Dr George Mason may be Taranaki’s most generous environmental benefactor.

The retired scientist has been donating to education, ecology, science, the arts, and publication for decades, has contributed millions to further research and interest in the natural world that captivated him as a boy growing vegetables for his family’s table in World War II.
His biggest single contribution was $5 million to fund a research centre named after him at his alma mater, University of Auckland, where he began life as a student researcher in the fields of chemistry, botany, ecology and environmental science in 1948.

Aged 87, he lives busily at his long-time home overlooking the Taranaki coast at Waireka, with its view of Paritutu and attendant Sugar Loaf Islands, employing humour and wit to counter nature’s insistence on a gradual physical slowdown.

There is lots to do - a book to be finished, phone calls to field, philanthropic matters to manage, science yet to explore, the mountain to watch (via webcams), friends to care about, a hobby orchard and beehives to tend - and much contemplation with a brain that knows no obstacles.

It seemed a simple enough mission: walk with George Mason along a short bush track on Mt Taranaki and photograph him. But the 20-minute trek took four times longer than Rob Tucker expected - three hours in, 20 minutes back.

The reason was Mason knew every plant in the bush, its proper name, its characteristics, its purpose in the order of things in the natural world the scientist has studied, nurtured and venerated for nearly eight decades.

“We stopped every few paces on the way in,” recalls Tucker. “He knew everything that grew there, and he could tell me everything about it.”

The photographer experienced first-hand the extraordinary mind of a man whose mission has been to expand our knowledge of the natural world. He’s been its champion since he fell in love with plants at the age of 10, growing vegetables on a spare section on Auckland’s North Shore during the Second World War.

“They were called ‘victory gardens’,” Mason remembers. “Grow your own food for victory. It was in the early years of the war and New Zealand felt very threatened as the Japanese headed our way. We were only saved by the Americans winning the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942.

“There was this section next door to where we lived, and my father asked permission to mow it and maintain it. He started growing vegetables there, as well – potatoes, brassicas, legumes, all food for the family table. That got me interested in plants for the first time.”
How fitting that 70 years later he would be awarded the 2010 New Zealand Plant Protection Medal for “his immense contribution to plant protection in a career spanning more than 56 years in the agrichemical business”.

Mason first climbed Mt Taranaki in 1950 while an undergraduate student at University of Auckland.

It captured his imagination, not just as a place to tramp, climb and ski, but for the opportunities it offered to study plant ecology in a defined corridor from sea level to 1800 metres.

It offers, he says, the most perfect example in New Zealand of “an altitudinal zonation of plants”.

“In the 1930s when I was only six, my dad took my brother down to climb Ngauruhoe, Ruapehu and Egmont as it was then called, and I recall their stories. I started tramping in the Waitakeres and the Hunuas in Auckland, then the central mountains, but Taranaki was the one I was most interested in.

“In fact, I wanted to do my masters degree thesis on plant ecology relating to Mt Taranaki, but unfortunately my botany professor said he wouldn’t be able to supervise it properly, so I did a seashore study at Ngataringa Bay off Bayswater in Auckland’s North Shore.”

After graduating in 1956, Mason got his first job as a research chemist with Ivon Watkins Limited in New Plymouth, a move that began an association with Taranaki’s environment that has involved numerous organisations and many accolades.

He is a long-time member of the Friends of Pukekura Park, a former president of the Taranaki Alpine Club and a life member of that and the Stratford Mountain Club, as well as of the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust.

Former New Plymouth Deputy Mayor Lyn Bublitz said of him: “At Pukeiti, his expertise in weed and pest control has helped enormously to conserve and re-establish the original forest. George’s interest, combined with his scientific knowledge, has made a huge difference to Taranaki’s environment.”

Mason joined the Forest & Bird Society in the 1950s and chaired the North Taranaki branch in the 70s. For his support of environmental and ecological education, the branch nominated him for the rare “Old Blue” Award, named after the Chatham Islands black robin called Old Blue, the last productive female of her species in the 70s.

He chaired the Egmont National Park Board’s Scientific Committee for many years, is a long-time member of the New Zealand Institute of Agricultural Science, a Rotary Paul Harris Fellow, and a New Plymouth City Citizens Awardee, as well.

Mason funded web cameras that constantly film Egmont National Park for the Taranaki Alpine Club and Stratford Mountain Club websites: “I check out what’s happening on the mountain
every day,” he says. He’d rather be there in person, but four knee replacements, one shoulder reconstruction, and a pending new hip mean he’s unable to climb these days.

He’s been to the summit more than 100 times, once on New Year’s Eve so he could ski down and claim he was probably the world’s first skier in the new year.

He’s one of those people who can say they’ve skied in the morning and swum in surf in the afternoon of the same day.

Rather than dwell on all that, however, he spends much of his time ensuring we continue to know more and more about the region’s environment. He does it by funding research and education.

Money accumulated by his charitable trust is dispensed by the hundreds of thousands each year to students, universities, museums and schools.

Locally, these include Westown, West End and Marfell primary schools, and recently New Plymouth Boys High School to support a new agri-business course.

To commemorate his uncles, who helped the family during his school years, he established the Mason Brothers Scholarship in engineering at Otago Boys High School, where they were pupils early last century.

There’s also a mathematics scholarship at Takapuna Grammar School in memory of Mason’s brother, Warren, who was dux there. There’s another at Whakatane High School where Warren was head of maths for a couple of decades.

Greymouth High School gets an annual scholarship in memory of Mason’s care-giver, who was from the West Coast. There is also an annual scholarship at King’s College, preferably for Māori students from Taranaki.

As well as providing money for the newly launched George Mason Centre for the Natural Environment at University of Auckland, he has supported more than 30 doctoral students to study natural sciences, including some at the scene of Mason’s own PhD studies, University of California, Davis.

Some projects have focused on Taranaki. For example, George Mason Puke Ariki Scholarships have gone to Sarah Jane Withers to study the behaviour and genetic makeup of New Zealand’s smallest bird, the rifleman; to Kirsten Thompson to investigate the strandings of beaked whales; Oliver Deutschle to look at the geological stability of Mt Taranaki; and Geoffrey Lerner to work out the sequence of the mountain’s most recent volcanic activity.

Mason has provided seeding money for a range of books and pamphlets on Taranaki’s native plants, birds and special landscapes, including Six Taranaki Shorebirds. He gave funding for equipment and web resources to monitor penguin populations, as well as helping with a revamp of Marine Education Centre at Port Taranaki.

He funded research publications by staff at Te Papa Museum. “We’ve also done one on Taranaki’s seashore animals and plants, a little booklet for schoolkids.”
One of his latest interests is research on the unique sponges off the White Cliffs in North Taranaki. He has bought the Victoria University project an underwater vehicle and paid for a PhD student from the UK to undertake the study. Another project is to fund Waikato University to do extensive, long-term environmental research in Taranaki.

Most of us were probably surprised when Sir Bob Jones announced he’ll build the world’s tallest wooden office building in Wellington.

But not George Mason. The laminated timber construction method likely to be used in Jones’ building has been developed with the help of something the Zelam company invented – a safe way to stop decay in engineered wood products.

Zelam, the company Mason and business partner Dr Peter Hayward started in 1988, spent 10 years perfecting an idea Mason worked on over decades. It involves impregnating laminated timber with fungicide so the finished product doesn’t fall prey to organisms causing decay.

They succeeded to such an extent that glueline laminated timber buildings became durable. It meant they could later sell Zelam for many millions to Swiss multi-national company Lonza in 2015.

It’s one of the many discoveries made by Mason over his long career as an applied scientist, work that has led to valuable patents and intellectual property.

“Not being a super-specialist in one very narrow area, I’ve had a pretty broad background in science, and lots of ideas and opportunities,” he says.

The timber treatment one arose from his early time at Ivon Watkins Ltd, when he was looking for ways to move away from dangerous methods used for treating timber. “Some mill sites were contaminated with either arsenicals or pentachlorophenol, which was notorious with its dioxins.

“One thing I got onto was engineered wood products, and the simplest is plywood – can we preserve and protect plywood using the stage when you peel off that veneer and then stick the layers together with bonding glue. The answer is: ‘Yes’.

“I focused on it when Dow Chemical took me to the US in the 1970s. They had an insecticide that was very good for termite control and wood insects, but we needed something more effective for the decay organisms that quickly get into freshly cut Pinus radiata and stain it.

“We experimented with putting horticultural fungicides into the glue used to bond layers of plywood, so it would permeate through the veneers of wood. I kept working on it after I left Ivon Watkins-Dow and we started Zelam, which developed special formulations.

“You laminate up to 20 veneers, and they become beams. So instead of buying the best of the wood and trying to say that’s got structural strength, with engineered wood you can guarantee its structural specification, as with steel. That’s where the added value is.

“And that’s particularly why Zelam was bought by the Swiss company. They paid much more than we could ever have got from a competitive bid in New Zealand, because they’re strongly into the wood protection business.”
Applying science to add value has been Mason’s way of life.

His ideas were let loose after he left IWD in 1986 when controlling company Dow Chemical decided to pursue alternative projects.

They included making shampoo for his rotary club to sell for fundraising, kiwifruit glace for a bakery firm, flavoured milk, a way to treat plants exported from our winter season to that in the northern hemisphere.

It turned out parting ways with IWD couldn’t have come at a worse time: the 1987 sharemarket crash a year later greatly diminished the equity in his retirement investments.

Aged only 57, and physically fit from decades of tramping, skiing and mountaineering, he decided he was too young for retirement, anyway. “I wanted to continue the style of life of travel and the like, so I thought I better go back to work.”

He did freelance consultancy for a while, then teamed up with Hayward, a fellow biologist who had ceased working at IWD and likewise wanted to do something else. They formed Taranaki Nuchem Limited, precursor to Zelam.

“We played around in a farm shed for a while, and then I said: ‘Hey, we better do something serious’. We looked for some industrial land where we could do chemistry work. The first place was at Spotswood, where AJ Cowley had land for development. They offered us half an acre, and prepared the site for us.

“The city council approved it as okay for what we were doing, but they didn’t understand the rules. If you even just mix water with chemicals, you’re in an industrial chemical operation. And so, the newspaper got on to it after a complaint from a neighbour or someone, and it came out as ‘not another Ivon Watkins-Dow in Spotswood’.”

About that time, the council at Whanganui called to tell Mason his company would be welcome there. “Possibly with that in mind, New Plymouth City Council offered land on the former Bell Block airfield. At first it was a block opposite Foodstuffs, so that was never going to work; but eventually a suitable industrial site was found.

“We said the subdivision costs were theirs,” says Mason. “We didn’t have any money. We paid ourselves only $1500 a month in the early years, because that’s all we could afford. I said to Peter: ‘We’ll never mortgage our homes or anything. We’ll grow this show on the profits we make. We’re not going to get deep into financial problems, and we’ll retain ownership that way’.

At first, they scrambled to make agricultural chemical products to sell, mainly by mixing “good old Taranaki water” with concentrated “technicals” they bought from Dow and others. “We’d formulate it with wetting agents and control the pH. We made sanitisers. We had products for the oil industry. It took some years, but we grew that outfit rapidly with plant protection products.”

Mason acknowledges the contribution of his fellow Zelam technical staff. “By their team effort we were able to research projects together and discover and register many new products. Their combined work developed the intellectual property unique to Zelam. Our company provided significant professional employment opportunities, which attracted staff to New Plymouth.”
Two thirds of his 50 percent share of the company’s equity went into the George Mason Charitable Trust after it was formed in 1995. “When we were doing significant business, most of that was eligible for royalties from the knowhow, so there was a big fund built up in the trust even before we sold Zelam.”

Nowadays, the trust’s investments are managed by professional investors, and the terms for donating are very specific – strong on education support, especially post-graduate tertiary education. “I guess I’ve taken up the Yarrow-type support in Taranaki, certainly in tertiary education.”

If he’d been raised in the United States, it’s likely George Mason would’ve had a Roman numeral after his name. Born on Auckland’s North Shore in 1930, the youngest of four children, he’s George William Mason V, the fifth to have that moniker.

Research for a book on his life has uncovered connections back to the 16th century, in England, France, Germany and Italy. It found a few details about George Mason the first, but much more about the second, Dr Mason’s great-grandfather.

GWM II migrated from Kent in the late 1850s, heading first to the goldrush in Melbourne, then to Otago’s version in 1862.

He had no luck finding precious metal, but located something almost as valuable, a source of clean water at Otago Harbour’s Deborah Bay. He began a business supplying it to sailing ships needing ballast for the trip home.

What Mason has found fascinating is the sort of discovery most families make in their trees, in this case an absence of any record that George William II and his wife, Henrietta, were actually married.

Records show she was an accomplished linguist and professor of German literature, who moved in distinguished circles in France and Germany, knew composer Franz Liszt and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and had previously married a Frenchman and had children with him.

There is no sign of a marriage certificate for George and Henrietta, only evidence they knew one another in London. She followed him to Port Chalmers, where they had three children, including George William III.

The family lived in Port Chalmers for about 50 years. Mason has been back and found signs of the mining hut where his grandfather planted a Californian redwood tree in about 1890 (right).

He has supplied plaques that identify that and other trees planted in the centre of Naseby to commemorate the many nationalities of miners who worked the goldfield.

Mason’s father, George William Mason IV, was born at Port Chalmers in 1887. He recalls: “Dad lasted only into standard six at Deborah Bay School. He had to leave because he had a row with the principal, Peg-Leg Pete.

“He was being caned, I understand, and he didn’t take that particularly well. So he tackled Peg-Leg Pete in the good leg and dumped him in the corner, and departed, carving his name on the school gates on the way home.”
His mother, Minnie, said: “What are you doing home at this hour, young George?” He told her, and said he wanted to be a carpenter. He then took up a carpentry apprenticeship at the age of 12, and later began work with his brothers repairing ships at Port Chalmers.

As a ship’s carpenter, Mason’s father headed to the US via Europe, winding up in Canada working in the salmon fishing industry.

During World War I he was conscripted as an engineer into the Canadian army, but couldn’t be sent to the war front in France because he was a New Zealander.

He returned to New Zealand in 1922, joining his family in Auckland, where his brothers had an engineering company.

He met his future wife, Dorace Emily Cooper, who was staying with his sister. They married in 1923 and settled in what would be the Mason family home in Bayswater, North Shore, for more than 80 years.

Mason’s father died not long after the start of World War II, when Mason was 11. His widowed mother did her best to further the education of her younger son, who became head prefect and dux at Belmont School.

They were grateful when assistance came from Mason’s form-master, one Fred Dannefaerd, who later moved to New Plymouth to be headmaster of Westown School.

As a school pupil, Dannefaerd himself had won a scholarship to one of Auckland’s premiere private schools, King’s College, and he encouraged Mason to do the same. Older brother Warren Mason, also dux at Belmont, had already paved the family way into university study and would become a teacher after the war.

Mason sat the scholarship exams and won a King’s bursary of £45 a year. It covered the private school’s fees, but that’s all. To help make ends meet, he did an Auckland Star paper round and became a grocery delivery boy.

Four years at King’s from 1943 to 1947 were followed by a similar stint at the University of Auckland. His bachelor’s degree should have taken three years, but a fourth was needed “because I wasn’t a good student,” he reckons.

That’s undoubtedly an exaggeration, but one thing he struggled with was maths, so a failed paper in that required him to return. “I did a unit in geography in that fourth year, as well, with Dr Kenneth Cumberland, who’d just arrived as the founding professor of geography in New Zealand. I also got a part-time job as an analytical chemist with the Auckland Metropolitan Drainage Board.”

That turned out to be interesting because Dove-Myer Robinson, who would later become Auckland mayor, would use the pilot plant research done by Mason and his senior colleagues to win one of the country’s first great environmental battles. They showed it was feasible to treat the city’s sewage in oxidation ponds at Mangere rather than pipe it untreated into Waitemata Harbour at Brown’s Island.

Two more years were needed at Auckland to get the masters degree. “You had a very intensive study year of specialising in botany for honours papers. I got second class honours in the papers, and therefore got second-class honours in my masters degree. (Laughs) But you can still say you got an MSc with honours.
Now I had to find a job. I was 24, and my mother said: ‘Whatever are you going to do?’ I started applying for jobs in Auckland, because I didn’t want to leave my yachting schoolmates. I tried everywhere, even the oil industry. They had graduate trainee programmes, but you’d never get an answer to your application. “In those days, the only employers of botanists were the government or teaching, and I wasn’t going teaching. I had a bent towards application, I guess – you know, where could I use this education in a wider sense?”

Auckland had nothing, so he spotted the next best thing, a position at Ivon Watkins in New Plymouth, and in 1954 became the company’s No 15 salaried worker. “There were a couple of chemists there before me. Brian Gundersen had been the first chief chemist, and when he moved to business development for new products they needed someone to come in to support his replacement.

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The “poor student” receives an honorary doctorate of science from University of Auckland, conferred in a ceremony at Tūpāre in New Plymouth in 2016. Right: In the gardens at Tūpāre, with Dr Ian Parton, then-Chancellor of the University of Auckland.
“Dan Watkins was quite excited to have a scientist who was not in chemistry. I had experience in laboratory work, and I was particularly involved in quality assurance, tests and formulation development.

“It was almost purely agricultural chemicals then. The was located in Buller St – ‘the Houses of Watkins’. Every now and then, we’d buy another old house so we could expand down the street.”

He’s been in Taranaki for more than 60 years now and would never dream of returning to Auckland to live, although he’s never quite been able to dismiss the significance some locals attach to connections with the first four settler ships.

“It’s been important almost for me to find out which ships my families came on, even if they didn’t make it to New Plymouth. They only made it to Port Chalmers in the 1860s, so we were second class citizens,” he notes with that mischievousness permitted by age.

Mason’s role at Ivon Watkins changed after a couple years. He wanted to get back into the biological side of things, and field trials. “Product development was my aim, for example to replace arsenical chemicals that were sprayed even on city streets, and used by farmers to kill blackberry, as well as the sodium chlorate that was used to burn down ragwort by spot treating.

“My job was the discovery and development of new Weedone products, based on synthetic hormone growth regulators. In wartime, science was looking for chemicals that would selectively control weeds, particularly those in cereal crops. Both the British and the Americans – unbeknown to each other – discovered these synthetic hormones.”

His breakthrough in that period? “To discover the group of products we called Phytazol, which was the key product that made this non-selective industrial chemical mix that I put together. We leased land near the old Bell Block airfield where I could do trial work on a mixture of non-selective herbicides that would kill weeds and control germinating seeds, as well.

“There would be no such thing as a safe weedkiller for the streets. The council had been using coal-tar derivatives from the gasworks here, and that would dissolve the asphalt paving. I remember Sir Russell Matthews, whose business was in tarsealing roads, talking about ‘that dreadful stuff they spray my streets with’.

“The company immediately took it up as a unique product that we developed, and we registered the trademark for Phytazol. In 1956, I spoke about this development to a university visitor from the US, and as a result he initiated an offer for me to teach at the University of California at Davis.

“Dan Watkins could see potential in me to get more advanced training, so he was prepared to pay some money for me to go there. And I was ready…some of my mates had moved on to do PhDs at Oxford. Cambridge. Sydney, you name it. I was the first of my fellow Auckland students to go to the US, and I think the first Kiwi to do a doctorate at UC Davis.”

Watkins gave him study leave for three years, so he retained his New Plymouth job. “I was lent money I was due to pay back when I returned. Dan took out an insurance policy in case I didn’t return, but I did.”

He taught weed science for three years at Davis, and for his PhD worked on the mode of action of a particular synthetic growth regulator chemical that was used as a selective herbicide for cereal crops in Europe.

“We labelled the chemical with a radioactive ability so we could trace it all through the plant. The hydrogen in the molecule was replaced with radioactive tritium, and we could trace it with X-ray film. The image after about four weeks showed where it went in the plant.”

He also looked at an aspect of the path of carbon in photosynthesis.
“The Nobel Prize was awarded in 1960 to a professor at Berkeley University in California.

“He worked out that the carbon from carbon dioxide in the air went through the whole chemical reaction chain to be then fixed in the carbon compounds resulting from photosynthesis.

“We were using some of that technique to work out the mode of action of new herbicides that blocked photosynthesis.”

He left Davis in December 1959 and headed to Europe before coming home.

“I wasn’t in any hurry. I was keen to do a tour of the world first, because once you were home in New Zealand in those days there wasn’t much in the way of sabbatical leave or going on holiday trips like now.”

He spent time in Germany working on a project. He bought a Volkswagen car from the factory in North Germany and toured the Continent down to Italy, where he left it to be shipped home.

“In those days, if you owned a left-hand drive vehicle overseas for more than a year, you could bring home a right-hand drive one duty free. So it cost me £400.”

He slowly set off for New Zealand via Italy, Greece, Beirut and Lebanon, India, finally getting home in March 1960.

“That annoyed Dan. He said to his secretary: ‘Find out where the hell young Mason is.’ My sister told him she’d just had an aerogram from me from Greece. Dan’s response was: ‘When that young bugger gets home I’ll sure Greece him’.”

When he got back, Ivon Watkins was still in Buller St but preparing to move to new premises at Paritutu, where its successor, Dow AgroSciences, remains to this day.

“I can tell you, life back here was in direct comparison to the University of California. In that first year home, I was offered a university job back in California, followed by another as pre-director of research for a significant agricultural chemical company. That was a bit of a ‘what shall I do?’ moment.

“But I liked living in New Zealand. The mountain partly drew me home. I had been skiing and mountaineering quite a lot in the US. I also had tremendous independence here in New Plymouth.”
His personal move to Waireka came in 1966. “I said to Dan that if we were really going to expand our research operation, particularly in animal health, we had to have land for trials. He told me to got out and find it somewhere.

“This property (35 hectares at Waireka) was owned by Duncan and Davies (nurseries) and had been their major production area. They were moving to Brixton and wanted to sell this for £25,000. I said to Dan I’d give them £20,000, but he said: ‘Don’t be so miserable. If that’s your utopia, buy it regardless’.

“So they let me buy this land. I said if I stay I better settle down and build a home and the like. I was still a bachelor. Dan said: ‘Well, where?’ and I said: ‘The Waireka research station’ and he said: ‘OK – tell us what you need’, sort of thing. I walked over it with the surveyor, and said: ‘Well, put in a peg about here’.

“Dan Watkins was very forward in thinking for a guy who didn’t even graduate from high school with university entrance. He was a real ideas man, entrepreneurial. That was the pioneering spirit in New Zealand, when you look at my Dad and uncles. But it was unusual in New Plymouth – a very conservative place when Dan came back here in 1946 from the Middle East after the war.”

Mason finally ended up with responsibility for 50 staff. “We had research chemists, a synthesis chemist, a process development chemist, as well as agronomists and animal health specialists. We had an entomologist, who we’d supported to do a PhD in Arizona.

“I was an international representative of the American Weed Science Society and I used to go every January to their annual conference. I was free to travel. I got lots of ideas. You get all these international contacts and you keep them up and it affects your thinking about where you’re going in your research and development programmes.”

That would change after Dow Chemicals bought 50 percent of the Ivon Watkins company in 1964. Mason would be the first sent to Dow headquarters in Michigan “for reintegration”.

“Our research programme didn’t have the same priorities as Dow’s global thinking, particularly Dow Chemical Pacific. I ended up reporting to the director of research for Dow Pacific in Hong Kong. Twice a year I had to go up and report on our programme of research and how it fitted into their Pacific and global operations.

“They weren’t very successful in getting me totally convinced, so they offered me this great opportunity to go to the US in the mid-70s. By working in the US, I got paid a lot more, and had all sorts of transfer benefits and so on. But I was out of the show, and the difficulty would be when I came home.

“They tried to get me to stay in the US to work on international developments of agricultural chemicals for the Dow agricultural science group. But I knew, if it’s one guy’s idea and he gets shifted in a year or two, the new guy coming in says: ‘What in the hell does this Mason do? Send him back home’.

“There’s no job back home in New Zealand when you’ve been working at the headquarters of a global company on an international-type assignment. I mainly worked on my own projects while I was over there, some things I had been looking at here in New Zealand, particularly where we could apply chemistry to add value for export.”
It would turn out to be preparation for what happened when he left IWD in 1986. “It was the groundwork for our own business.” Taranaki Nuchem, later Zelam, would follow, as would Mason’s remarkable generosity through his charitable trust.

Dear George Mason,” the testimony begins. “Thank you for your generosity in funding my PhD research. I am so incredibly grateful for this scholarship and the numerous opportunities that have arisen as a result…”

Those are a few of the words written by Megan Rebekah Friesen (pictured right) whose doctoral studies from 2012 to 2016 investigated how seabirds use smell and vocalisation to communicate, and how such knowledge might be useful in attracting birds to restored habitats.

She is one of 25 students who expressed gratitude to Mason in a book published by University of Auckland last year. Their messages of thanks and details of their work jump off the pages.

George Mason an intensely modest man, so there is silence after we ask him to pinpoint his greatest achievement, a defining moment of his career, perhaps.

“I need to think about that. I guess going out on our own and establishing a company that generated these funds, taking the plunge of investing in your own skill, training and technical ability. We had great training in our exposure to the American business system and the like.”

Ambitions left undone? “I’d love to be able to travel more, but I’m just not up to it now, even if I travel in business class.” He’s determined not to be bowed by age, however, and describes an American friend who had been in the US military’s alpine unit.

“I used to ski with him, and he was still skiing at 100, and died at 102. I had him out here when he was 85. We walked from Manganui Lodge around to Tahurangi, then down the Puffer. He was puffing a bit, but at 85… I was 70.

“I can’t get up there now by foot. My breathing’s not… I went round there last year for the Stratford Mountain Club’s Manganui Lodge, and walking through the gorge I had to sit down. So I’ve had a pacemaker fitted. Haven’t tried it out up there yet.”

His motivations for philanthropy grew from a realisation in the 1990s that the company was making more money for him than he could ever possibly spend. He never had ambitions to amass assets.

About that time, he was inspired to think about supporting post-graduate research by his cousin, Dr Brian Mason, a renowned mineralogist who also built up the world’s great collection of meteorite samples at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington. Brian Mason was donating major funding to his alma mater, the University of Canterbury.

It’s probably also fair to say Mason’s contributions to society relate to his experiences as a young man, when money was tight and he appreciated help to gain access to academia.

Giving is hard work: “I need help with the charitable work these days, so I have a secretary to assist me. There’s something to do every day with these sorts of projects. I think it’s very important – even in retirement you need to feel society still wants you.”

There can be very little doubt that it does. Never more so, given the dichotomy between threats to the natural world and expanding interest in protecting it, an awareness that is furtherever every time George William Mason V encourages another young mind to discover the passion for nature he first found more than three quarters of a century ago.