error and experimentation about method; and to provide a model to inspire others, the knowledge of how to proceed and the energy to carry out the huge organisational task of bringing together all of the components.

Mr Mason had shown tremendous ability to imagine "a better future for our natural environment" and strive towards it through his perseverance and many personal skills.

Without activists like him, society and civilisation would stagnate and the planet would be transformed into an unrelieved monoculture of people and landscape, Dr Meurk said.

Moore's Bush in Leith Valley was Mr Mason's first major project, followed by Tomahawk Lagoon and Quarantine Island, made possible by leading hundreds of young volunteers on weed control, fencing, planting and tending operations until forest structures were re-established.

Many of the participants in the groups he established, the Dunedin Kiwi Conservation Club, Dunedin Teen Greens and Students for Environment Action, were influenced by his example and persistence in achieving his goals and went on to become leaders in the conservation movement.

Three times married, twice divorced, Mr Mason had two sons, Brett and Mark, with his second wife, Patricia Wilson, whom he married at Glenfalloch in January 1981.

Both sons remember their father as "a dad of adventures and taking us places less visited". They recall camping out beside the old graveyard on Quarantine Island, exploring bush in the Lenz Reserve in the Cathms and mountain biking the Otago Central Rail Trail before it was finished.

As children they both enjoyed the freedom they were given to explore and get muddy. They were also lucky to have a wide range of pets, from bugs to fantails and everything in between "even if it wasn't a good idea". And their father later got to enjoy having even more pets of his own with the building of the farm park.

He left them both with a love of the outdoors.

More recently he delighted in "picking off" some big travel goals, including Iceland and, closer to home, the Chatham Islands.

Mr Mason is survived by his sons, Brett and Mark, and his three wives: Aileen Varney, whom he married in North Taieri in December 1973; Patricia Wilson, his second wife; and Susan Radcliffe, whom he married in Pleasant Point in 2009.

— Kay Sinclair