

# Remoteness makes it

Don 27/1/14.

The arguments for a Fiordland monorail and a Haast-Hollyford highway don't stack up, writes **Robin McNeill**.

**W**HAT do you reply to the highwayman who calls: "Your money, or your life"? That you feel lucky to have the choice? Trampers feel much the same way about suggestions that they should be "reasonable" by accepting at least one of three damaging tourism proposals for Fiordland: a monorail through Snowdon Forest, a Glenorchy-Hollyford tunnel, or a Haast-Hollyford highway.

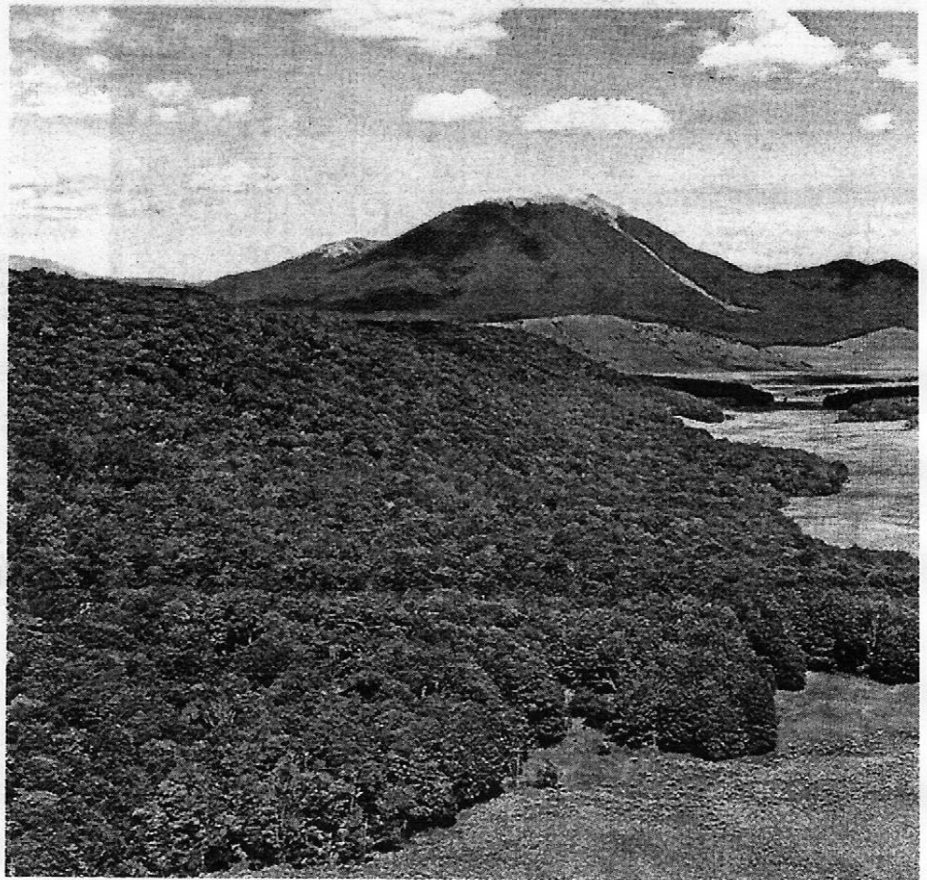
Any one of these would desecrate our back-country in a way that belongs, if anywhere, to the 19th century, not the 21st. None of the proposals solve, or can hope to solve, the real challenge to Milford Sound tourism – the avalanche-prone Upper Hollyford road and Homer Tunnel.

Unsurprisingly, last year Conservation Minister Nick Smith concluded that the Milford Dart Link tunnel was a bad idea and turned it down. But, what of the other proposals?

Bob Robertson, chairman of monorail company Riverstone Holdings, keeps shifting his spin. The company's original idea was to build a monorail through the Snowdon Forest section by section, cantilevering each from the last to minimise environmental impact. When Mr Robertson realised this couldn't work, he proposed building a construction route ahead of the track and an access road to the side.

Using the old marketing adage "If you can't fix it, feature it", he now promotes the access road as a cycle trail. However, anyone who's built a road in swampy terrain or on the side of a hill knows that such roads cannot be made within the narrow corridors requested. The commissioner who heard the submissions knows this too, and clearly recommended that the Conservation Department allow Mr Robertson no leeway to increase the corridor width, or to extend the route for switchbacks to climb out of the Kiwi Burn. Regardless, the proposed cycle trail looks uninviting for most riders.

Mr Robertson should come clean about what his monorail is supposed to achieve. Saving six minutes' travel between Queenstown and Milford Sound, as *Campbell Live* demonstrated, is hardly compelling. He now claims that it's about increasing tourist spending in Te Anau, and that locals who tramp with their families in the Kiwi Burn should be grateful instead of



**Not in our backyard:** Part of Snowdon Forest, where the proposed monorail would run.

**Such a road would present logistical nightmares for volunteer first-responders in Te Anau, who now barely cope with accidents on the Milford Road.**

spitting in his face. The locals might actually know better.

A monorail would double the tourist carbon footprint because Mr Robertson's proposed all-terrain vehicles, monorail and road coaches ensemble will necessarily shuttle back and forth taking visitors to Milford Sound throughout the morning, a batch at a time.

So now he argues that the economic benefits of his monorail would save the country. Well, yes; because calamity is a sure way to increase GDP, as the Christchurch earthquake aftermath rudely demonstrates.

However, if anywhere needs a monorail

to improve productivity and boost the economy, it's between Auckland Airport and Britomart, not Fiordland.

What about a Haast-Hollyford high? Its chief proponent, Darham Havill, maintains (although providing no detail that his private road will cost only \$25 million, and that after 20 years he will magnanimously donate it to the West and Southland district councils.

A road following the Alpine Fault, crossing flood-prone rivers and traversing hills given to collapsing cannot be that cheap. Federated Mountain Clubs and shows it would cost more than \$1 billion.

The two councils are rightly reluctant to take on its high maintenance liability economics stack up only if the intention to build a mining road. Mr Havill's bar are not short of mining experience and the road ever gets the nod, a betting point might wager that it would go only to the Hills asbestos deposits.

Tourist benefits of the proposed road would be minimal. To the average tourist would offer scenery little different from south of Knights Point. Mr Havill maintains that it will strictly follow the 1860s survey route through (but legally outside) Fiordland and Mt Aspiring national parks.

# paradise



but this is physically impossible.

Such a road would present logistical nightmares for volunteer first-responders in Te Anau, who now barely cope with accidents on the Milford Road.

Another 100 kilometres of highway would stretch them to breaking point.

Supporters of a Haast-Hollyford highway ignore the fact that national parks are governed by management plans, developed through wide public consultation. New Zealanders have identified the region south of Haast as a prime remote area. The Olivine Wilderness Area was gazetted in 1997 for its special values.

This happened neither by accident, nor by subterfuge. New Zealand – and indeed the world – has very few places where people can experience such remoteness. It's largely why South Westland was accorded Unesco World Heritage Status.

A road would demolish it completely. Road-bound tourists have all the rest of the West Coast to enjoy.

Mr Havill should spend his money on a private holiday highway somewhere else.

■ Robin McNeill is President of Federated Mountain Clubs, whose 17,000 members throughout New Zealand tramp and climb in our back country.