

Geoff Button's Flora Treasure Chest

The plants that grow in New Zealand are an interesting mix of primitive and modern. The fact that the New Zealand landmass has been isolated for so long as it travelled across the Tasman Sea has brought about some interesting characteristics as they have adapted to life in the South Pacific. The rift in the ocean floor that caused this expansion of the Tasman Sea has stopped and healed now and the New Zealand landmass is fairly stationary but is actually growing upwards with the convergence of the Indo-Australian and Pacific plates. As New Zealand has drifted across the Tasman Sea it has grown high and then been eroded down to be largely below the sea which is evident with nearly all the fossils found here being marine in origin with only sparse fossils of terrestrial species in Central Otago and Hawke's Bay. This may also be explained by the fact that New Zealand has had some extensive volcanic activity and tectonic activity which cause much of the fossil record to be destroyed.

The plant species would have been confined to small areas and as the landmass rose again, they would have colonised the land again. As this process was going on, more advanced species came via wind dispersal and by chance colonisation across the sea.



The Pohutukawa with its fine light seeds (pictured above) have been distributed from the Gondwanaland super continent all around the South Pacific region by strong winds associated with the "Roaring 40's".

New Zealand has many primitive species such as mosses, hornworts and ferns. The group of species called the Gymnosperms are very well represented with most of them falling into the group of plants called Podocarps. These are mostly in the form of large tall trees which dominate many of the lowlands. Later arrivals through mainly wind distribution include the daisies and the Myrtaceae as well as many others. From week to week, I will introduce a group of plants with some interesting facts which can help you in interpret these plants for visitors to New Zealand and also just to develop your interest in the wonderful flora that surrounds us.

Geoff Button