

UNEXPLORED PLAYGROUND

John McCrone

The opening up of the vast St James conservation area to the public could be seen as a great leap of faith. Will it be used or abused? John McCrone took a trip into the high country near Hanmer Springs.

A pocket paradise. A Kiwi Shangri-La. For nearly a century St James Station, a triangular wedge of North Canterbury high country behind Hanmer Springs, has been off limits, ruled over by a fiercely private farming family.

One of the South Island's biggest pastoral leases, a block about 25 kilometres by 40km running over two rivers and three mountain ranges, St James has remained almost semi-mythical even to locals.

It is a snapshot of every Canterbury highlight in one place. Flat, glacier-carved terraces, steep snow-capped ranges, dark beech forests, glinting streams and marbled torrents. Wild pigs filtering in and out of the bushline, chamois skittering across the upper scree, huge, fat brown trout lazing in unfished pools.

And uniquely, the thundering hooves of wild horses galloping across the grassy plains - the legendary herd of St James clydesdale crosses, rounded up every few years and sold off as tough "southern man" working steeds.

Well, this little paradise has been bought for the public - if for a controversially large sum - and on November 20, there will be a celebration, with the official ribbon-cutting of a new 64km mountain bike track, part of Prime Minister John Key's promised national chain of cycleways. All good keen bikers are invited to come and give it a try.

But St James, a vast natural park on the doorstep of Hanmer Springs, the headwaters of both the Clarence and the Waiau rivers, offers so much more. Four-day tramps, freedom camping, horse-trekking, kayaking, hunting and fishing, and even four-wheel driving - all the recreational possibilities that, apart from the walking, are normally treated as heresy on conservation land.

It is all a bit of an experiment really. The Department of Conservation (DOC) was handed responsibility for this "jewel in the crown", as DOC South Island manager John Cumberpatch puts it, when the Government's Nature Heritage Fund blew most of its budget in buying St James for \$40 million from the Stevenson family in 2008.

Quite frankly, says Cumberpatch, the purchase came as a surprise to DOC and the question quickly became just what do you do with a station this big, this special, which has effectively been someone's private kingdom for so long?

DOC traditionalists might have wanted it tightly managed, returned to some kind of pre-farming natural state, with grudging access even for trampers.

"We could have run the process and made it a national park. Which would've meant you can't do this or that."

Or it could have gone the Molesworth Station route - the rather more barren, if even larger, high-country farm bordering St James to the eastern side of the Clarence River. Molesworth was transferred from the ownership of another government department to DOC's control in 2005, but remained a working cattle station, greatly limiting any public use.

Instead, says Cumberpatch, St James has become a test case for a new, more commercially driven approach to the South Island's scenic splendour, one where DOC is being challenged to see green values, recreation and economic development going hand in hand.

Cumberpatch and his staff, like Waimakariri area manager Kingsley Timpson, do not like to admit it, but they are nervous. Their plan is to open up St James with as few initial public restrictions as possible.

The idea, says Timpson, who has the daily hands-on responsibility, is to see who turns up and what they want to do. That will shape the long-term strategy for this new high-country conservation park. But the risk is that it will take only a few hoons running riot with a four-wheel-drive or the wrong sort of pig hunters deciding to make a bonfire out of a heap of DOC hut mattresses for him to be left looking silly. "All I need is one bad weekend and it could be career-ending," says Timpson ruefully.

The morning is shaping up to be another spectacular blue-sky Canterbury day, just right for a spin on this new St James mountain bike track and, courtesy of DOC, a quick flick around the whole estate in a helicopter.

St James has, in fact, been quietly open to trampers and hunters for a couple of years, but with the cycleway and four-wheel-drive access complete, DOC feels this summer is the time to publicise its existence.

Press photographer Iain McGregor and myself hitch a ride out in Timpson's DOC Hilux. The ruins of an old homestead marking the entrance to St James Station are just minutes over the hill from Hanmer Springs.

Timpson says the Stevenson family, who own several other farms spread around the Hurunui, never lived much on the station, because the winters were too harsh. But as part of the purchase deal, they have been allowed to keep three of the properties on the spread as their summer baches.

Pass the front gate, it is then 25km of shingle to the top end of the cycleway at Maling Pass. The first part of the St James trail is classified grade 3 - "occasional steep slopes and loose gravel". The middle section is grade 4 - "most riders will find some sections easier to walk".

In the helicopter, we later see some of that grade 4 - a path across a high tarn that heads for a cliff edge then drops over the side with the faintest suggestion of a zigzag route down. Good grief. And real mountainbike trails go up to grade 5. Just the cliff edge, I suppose.

St James is clearly rather more testing than you might expect of a link in Key's trumpeted national cycleway. Intending to return home in one piece, I have opted for just the tourist taster - continuing on over Maling Pass in the Hilux and then pedalling the softer stretch along the Waiau River to tiny Lake Guyon.

As the Hilux strains in bottom gear up some of the hills, and graunches its tow bar in the equally sharp gullies, this is looking a sound decision, although that could be a biking wuss talking.

Timpson says his sister-in-law from Blenheim managed pretty much the whole trail the previous day on an old clanker with cable brakes that were about gone by the end.

The sun is high as we set off. McGregor whizzes along, occasionally trying to take photos with a camera in one hand. I am more intent on sucking in air at the top of each of the small sharp climbs, then avoiding the slushier patches of gravel on the way back down.

When it comes to a couple of shallow stream crossings, I simply shut my eyes and plough through, hoping not to be toppled off sideways by some unseen boulder.

Timpson says this is all part of the learning. How tough do people want their countryside?

DOC has a manual that grades its trails, signage and facilities, ranging from state highway pit stops – those 10 minute garden path loops through the bush and back to the picnic table – to the barely marked, “you’d better know what you’re doing” true adventurer’s terrain.

Eyeing me up, Timpson says that in DOC parlance, I would be classified a “back country comfort seeker”. Our sort want to get out into the beautiful New Zealand landscape, but believe huts should have good mattresses, and long drops a handle-marked flush.

It would be nice if DOC did something about the sandflies too, I add. A few have settled on our legs as we sit in a scrubby clearing of matagouri waiting for our helicopter to arrive, but they turn out not to have much of a bite.

A few minutes later, from the air, we start to see the full spread of St James’s attractions. The helicopter swoops past several suspension bridges being built just for the cycleway.

Timpson says each one is a big cost, but they add spectacle to the ride and they worked out cheaper than the alternative of cutting a route through some impassable bluffs.

Key’s national cycleway push was certainly happy timing for Timpson.

“Normally this trail would’ve taken five to seven years to develop, but we’ve been able to get it all done in one”.

Heading up the Waiau River valley, we can see the dots of a few fishermen and hunters. Timpson says trout can be taken up to 40 centimetres, but the big trophy-sized browns must be left for breeding. Its long isolation means St James has rivers and lakes as they use to be unthrashed.

Cumberpatch says the station was well managed and lightly farmed by the Stevensons.

“They’d only farmed about 13 per cent of it, and they’d never truckloads of fertiliser on it or turned it up, so it is pretty much in its natural state”.

Since the Stevenson family took it over in 1927, few outsiders have ever set foot on the land. Cumberpatch says even some of the neighbouring station owners saw St James for the first time only when DOC took it over.

“Old Jimmy (Stevenson) was a hard case. It was his right, but he just would not let people on.”

Timpson says the hunting is good for the same reason, particularly the pigs. We pass several groups of pig hunters camped at the riverside on the way in, packing to go home after a successful weekend.

With a gleam in his eye, one tells us how pleased he is. A clever old boar got away by popping back out of the bush every now and then to check on his pursuers, always staying one step ahead. However, three other large hogs are now strapped to the top of the trailer, dripping blood on the still-excited dogs stowed below. Crates of empties tell of the celebrations the previous night.

Timpson says pig hunters have a name for being a rough crowd, but this lot look sensible – here for the sport rather than rark the place up.

He says the plan for St James is, in fact, to encourage as much hunting as possible during the next few years, because that will get the game down, helping with both the conservation side of things and self-limiting the number of hunters who might want to come up here. “The quickest way to get rid of the hunters is to let the good hunters in”.

This is the kind of careful thinking he is having to do. It is the same with four-wheel-drives. There are the responsible club members who go out with in family convoys and stick to the marked routes. Then, because of second-hand imports are so cheap these days, there are those who don’t mind trashing their rides, ripping along riverbeds and stony fields.

Timpson says he hopes for good behaviour and the least restrictions. People are being allowed to camp anywhere they can find flat, dry ground, and ride wherever their horses can reach. The four-wheel-drive access roads may have padlocked gates, but this is only so the drivers have to make themselves known when they ask for the combination code.

The policy is to start with the lightest touch, then tighten up if that proves necessary. Further evidence of this flexible approach comes as the helicopter lies low over the grassy heart of the station.

DOC's first instinct when taking over St James was to get rid of its sheep and cattle, and its iconic wild horses.

Cumberpatch says this was a no-brainer. The Stevensons might have developed a well-loved and hardy breed, but horses have no place against a natural New Zealand backdrop. DOC quickly learnt from the howls of protest, however, that this was a bad move.

Early on, DOC ran a consultation exercise, hosting a joint visit for every possible interest group as part of its effort to find what people might want to do with a publicly-owned station, and it was pointed out that horses running free across the plains was the kind of end-of-day reward that would draw trampers, bikers and tourists to St James.

The commercial angle was obvious. The St James horses could be an instant brand, something that in coming years would identify the conservation park just like whales do Kaikoura, or hut mud pools Rotorua. So DOC relented.

Cumberpatch says the Stevensons will be allowed to maintain a breeding herd of up to 80.

And now, there they are beneath us, stampeding across sparkling streams and weaving through the scrub as our helicopter pilot wheels around, steering them into position against a view of snow-covered peaks for their photo opportunity.

Back at DOC's Christchurch office, Cumberpatch says it should be clear why so much was paid for St James, and the potential it has.

The hope is that St James evolves into a multi-use recreation park for Canterbury people and a drawcard for tourists.

Cumberpatch says it is the variety available in St James that makes it special.

As back country goes, it is also relatively danger free. It might be out of cellphone range – enough these days to cause an adventure frisson in city folk – but it does not have rapidly rising rivers and other common South Island weather hazards.

So it seems ideal for targeting that family outing and comfort seeker group, he says. There is also Hanmer Springs conveniently on the doorstep with all its shops, motels and tour operators.

The township is trying to establish its own niche in a crowded holiday market by tapping into wellness tourism – spas and wineries – heading to the countryside looking to unwind rather than charge up and down hills all day.

“Internationally, there’s this glamping – glamorous camping – where you pay a fortune and when you get there, there is a tent and a nice bottle of pinot noir waiting for you,” says Cumberpatch. He can easily see St James becoming part of this commercial formula. “It’d give people a reason to go to Hanmer Springs and stay five days rather than just one day.”

Nothing has been ruled out at this stage, he adds. If someone comes up with a business plan to run back-country lodges, DOC will be open to it. St James is even big enough that wind farms and hydro dams are not out of the question.

This is why it is an experiment. Conservation is usually taken to mean a long and necessary list of “thou shall nots”, and this still is the case for most Doc-controlled land, but Cumberpatch believes green values are now becoming such a part of general society that people now know how to do environmentally aware developments and leisure operations.

St James will be a test case to see if that is true. So this summer, the gates are being swung fully open. It will be up to its visitors not to stuff things up.