



Environmental Defence Society 2021 Conference: ‘Transforming Aotearoa – The Government’s Environmental Reform Agenda’ Christchurch, 4-6 August 2021

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The Environmental Defence Society’s (EDS) conference this year was centred around the numerous environmental reforms that the government is undertaking. The focus was especially on the reforms on the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), freshwater, oceans & fisheries and conservation. The conference was attended by a diverse crowd, with a mix of public servants, academics, lobbyists and politicians, as well as farmers and activists.

A reminder about the need for integrated and sustainable management preceded discussions on freshwater and land-use, especially regarding New Zealand’s agricultural sector. While Ministry for the Environment representatives presented the new policy objectives to address freshwater, we were reminded of the extensive land-use changes that New Zealand underwent in recent decades and the implications for freshwater and climate change targets. Resilient land-use strategies with a shift towards a regenerative approach were discussed as ways to address environmental issues while maintaining New Zealand’s image in international markets. This is especially relevant to management of significant and vulnerable environments, such as the high country. The need for land-use policies to address cultural values as well as environmental ones was proposed as a way to avoid and mitigate the effects of land alienation and disruption of social cohesion experienced by many iwi and hapū.

The greatly anticipated session on the RMA reform was opened by Hon Tony Randerson QC detailing the vision for the reform and commentary around the Natural and Built Environments Act exposure draft. The details around purpose and principles of the exposure draft are limited, although it contains provisions for a national planning framework to be prepared by the minister and a proposal to combine plans (regional and district) to improve efficiency and environmental outcomes. The main objectives of the reform are environmental protection and restoration, the ability to address climate change concerns, the consideration of environmental limits and process improvements. The exposure draft includes slightly broader provisions to address Māori interests, especially through the inclusion of ‘Te Oranga o Te Taiao’ in the purpose of the act and provisions to ‘give effect to’ Te Tiriti. Questions around implementation of these principles and inclusion of matauranga Māori in processes were voiced, with the main message being that ‘hard conversations’ need to be had to truly harness the potential of equal partnership. Despite the uncertainty around the exposure draft, most speakers endorsed the reform.

The conversation around oceans and fisheries reform kicked off with a vision for the future of New Zealand’s blue economy that recognised marine resources beyond their financial value. An overview of overseas and national policy followed, including indigenous and industry perspectives. The current framework is fragmented across a plethora of legislation, with the suggestions to develop an overarching oceans policy

and implement integrated-management tools. Support for a cross-sectoral approach to the reform also highlighted the role of Māori as Treaty partners, especially regarding fisheries and marine reserve proposals.

The Minister for Conservation, Hon Kiritapu Allan, made a case for a conservation reform to address the current ad-hoc, fragmented and dated approach. The conversation was centred around conservation management issues, the strengthening of the role of Māori, inclusion of matauranga in legislation and the relationship between conservation and tourism. EDS has released a new paper discussing conservation reform issues, which will make a good read for anyone interested in this topic (available from: <https://www.eds.org.nz/our-work/publications/reports/conserving-nature-conservation-reform-issues/>).

Overall, the conference provided a stimulating and timely discussion on the environmental reform agenda, bringing together a range of perspectives. Strong cases were made for these reforms, and it will be interesting to follow their development. I encourage fellow students and practitioners to look at the recorded conference sessions available on the EDS website (<https://www.eds.org.nz/our-work/eds-conferences/2021-conference/>).