



In the Maw of the Mokihinui

Quentin Duthie rafts a West Coast river threatened by a hydro dam proposal

Photos: Graham Charles/Image Matters

Rafting the Mokihinui River gorge

“Hold on, get down!” comes the call as we career into the first rapid of the Mokihinui gorge, and that’s really all we can do anyway. After placidly flowing across some extensive flats, the north and south branches of the Mokihinui River join together, but immediately face an obstacle. A jumble of limestone blocks, dislodged from above in earthquakes past, force the flow to converge, turn completely white, and cascade steeply down. At the mercy of the boiling river, our raft of eight paddlers follows the same course.

We emerge from the washing machine in one piece and right-way-up, although the water’s force has bent the aluminium oar of my mate Debs Martin. The grin on guide Tim Marshall’s face shows that he is completely at home in whitewater, and loving it. A professional guide from Murchison-based rafting company *Ultimate Descents*, Tim has prepared us well, but even so, this first rapid comes as a bit of a shock for land-lubbers like me. So I’m relieved when Tim explains that we’re past the most serious rapid on the Mokihinui. What a way to start the day!

Three kayaks – our rescuers if we topple out and also our rafting action-shot photographers – take their turns shooting the rapid: pro paddlers Graham Charles, Ben Jackson and Jess Brown whooping with delight and maximising the manoeuvres on each turn. All in a day’s work for them and our guide, but this whitewater gig is a novel experience for me.

The Mokihinui River has called me for many years, but I am yet to actually tramp there. This despite twice planning ambitious trips but

aborting them because of poor weather forecasts. An avid reader of tramping guidebooks, including Derek Shaw’s 1991 *North West Nelson Tramping Guide*, descriptions of the alluring mudstone of the South Branch and magnificent forest in the gorge, and the single photograph of a sweeping bend of the discoloured river under blue sky, are indelibly etched in my mind.

Somewhat ironically, I have Meridian Energy to thank for finally forcing a visit to the Mokihinui, to see for myself the gorge that they plan to dam, and by raft rather than my usual pack-and-boots mode.

In early April I joined a crew of like-minded folk to raft the gorge from the Forks Hut to the Rough and Tumble Lodge, roughly the length of the proposed dam. The rafting trip was a treat for a humble trumper who maintains a healthy respect for New Zealand rivers, especially given my limited aquatic skills. The perspective of a South Island gorge from a raft proves quite different to that seen tramping along a sidle track.

Below the Mokihinui's top rapids is Lake Perrine, formed by the 1929 Murchison Earthquake and now reverting to river beside large sand-gravel flats. The sluggish current gives us paddlers a chance to recover from the excitement of the top rapid, to practice a few more moves and to note the river features: the stands of kowhai on the banks, the change from limestone to granite and the different stages of regeneration on slips. The Mokihinui area and much of south Kahurangi is scarred from the large Murchison and 1968 Inangahua quakes. Of interest to an amateur botanist like me is the Mokihinui's extensive, almost weed-free, regeneration on the slips.

At the next bend, the gorge proper begins – where the walls steepen and the valley narrows – and where the top of the proposed hydro lake will reach. We enter the river that will be lost if Meridian gets its way. The slopes above the gorge lie blanketed by mature beech-podocarp forest with flashes of still-flowering rata; tutu and manuka compete on regenerating slips. And all the time a wide open, bright blue sky makes the cool air and water temperatures of autumn quite tolerable.



Much of the gorge comprises long, deep, dark green pools, home to the long-lived long-finned eel, and we need to paddle to keep the raft moving. Between pools come boulder-garden rapids, some quite long and requiring navigation to steer the raft though. The Mokihinui is renowned for its floods, where average flows of 90 cumecs swell to a mind-boggling 1840 cumecs in one-in-two-year floods. This is plainly evident in the gorge, where the sides are bare for

WILLIS'S WALKABOUTS

Cultural Kakadu

For more than a year senior Kakadu Aboriginal traditional owner Violet Lawson has offered short bush tucker and culture walks near Cooina. We trialed Violet's tour on some of our trips last year. **Everyone who took part thought it was excellent.** Several said it was the one of the highlights of their trip. How could we leave it out?

Violet's tour will now be included on most of our trips that spend the night in Cooina – at no additional charge.

Come and enjoy it with us, and understand more about the landscapes through which you will walk on our Kakadu trips.

12 Carrington St Millner NT 0810
walkabout@ais.net.au

www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au

Phone 61 8 8985 2134





An aerial view of the Mokihinui River gorge

many metres above normal water, licked clean by regular scouring.

At lunch we bask on bedrock mounds, entertained by a long-fin eel that comes to investigate the raft – how can a fish be cute and ugly at the same time? The tall forest of Anderson's Flat is majestic and I'm shocked to think that 300-odd hectares of this magnificent forest will be inundated if the dam proceeds.

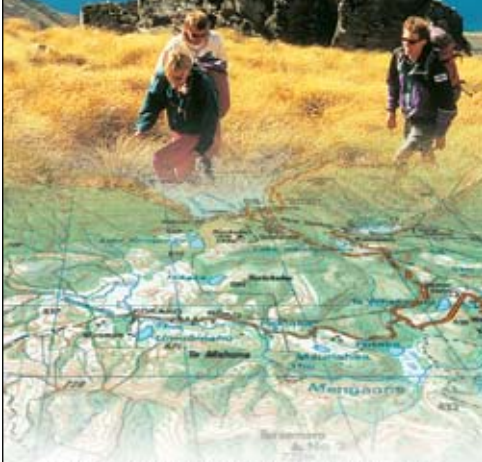
Further down-river, the afternoon shadows lengthen and we pause at Rough and Tumble Creek. The old pack track route to Karamea left the gorge here, and the remains of the historic Iron Bridge (a sister to the Iron Bridge in the Buller gorge) has lain forlornly on the riverbank since the 1929 quake toppled it. Such historic relics would also vanish beneath the artificial lake.

We eventually emerge from the gorge and pass the final steep-sided constriction that the dam wall would span. I try to imagine 85 vertical metres of concrete above us, and there is sobering silence on the raft, beneath which burns growing anger at the hydro plan. I rather lamely joke that Tim could rename his company *Ultimate Dissents* for the purpose of the campaign against the dam proposal. Physical exertion has also made us reflective; paddling some of the river's slower stretches has exercised muscles that I didn't know existed.

Dwelling on my experience of the Mokihinu gorge, its whitewater rapids and long green-water pools, it is clear that an accessible yet exhilarating whitewater opportunity could be lost. The Mokihinu is one of the few rivers on the Coast that is challenging enough to create a quality whitewater experience, yet it is also a suitably wild river for first-timers like me; a perfect introduction to the joys of whitewater recreation in wild places, yet still attractive to old hands.


If the river is dammed, the benefits will be a flat-water playground, probably more dominated by jet-skis than the idyllic punt boat depicted in one of Meridian's photo-shopped images. Despite the significant loss of white water and wild river values, Meridian staff did not even mention these values in their presentation to the FMC June AGM, preferring to try and woo us with a recreation 'mitigation package'.

Discover more with Memory-Map







Plan and prepare your next outing with easy-to-use interactive maps and charts. Stunning 3D views. Print out custom maps. Program your GPS or Plot in real time.

Memory-Map navigation software helps you plan your routes and plot your position on PC or Pocket PC. Richly detailed full colour maps and charts are easy to understand, and the performance review features lets you see and play back your track.



Distributed in New Zealand by Ampro Sales Ltd.



Find us in your local
Outdoors Store or visit us at
www.memory-map.co.nz

memory-map
PREPARED FOR ADVENTURE

Most of the historic pack track through the gorge, and associated relics, will be inundated – although Meridian has plans to tell the history through interpretation panels on a new, relocated track above the high tide mark.

A trust has also been formed to pursue the idea of a dual-purpose track from Seddonville to the Buller, extending the track up the South Branch and down the old Lyell pack track to end in the Buller valley. This is the tramping route described in Shaw's *North West Nelson Tramping Guide*. Funnily enough, the Green Party proposed a high-standard track on this route in 2000 as part of an economic package for the West Coast, following the end of native logging. Developing a track here is not a bad idea, but it seems DOC will still pick up most of the cost, begging the question as to why the track needs the dam! Personally, the appeal of the route would severely diminish if the Mokihinui Gorge disappeared under an artificial lake.

Meridian's recreation package attempts to make up for the lost opportunities, but the

company plays off one type of recreation for another: a supreme white-water gorge is lost, while a new track and flat-water lake will be created. The simple fact is that we can always transform wildness into accessible and developed recreation opportunities; but we cannot recreate wildness. Replacement of wild landscapes with a designed recreational experience is a bridge of no return. FMC is the leading advocate for preserving wild places in their wild state in New Zealand – we are not just about the creation of tracks, huts and other recreational opportunities. In this sense, FMC's campaign to save the Mokihinui in its natural state is a natural fit – we know that wild rivers are not renewable.

But there are also other reasons to question the need for and the impact of the proposed dam. The Mokihinui is one of New Zealand's most valuable rivers for biodiversity, particularly of the aquatic variety. Some 250,000 long-fin eels are estimated to live there. Eels and whitebait need to migrate to and from the sea and are simply incompatible with an 85 m dam

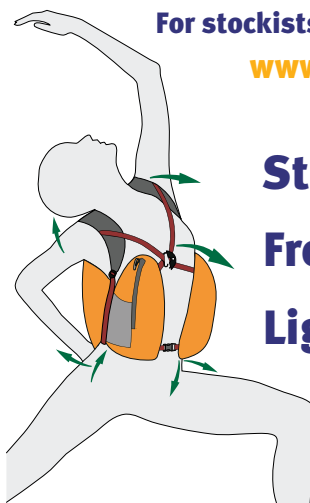


THE WORLD'S FIRST BODY-CENTERED LOAD-CARRYING



African women can carry 20% of their bodyweight with no additional exertion by walking upright, but the load is unstable.

With a FlowMo Bodypack you can save energy by walking upright with the weight balanced front and back and the load is stable.



For stockists and mail order see

www.aarnpacks.com

Straighten up!
Free up!
Lighten up!

PACERPOLES

THE WORLD'S FIRST LEFT AND RIGHT-HANDED TREKKING POLES

"The Pacerpoles are really like going from an old hard-tail mountain bike to one of the new XC bikes – light, plush and you are able to keep your power to the ground while staying fresher." – Mark Inglis on Everest.





PATAGONIA




**SMALL GROUP
HIKING TOUR**
22 AMAZING DAYS
FROM 12TH FEB '09
**Free dossier call
0800 874 748**



www.southernexposuretours.co.nz

Africa
Walking and climbing safaris



Mt Kilimanjaro
Lower Zambezi
Botswana - Linyanti
Cape Town + Winelands
Greater Kruger National Park

African Safaris Ltd
Ph: 0800 528 101
www.africansafaris.co.nz

wall. Meridian sought to suppress a Landcare Research report which rather starkly concluded that there is no way to mitigate the impact on the river's biodiversity.

One must also question why the first step in solving energy demand problems is to dam another river – are there no alternatives? The West Coast currently has a large shortfall of supply and faces rapid growth in demand over the next 10 years. However, the Mokihinui is not the only solution. The Arnold scheme will likely go ahead, which would triple local supply and almost meet current demand. Focusing on the demand side, there are other options too. Demand growth on the West Coast is not driven by population growth and hairdryers: two main sources of demand growth are dairy farming and coal mining, both of which have efficiency and co-generation options. We should require such industries to explore all these options before we sacrifice another wild river to feed their growth.

Saving the Mokihinui in some ways reflects the campaign to protect the Franklin River in Tasmania. In 1973 Lake Pedder, a unique 900-



hectare moraine lake with a striking 300-hectare beach of pink quartz sand was inundated for just 60 megawatts. That loss stirred the public consciousness in Tasmania, and when a plan to flood the wild Franklin River arose in the 1980s there was an angry response from those who sought to protect wilderness from unnecessary development. People converged on the small West Coast town of Strahan from far and wide. A battle of ideology ensued: development at all costs versus wilderness for its own sake. The protracted, highly-charged and intensely polarised campaign, with thousands arrested and protest flotillas blocking access, eventually resulted in the Federal Government intervening to protect the river. Twenty-five years ago, a 1983 court decision protected the Franklin from drowning and it is now part of the Franklin, Lower-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park.

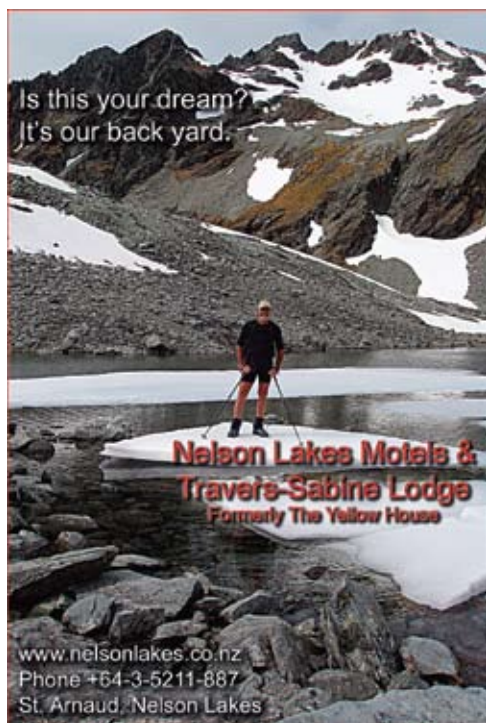
The Mokihinui River and its tributaries drain a vast area to the south-east of Kahurangi National Park. Perhaps, like the Franklin, the Mokihinui should gain national park status, by being incorporated into Kahurangi. Certainly, there could be no more worthy addition to our second-largest national park.

Quentin Duthie is a new member of the FMC executive. Read more about him in the Executive Profile.

Further Reading and Information:

'Mokihinui Magic' by Debs Martin, in *Forest & Bird*, May 2008; 'Line in the Sand' by Linley Hargreaves, in *NZ Wilderness*, July 2008; 'Tramping the Mokihinui' by Marcus King, in *NZ Wilderness*, July 2008; *North West Nelson Tramping Guide* By Derek Shaw, Nikau Press, 1991

www.mokihinui.org, www.forestandbird.org.nz/conservation/freshwater/mokihinui.asp, www.meridianenergy.co.nz/OurProjects/Mokihinuihydroproposal, www.wrap.org.nz





SEEK ADVENTURE



alpine pot



titanium stove



adventure lantern

www.kovea.co.nz

Photo: Patrick Vetsch / Goulard Downs, Heaphy Track, Kahurangi National Park

GOOD TIMES GREAT GROUP ACCOMMODATION

Why not team up your next outdoor adventure with a YHA hostel?

- Private en-suites, double, twin or multi-share rooms.
- Independent Qualmark quality assured accommodation.
- Close proximity of hostels to all the great tramping and hiking tracks.
- Excellent self catering facilities.
- Hassle free activity bookings at the YHA hostel travel desk.
- Drying rooms*.

* Available at some hostels.
For more details, please ask at time of booking.

With 51 hostels nationwide YHA New Zealand has the facilities and locations to make your tramping and hiking trips easy to organise and affordable



0800 278 299
info@yha.co.nz
www.yha.co.nz



BEFORE AND AFTER

At left the Mokihinui Gorge as it appears now; and at right how it would look after inundation. Map: Geographx



Hemphill River

Mokihinui
(North Branch)

Mokihinui (South Branch)

Lake
Perrine

Maori Ck

Specimen Ck

GLASGOW RANGE

Rough & Tumble Ck

RADIANT RANGE

road to Karamea

Coal Ck

Mokihinui River

Seddonville

Chasm Stream

road to Westport