

**Media release – December 27, 2006**

**Protect the high country or NZ's crown jewels will be laid out for the picking– says international landscape expert**

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New Zealand's semi-arid high country and basins need to be protected in perpetuity before the face of the landscape is ruined says an international landscape architect.

The country must put the brakes on high country tenure review so integrated management can be addressed, Di Lucas, former president of the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects (NZILA), said today.

Ms Lucas, a delegate to the international landscape organisation, said areas like the Mackenzie basin could end up like the large tracts of dairy farm country increasingly covering the Canterbury Plains.

“All the high country lease land should stay in Crown ownership, at least in the interim. These are sensitive and special lands, in special places, that should not just be tossed into the market place for perhaps short-term transformations.

“The lower high country is rich in natural values but vulnerable. They are our water catchments for the lowlands and for the power schemes for NZ. The legislation requires ecological sustainability, but that is being ignored.

“The lower high country is a special part of the planet and has to be protected forever.”

She said the high country landscape resource is precious to New Zealand. It is not just the rugged mountains that are iconic, but their context: the great valleys and basins that they rise above.

“Even though not in a pristine state, basins such as Mackenzie are internationally significant for their landscape character. Their naturalness as well as their heritage value in the Kiwi psyche. Irrigation is having a major impact on basin landscapes.

“Irrigation schemes are being installed or sought in various of the flatter lowlands, the basins and valleys, such as the upper

Waitaki, toward Omarama, the Ashburton lakes basin and Upper Clutha. You can see the change from semi-natural cover to vividly green square or round paddocks is a massive landscape change. The character of the semi-arid landscapes is being lost. “

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The floor of the Mackenzie basin was all potentially irrigable and would transform the iconic semi-arid landscape to a cultivated landscape. The character of the Mackenzie was not merely from the alps forming the spinal backdrop, it was primarily from the naturalness and wildness, and the heritage stories still able to be read, in the floor lands, she said.

Much of the Mackenzie lands have never ever been cultivated. It would be a huge change to do so now to convert from short tussock grasslands to irrigated and intensive pasture, such as for dairying. This would totally alter the landscape character.

“The basin floors will become just like the Canterbury Plains, and lose their distinctiveness. Massive change is already occurring on land between Twizel and Omarama in the Waitaki, and in parts of the Ashburton lakes basin. With the loss of these there is widespread concern at the landscape consequences.”

Hundreds of residential blocks are either approved or proposed in the high country basins, such as around the major lakes of Wanaka, Wakatipu, Pukaki, Tekapo and Ohau. The apparent scale, remoteness, wildness and naturalness is diminished with residential activity, Ms Lucas said.

Protection of high country character is a New Zealand-wide issue. Along with coasts, they are New Zealand's most-loved landscapes: hence the great sales of Graham Sydney paintings in Auckland and Wellington.

Just about every new big development proposal around the Wakatipu, Wanaka, Pukaki and Tekapo is on land that has been freeholded through tenure review providing resorts, houses, gondolas, vineyards and dairy land.

Apart from Queenstown Lakes District Council which had already been swamped with development pressure, the local councils had been sadly quiet in defending their landscape resources that are major assets in their territories, she said.

“The Department of Conservation is supposed to advocate for landscape protection. Sadly its track record in tenure review shows that it does little for landscape protection in our valleys and basins. DOC focuses too narrowly on mountain-top biodiversity and recreation, and largely ignores the valley

resource which is the most valued viewed and enjoyed in being the scene-setters for high country experience.

``Given the lack of government advocacy for looking after important high country landscapes, the High Country Landscape Group of NZILA is very nervous about the future with the insatiable demand for residential and visitor development, and for intensified agricultural landuse.

``With freeholding into a landscape management vacuum, our crown jewels are being laid out for the picking.”

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Media advisory: For further information, comment, interviews or photos please contact Di Lucas on 03 365 0789 or 027 232 5690, or Kip Brook at Word of Mouth Media NZ on 0275 033855