



National Wetland Restoration Symposium 2012

Wetlands – Are we getting it right?

Held in Invercargill over March 21 – 23, this symposium drew over 180 attendees from around the country from a variety of backgrounds. Regional & District Council staff were well represented, as were DOC staff (and former DOC staff), other government agencies and reps from numerous community organisations.

The presentations and field trips covered four broad categories:

1. Effective Community Engagement
2. Regulatory vs. non Regulatory Approaches
3. Communicating Science to the Public
4. Integrated Management of Wetlands for Ecosystem Outcomes

Our first keynote speaker was Guy Salmon, from the Ecologic Foundation, who set the scene with some thoughts about the RMA and the challenges of governing wetlands. Rural cultural assumptions have led to landowners expecting the right to farm, including draining wetlands, and the right to treat water as theirs to use. "We need to crack the problem about who owns water," he said. "You can't charge people for using it but it's worth \$5 billion. The Crown gets nothing from water. If it did get something there would be a bit of money available for restoring wetlands and doing other things that need to be done."

A team from DOC explained the Arawai Kakariki Wetland Restoration Programme with a virtual tour of their key sites, reminding the audience that, in a global context, the loss of wetland ecosystem services and benefits is one of the most significant environmental challenges. This project is impressive, and seems relatively well resourced which makes a difference.

After that short indoor session it was on to buses, lunch boxes in hand, for a trip out to Waituna Lagoon. Eight different stations were set up at 2 locations, with a multitude of presenters and topics keeping everyone entertained – great for the participants but quite a task for the speakers who had to present to eight groups in quick succession. With high temperatures and clear blue skies the sunblock was essential!

Day 2 began with Ken Hughey from Lincoln University speaking about the challenges facing Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere. Described in 2011 by the Minister for the Environment as NZ's most

polluted lake, it still has a lot to offer - the most diverse range of bird species of any NZ location (167 species) and a huge variety of recreational activities. Ken offered a cautionary message about not focusing solely on the “postage stamp” restoration projects, which are important to get community involvement but won’t provide answers in the long term. Echoing Guy Salmon’s comments about rural cultural assumptions, Ken advocated for a more holistic approach, with a significant culture change in the way land use is managed. This needs to be backed by serious funding from central government.

An interesting programme for the rest of Day 2 saw a wide range of wetland related topics and speakers. Local botanist Brian Rance showcased some of the diverse community conservation projects underway in Southland, we heard about Ramsar, engaging with schools groups, restoration techniques, monitoring, the use of constructed wetlands by NZTA for runoff control, and much more. Andy West, University of Waikato, ended Day 2 with a pretty gloomy round up of global issues – increasing population, food security problems, shortage of fresh water – but concluding with a fairly optimistic message around the role of science and new technology. He’s particularly keen on “Herd Homes” (he did mention his personal connection with HerdHomes®Ltd) so we can perhaps expect see a few popping up around Lincoln as he takes up the position of Vice-Chancellor at Lincoln University this year.

Unfortunately, prior commitments meant I missed Day 3’s field trip to several local wetlands, but I hear it went well and was much enjoyed. Getting out of the lectures and workshops to see a bit of the countryside and it’s waterways was undoubtedly a highlight – hearing about wetlands, the issues and the restoration projects is all very well but including visits to see projects in action made for a very enjoyable and productive event.

The other highlight for me was the networking – the chance to meet passionate, knowledgeable people from around the country. Working for a community organisation can be pretty isolated at times. If you are in that situation, I’d definitely recommend taking advantage of opportunities such as this symposium to connect with others in similar situations, hear what is happening elsewhere, and hopefully get inspired!

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