



The Environment and Conservation Organisations of Aotearoa New Zealand national conference

Nicholas KIRK

Department of Environmental Management, Lincoln University, New Zealand

The Environment and Conservation Organisations of Aotearoa New Zealand (ECO) national conference was held between the 28th and 30th of August in Christchurch. The conference began at the University of Canterbury Law School with a mihi from the Tuahiwi rūnanga in North Canterbury. The greeting preceded a discussion of Māori approaches to freshwater management led by Sir Eddie Durie and Associate Professor Jacinta Ruru. Durie, a former Justice of the High Court of New Zealand and current co-chair of the Māori council, proposed water policy reform which would set a price on the commercial use of freshwater. Durie proposed that domestic use remain free-of-charge; however, a proportion of the income generated from the tax on commercial use would go exclusively to Māori. Durie argued that the revenue generated from commercial use should pay for environmental protection. Ruru discussed Māori proprietary interests in New Zealand's freshwater.

The conference moved to St Mary's Church in Addington the following day. In the first session, Dr Mike Joy and Professor Bryan Jenkins discussed environmental trends in New Zealand's freshwater as well as the institutional arrangements for managing freshwater in Canterbury. Speakers in the second session discussed the social, economic, and health implications of the environmental trends outlined by Dr Joy. Dr Alison Dewes noted a transition in New Zealand towards farming within limits, however, she argued this approach was threatened by the government's agricultural export agenda. Professor David Hamilton argued that standards for freshwater quality in New Zealand's rivers are currently much weaker than standards for lakes. Professor Hamilton also critiqued New Zealand's approach to managing nutrient pollution through measuring off-farm pollutants rather than restricting the use of inputs such as fertiliser. Dr Alastair

Humphrey's presented on the health risks of freshwater pollution, and argued that cyanobacteria, nitrates, and microbiological contaminants were the three primary threats to human health from freshwater.

In the first afternoon session, Linda Te Aho, Dr Ronlyn Duncan, Maria Bartlett and Scott Pearson discussed collaborative governance. Linda Te Aho described the Waikato River Waitangi settlement process, and relatedly, Maria Bartlett argued that collaborative planning exercise ought to treat Māori as a treaty partner rather than as an affected stakeholder. Dr Ronlyn Duncan discussed how collaborative governance of freshwater in Canterbury has shifted the responsibility for setting environmental limits from scientists to the public. The discourse of nutrient limits helped justify irrigation expansion, however the limits are publicly negotiated limits rather than environmental limits. Scott Pearson then presented a critique of the collaborative process in Canterbury. David Caygill, a Canterbury Regional Council commissioner who was in the audience, was asked to respond to Pearson's presentation. Caygill noted that the collaborative Canterbury Water Management Strategy targets are in tension with each other, and these tensions cannot be easily resolved. Despite criticism, Caygill reaffirmed the Regional Council's commitment to limiting nutrient pollution.

In the second afternoon session, Al Fleming discussed the healthy rivers project with a focus on the Waikato River. Chris Livesey and Chris Todd then presented on the Land and Water Forum. In the third afternoon session, Catherine Iorns and Bestan Martin discussed how legal reform could help establish greater public trust in environmental management.

The conference continued on Sunday with sessions on how to engage with the statutory process. These were run by Richard Ball, Steve Abel, Jen Miller, and

Sophie Allen. The conference concluded with the ECO annual general meeting.

Overall, the conference presented a timely discussion of freshwater issues in New Zealand. Despite recent reforms in Canterbury, environmental advocates feel apprehensive about the expansion of irrigation in the region. One solution, which would also redress Māori proprietary desires over freshwater, was presented by Sir Eddie Durie. Perhaps this, and other presentations at the conference, highlight an emerging desire amongst environmentalists to reform New Zealand's freshwater legislation.