

# CREATION, CRISIS AND CONSERVATION CONFERENCE AUCKLAND – FEBRUARY 2005

## Environmental stewardship in the New Zealand context

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It is easy for 'kiwis' to become complacent about the land in which they live. Recently published analyses show that biologically the region is of world importance. The New Zealand archipelago and Oceania are members of the exclusive 'top 25 club' for biological diversity. Moreover, New Zealand is the only developed nation that is wholly a biological hot spot. Yet, such uniqueness seems to have largely escaped media, political, professional and Christian attention.

A few years ago I traveled with a BBC researcher locating sites for the David Attenborough dinosaur documentary series. North of Haast, my companion was entranced by a forest pool surrounded by tree ferns. "Don't you realize that this must be the most unaltered place on earth since the dinosaur age". Such a statement is not strictly correct. But it does point to something that kiwis may overlook. This is the extraordinary distinctiveness of the animals, plants and landscapes that characterize New Zealand.

Humans arrived late on New Zealand, with the Maoris first arriving perhaps 700-800 years ago and the Europeans in the early part of the nineteenth century. We were the last substantial landmass to be reached by *Homo sapiens*.

We once had remarkable species like the giant flightless moas, and Haast's eagle. Most have gone. Since European settlement alone, some 16 land birds, one native bat species, one fish, at least a dozen invertebrates and 10 plants are believed to have become extinct, while other species such as the tuataras, the stitchbird, and the North Island saddleback survive only on offshore islands.

Prior to the arrival of humans in New Zealand, indigenous forest covered about 85% of the country. Today, the forest has been reduced to about 23% with only about half in more or less pristine condition. Grasslands, on the other hand, have increased sevenfold. Most of this is grazed or overgrown with introduced grasses, leaving only about 15,000 km<sup>2</sup> in more or less pristine condition. Duneland habitat is now down to no more than 250 km<sup>2</sup> - a highly threatened system. Wetlands have been especially heavily impacted; once covering almost 4% of the country, they have now been reduced by about 90%. In terms of remaining natural habitat we have about 22% of the land surface of the country.

Similar stories could be told about water resources, landscapes and air quality. We are ahead in some areas, holding our own in others but for significant areas our record is poor. Is this important – it is when one considers that New Zealand's prosperity and social cohesion depends on its natural landscapes and processes and its biodiversity.

There have been some notable mitigating responses. We have a strong NGO structure, and comprehensive government agencies handling resource uses and natural capital. We have a history of passing benchmark legislation. There are a growing number of industry-based systems for maintaining good environmental standards. We have embraced Green Globe and Natural Step benchmarks. But the concerns of people like Canterbury's T.H. Potts who warned of the impact of continued transformation of the landscape, and others in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could well be statements of year 2005 for many parts of New Zealand.

New Zealand is seen by many to be the epitome of wilderness. But historically, wilderness has been anathema to so-called civilization. Guy Hand, a Scottish freelance writer graphically describes an historic example:

*The English saw in the Highlands, not only land darkened with trees, but incivility. They called the native Highlanders "savages", (from the Latin root silva, meaning forest) and their trees "an excrescence of the earth, provided by God for the payment of debts". Through the axe, the Highlands and its people were to be cleansed of chaos and shown the path to culture. The English, of course, were not the originators or sole practitioners of the belief that culture must only be built on the stumps of trees.*

How do Christians respond? While there are heartening responses to the challenge of good stewardship at the individual and local level, these are less often translated into wider social action especially within the Christian community. Churches generally have failed to pick up on the environmental message.

*"Welcome everyone. Welcome and have an inspiring time of worship, sharing the Scriptures and fellowship. And – on the way here – wasn't it a great morning. It is great to enjoy God's creation as we drive here."*

How often we are introduced to a Sunday church service with something along these lines. It is a call to meet together, to have communion and to express and enrich relationships. It is in itself an expression of relationships, between God and humanity, and between individuals – all good. Yet, is there something missing – where is our real expression of relationship with the environment that provides much of our visible context? Does nature become nothing more than a backdrop against which we play out the activities of life, including driving to the Sunday church service?

A couple of years ago I suggested that there were five key impediments to development of a robust environmental ethic among New Zealand Christians. These constitute five commonly encountered viewpoints:

- There is no environmental crisis. The concerns of environmental organizations is simply exaggerated hype for which there is no objective evidence, and

besides technology will always find an answer.

- Even if there is a crisis such as human-caused global warming or extinction, such matters are not the concern of the church whose mission is to evangelise and disciple people and not be concerned with the world of nature.
- The environmental mandate of the church is simple. It is to develop and dominate the world – to have dominion – and the world was created for humans to use and even exploit.
- It is right for local church communities to consider conservation and sustainable living, but the 'green church' is one that allies itself with the credo of environmental NGOs and Green political parties, loves wilderness, and above all recycles its trash.
- There is simply no hope, so (especially if we are in the end times) there is no point in engaging in environmental debate and action.

It is easy to gloss over the issues. But think for a moment about the heritage of what humans create. A lot of effort goes into historical preservation and there is public outcry at the loss of cultural heritage such as buildings and paintings. But there is much less concern at the loss of our biological diversity. New Zealand's record of loss of biological heritage is bad by world standards. Many of our biological distinctives are now extinct - including the flightless moas, Haast's eagle, and the strange Buller's moth that has not been seen for over 100 years. None of these are likely to be seen again by human eyes outside a Jurassic Park reconstruction.

It is ironic that while there is increasing debate among students studying the biological sciences on the ethical needs of the age in relation to the world of nature, this is being driven not for the most by theologians and churches but by scientific researchers. Especially in New Zealand, it is very easy to conclude that the Christian community has very little of relevance to say to the world on such matters as environmental stewardship, how the creation reflects God's nature, and the development of meaningful and lasting relationships between humanity and nature. In the last two decades we have rediscovered some of the fundamental roles of the church in society. But the seduction of technology coupled with retreat to an urban environment largely dominated by human constructs, has increasingly led us to see the natural environment of planet Earth as inert, largely irrelevant and valued chiefly as a resource for human comfort and pleasure.

Teasing out the factors that lead to this is contentious, but I want to suggest several that seem to me to be significant in New Zealand at the present time:

- Over-reliance on central government action. New Zealand has a remarkably centralized and hierarchically controlled administration. We wait for government to bless and for State agencies to act. There is an assumption in many instances that, "the government will do it". Moreover there is often mistrust of both the motives and ability of landowners to conserve. Many of the world's great initiatives in conservation have come from inspired individuals who believed that they could change the world. An example is the

extensive United States network of botanic gardens working on conserving the north American flora under the Umbrella of the Centre for Plant Conservation. This started in an attic at the Arnold Arboretum with two young botanists, Frank Thibodeau and Don Falk. Like Martin Luther King, they had a dream and the dream became reality.

- Partitioning of belief and action. Not only have we partitioned State and faith but many kiwis have partitioned faith and their daily lives. Faith can become something for Sundays and times of crisis, with little relevance to what we do in our lives, at work and at play. There are many environmentally responsible people in churches round New Zealand in the sense that they recycle, compost and burn clean fuel. There are church communities that watch energy conservation, recycle and take part in clean-up days. But is this anything more than token 'greenism' in the sense that it is merely what one might expect from responsible citizens, Christian and pagan alike? It is, in a sense, rendering to Caesar rather than a rendering to God. Integrating faith and action means working from a religious foundation and not a secular one that merely has a veneer of faith.
- An adversary approach to controversial issues. An interesting study is being currently undertaken by the Nelson-based environmental organisation Ecologic. They are comparing the way in which environmental policy is established in New Zealand with the approach used in Scandinavian countries. They are finding that whereas we tend to work things through by confrontational debate and Environment Court decisions, countries like Denmark start from a foundation of those basic principles on which all shades of the political spectrum can agree. Too often we ignore the dictum that cooperation rather than competition is the characteristic that took humanity from the cave to civilization.
- The NIMBY attitude. We all want our garbage to be collected from the gate but we want the landfill to be somewhere else. We want to have clean water and in the same breath we tip toxins down the drain. We want clean air but still enjoy a smoky fire. We advocate other people planting trees and restoring waterways but object to being told what to do on our patch. We realize that there is a limited budget for urban tree planting but someone else can wait to get their attractive street. These are variations on the NIMBY or "not in my back yard" problem. This sort of thinking isolates us. We not only want to ensure that we are at the head of the cue or get the biggest slice of the cake – or have the environment that we desire at the expense of others. We all need to share in the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, the hard and the easy – that is simply an obligation of being a member of society at large – and is especially important for the Christian or any other religious community.
- The cult of the individual. Some years ago I served on the statutory board for a major inner city forest reserve. What we wanted was a buffer zone where there could be a transition from an urban to a natural environment. The then City chief planner, on being told of the proposal answered in five words, "the individual has paramount rights. The issue has been more elegantly and academically expressed as the "tragedy of the commons" problem. When

people graze their cows on a commons, there are benefits in any one individual adding another cow because he or she gets all the additional income but the degradation is shared. This leads to every cow owner independently putting additional animals on the commons and the eventual collapse of the ecosystem. It is significant that private property rights in our country are among the strongest in the world. One of my social geographer colleagues has pointed out that the earliest European settlement maps of New Zealand were as much concerned with land boundaries and tenure as the position of rivers and mountains.

If there is a common theme it seems to be that we want to control our individual destinies. There may be a place for God but it is definitely not mainstream and it is certainly not in order to limit either social or environmental manipulation. But something that does touch human hearts is hope. We need to develop 'environmental hope' as a foundation. I have a vivid memory of giving a seminar at Canterbury University in the early 1990s on the challenges faced by biodiversity in the face of environmental degradation. At the close a colleague came up to me and said that it was a fascinating presentation – so depressing!

This is common problem faced by 'environmentalists' – it is as though we were sitting around the arena of life watching on the edges of our seats for the next extinction. Michael Soulé, one of the founders of the science of conservation biology noted that so often conservation has a negative message and then commented that no politician gets elected on the basis of negative messages, which may be why there are so few conservation-minded people in the United States congress.

In a recent commentary on disasters, Christchurch newspaper columnist, Martin van Beynen refers to this problem:

*Clearly we all need to have another serious look at our disaster planning. Perhaps we should look for a political solution. It's hard to go past the Greens who, as Jeanette Fitzsimons' recent speech on The State of the Planet shows, are always thinking about disaster. They could be our ultimate disaster party.*

Now, in quoting this I am in no way disparaging the Green party who admirably prick our national conscience on many social and environmental issues. But it is the perception that is important here – the perception that environmental lobbyists are pre-occupied with doom and gloom. In a fascinating but probably little known book, *Environmental Hope*, Peter Newman of Murdoch University, Western Australia, writes:

*Environmental hope is the belief that you can do something about the environment. it is not just wishful thinking, where you believe everything will be OK, but is based on the reality of change.*

He goes on to:

*When it comes to detailing what you can do about such a future, most writing ... is of little value. Good news is not easy to find. It is time to redress the balance a little.*

And so he and his co-authors documented 18 examples from Western Australia of projects that are examples of hopeful futures. We need hope.

One of the great Western Australian books is Daisy Bates' *The Passing of the Aborigine*. She spent much of her life living and serving the aboriginal people. But this was in the context that these people would fade from history and become extinct – her role was to document, befriend, and ease their passage to either assimilation or extinction. And so many of the tribal remnants did become extinct. They passed their sacred totems to Daisy, then sat down and simply ... died.

Are we expecting the same of nature and especially the array of animals, plants and fungi that we collectively call biodiversity? Wherever there is a spark of hope we need to nurture it and fan it into a blaze. Otherwise we risk the diversity of nature undergoing an extinction spasm that has not been seen since the Cretaceous Period many tens of millions of years ago. And as those extinctions mount up something deep within us will die also.

In the process of nurturing hope we need to develop a better understanding of both stewardship and environmental management. Management is an interesting concept. We use it both consciously and unconsciously to talk not only about business and organizations, but also society in general, nature, issues and problems. Our foundational legislation for relating us to our environment is the 'Resource **Management** Act'. But Wolfgang Sachs, a theologian at the Wuppertal Institute (Germany) warns of the dangers of management labels in relation to nature:

*Labeling things as 'resources' takes off whatever protective identity they may have and opens them for intervention from the outside. Looking at water, soils, animals, and people in terms of resources reconstitutes them as objects for management by planners and for prizing by economists.*

Earlier I referred to wilderness. Let us again put wilderness on the agenda as something that is prized by New Zealanders. Society needs wilderness – not just like it needs cosmetic surgery, but like it needs the basics of food, fuel and shelter. There is even a good Christian basis for this – in the Scriptures wilderness is not just a place of demons but of God. But what do we really mean by wilderness? It refers broadly to large areas, often dominated by forest, fast rivers and mountains, away from cities and roads, and usually protected as a national park. But Wayland Drew, a former Canadian free;ance writer, perceptively tells us that wilderness is not necessarily parks and reserves:

*When we create parks we bow to increased bureaucracy and surveillance, but when we speak for wilderness we recognize our right to fewer structures and greater freedom. Regulated and crowded, parks will eventually fragment us, as they fragment the wilderness which makes us whole. ... When wilderness has been consumed, our understanding of what is natural can be changed as required, and no facet of the human psyche and biology will be left invulnerable to revision.*

While not reducing the fundamental importance of individual salvation, the Christian church in New Zealand needs to rediscover environmental stewardship as a

component of a broader canvas of discipleship – not only wilderness but also production lands and cities. There has been much written about this by secular philosophers and scientists but it seems far less that one would expect by Christian thinkers.

Aldo Leopold, in his *Sand County Almanac* published posthumously in 1947 enunciated most clearly the environmental ethic that has become the rallying call of many environmentalists. This is simply to take the responsibilities of people for each other and to extend its boundaries to encompass the land and its component species of animals and plants - something that this conference explores and debates.

I want to raise one final issue in relation to faith and stewardship. Several years ago I was the keynote speaker at an international environmental conference in an extremely conservative Islamic State. Having been advised to be moderate on advertising my Christian background I was unexpectedly introduced as having a degree in theology by one of the country's most senior rulers. Afterwards a number of the audience came up to me, smiled and said that they were pleased that as a person of faith I understood where they were coming from and how they thought. I was promptly invited to chair an ethics workshop within the conference.

In contrast to many nations we can be uncomfortable about religion. This is well exemplified in a news item in the early days of 2005 headed, "We're not religious, says Dunne". Peter Dunne, leader of the United Future party went on to say:

*I'm not seeking to change anything. I am seeking to restate what we have always have been which has been subject to huge malicious interpretation ... I think there is a degree (of maliciousness), it's media inspired, it was designed to sneer at us and belittle us from day to day.*

Again, I am in no way critical of Peter Dunne and the United Party. But it does strike me as interesting that the media headed the news item as they did. Headlines, whether on the front of a book, the television news or the front of a news daily are a reflection of social perceptions and mores at large. Perhaps the time has come to take faith out of the closet and into the mainstream of living as a valid basis for stewardship whether social, economic or environmental.