

A tribute to John Newton

7 JULY 1945–6 JUNE 2018

John Newton was a lifelong Forest & Bird champion who inspired many generations of children to care for the natural world.

Many primary school children from the Wairarapa and across the country owe their introduction to the magic of the natural world, from coast to bush, to John Newton, who was particularly gifted and passionate conservationist and teacher.

For John's students, in a more relaxed time before the constraints of OSH (occupational safety and health), the annual class camp was a highlight and focus of each school year. Even today, years later, people talk of his uncanny ability to inspire his charges, from whatever socio-economic demographic, with a thirst for learning and for science.

At the same time John was introducing those young minds to Forest & Bird for he was a lifelong champion of the society and a great ambassador for it. So much so that at his funeral and gathering afterwards the Forest & Bird connection came up again and again. Having no membership forms on the pew seats was certainly a lost opportunity!

That long involvement with Forest & Bird saw him embroiled in the major national issues of the time, such as saving the Okarito and Pureora forests. But he also brought the principles and values of those heady campaigns home to the Wairarapa and the contentious local environmental debates there. This included advocating against the so-called "Polder" scheme for Lake Wairarapa Moana – a Netherlands-style plan to construct



large-scale embankments to cut off extensive areas of wetland for pumps to drain and convert to dairy pasture. That would have severely compromised what is said to be the second most important habitat for our native wading birds in Aotearoa.

There was also the proposal to take water from a major tributary of the Ruamahanga river, the Waingawa, and channel it into a dammed valley to provide the head for a hydroelectric power station – thereby leaving a long stretch of the river with minimal flow. Thanks in part to opposition from Forest & Bird and others, the idea was shelved but a scheme with a similar footprint is again on the table. But this time the driver is not electricity but irrigation and the local branch is again involved trying to stop it happening, with support from Forest & Bird's national office.

John was a man ahead of his time with a then seemingly preposterous idea to construct a predator-proof fence across much of the top of the South Island, including most of the Marlborough Sounds where John and Rosemary had purchased an isolated haven. What he was advocating then seems now to be not so outlandishly ambitious at all!

John was the high-profile face of Forest & Bird in the Wairarapa for many years. He also served three years on the National Executive, which he regarded as a personal highlight in his life. The society could not have wished for a more committed and capable representative.

■ **Chris Peterson**

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Photo: Bryce McQuillan

CROCHET FOR CONSERVATION

A big Forest & Bird thank you to Jin Lee, who donated more than \$1,000 from the sale of her homemade crochet soft toys, including a kererū, to help our conservation projects take off this year.

Jin, who lives in Auckland, said: "Forest & Bird does some exceptional work for everyone in our community, so it was a real privilege for me to be able to contribute to your cause."

Check out Jin's latest designs at <https://www.instagram.com/jingerjam/>.

