

Dialogues on Fresh Water: Navigating impasses and new approaches. September 2015

Overview

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On Friday, 28 August, Response and Environment and Conservation Organisations of Aotearoa New Zealand (ECO) commenced the conference, Dialogues on Fresh Water: navigating impasses and new approaches.

‘Dialogues on Freshwater’ opened at the University of Canterbury School of Law with a mihi whakamoemiti by Te Maire Tau (Ngati Tuahuriri) and then an address from Sir Eddie Taihakurei Durie and Professor Jacinta Ruru. Sir Eddie Durie spoke to the New Zealand Māori Council visionary proposal for freshwater governance created in reference to responsibility as a principle for a new order of governance in which local communities are assured of water supply, an independent Water Commission would oversee public good interests, and a user pays system provide revenue. It addresses commercial interests, restitution of Māori interests, and wider public good interests in Freshwater.

Jacinta Ruru, an expert on Māori water issues responded with a carefully considered account of rights and responsibilities and the importance of restitution for Māori, in the context of a Public Good approach. Both the Durie and Ruru presentations focussing on responsibility were significant since advocacy for Māori interests in water have, until now, been dominated by a right approach. Donna Hall spoke about the NZ Māori Council position and the anticipated Waitangi Tribunal Water claim, which would include proposals based on governance to safeguard public good interests. The Canterbury University Law School generously hosted a reception in honour of the guest speakers.

There was a strong youth contingent. Sponsorships were provided by ‘Soil and Water’ for fifteen students, and by ECO for a further five students, as well as supporting volunteer students. Students attended from biological sciences, law, and civil and natural resources.

The Dialogues on Fresh Water conference has a strong overall public good approach to water quality, water ecosystems and land management. It included discussion of the increasing pressure on water in Canterbury as well as in the rest of New Zealand. The topic of water comes at a crucial point in time when intensive farming practices are being encouraged to continue, putting even more pressure on waterways to meet the demands of increased irrigation, and

forcing freshwater ecosystems to cope with higher levels of nutrient run off and leeching. Today's use of water is already degrading ecosystems, biodiversity, environmental and Māori cultural heritage, and the values of New Zealanders. The conference provided dialogues on these aspects, as well as on public health, Māori, commercial, recreational, and economic interests.

Saturday 29 August consisted of addresses from a total of 15 speakers at St. Mary's Church with tea, lunch, and dinner being served across the street at the Addington Haven. There were approximately 110 people in attendance. Many representatives from member organisations of ECO attended, as well as concerned community members, and students from the University of Canterbury and Lincoln University, several of whom were sponsored by their department heads.

Speakers with backgrounds in ecology, agriculture, medicine and public health, Māori interests, ethics, and governance were asked to share their expertise and insights on New Zealand's water issues. Designed to also encourage discussion between audience members and speakers, there was time allotted at the end of each of the 5 sessions for questions. After hearing all the addresses, several key messages had been echoed repeatedly.

One of which is that the consensus approach to water management is proving to be a challenging uphill battle. The intent of these consensus processes is to balance the environmental and economic aims of the groups assembled at the table. But it's difficult to compete with the loud call for continued economic growth and development, and it's all environmental groups can do to keep economic aims somewhat in check and slow them down in order to find a compromise.

Victories are being made at some levels ensuring sustainable water use, such as an agreement reached ensuring that no dams would be built on major river stems in Canterbury.

On the flipside, recommendations based on science and made by experts are adjusted as they move up through the agreement process. For example, scientists recommended that the allowable Hurunui catchment nitrate load be maintained at the current level that it is at of 693 tonnes per year. In the end that recommendation was raised to 963 tonnes per year. Environmental and sustainability groups have to contend with the clout of economic aims, which can find ways to overpower other interests that are economically disadvantageous to continued growth and development.

Another takeaway is that New Zealand's 'clean and green' identity is a false one. It's more accurate for New Zealand to identify itself as being both the cleanest, and the dirtiest when it comes to its waterways. The untouched alpine lakes and rivers of the country are absolutely pristine, and have the low nutrient levels to prove it. But New Zealand is also home to groups of lakes

with some of the highest nutrient levels in the world. Farming has had few restrictions pertaining to nutrient leeching and runoff in the past allowing for this to happen to the country's lakes and rivers.

Intensive farming, especially dairy, exacerbates the situation. To keep up with the industry, farmers need to increase stocking rates, use supplemental feed in the form of palm kernel, and pile on more fertilizer, all of which leads to more nitrates being added to the nitrogen cycle. Too much nitrogen, and algal blooms will wipe out aquatic life living in those environments.

Despite government claims of improvement, rivers aren't necessarily getting any better. As Dr. Mike Joy from Massey University pointed out, the bar for national freshwater standards is set well below levels needed to sustain a healthy ecosystem, so that most rivers are considered acceptable, even if nothing is able to survive living in those waters. Parts of the Manawatu River score as some of the worst in world, but when considered under the nation's standards they are just fine.

High nutrient levels in the country's waterways are also having a huge impact on public health. According to the Medical Officer of Health at the Canterbury District Health Board, Dr. Alistair Humphrey, there are 35,000 reported cases per year of waterborne illnesses, and the actual number is probably higher. Many sufferers of water borne illnesses come from communities that get their water directly from rivers, which may be contaminated by toxic algal blooms caused by high nitrate levels. Bottle fed babies are also at risk of developing blue baby syndrome, a disease where not enough oxygen is being delivered to the body's cells because nitrates have significantly reduced the amount of oxygen-delivering haemoglobin in the blood. It's clear that increasing nitrate levels are already affecting not just the health of species living in lakes and rivers, but also humans living next to them.

Looking at the economic aspect of intensive dairy farming, it is troubling to see what lengths farmers are going to in order to keep up with the industry. Agroecologist and veterinarian, Alison Dewes, pointed out that farmers are encouraged to increase their production by banks and importers of supplemental feed and fertilizer, which is all well for them as they will surely benefit. But, while output in the last decade has increased by 60%, the level of debt has increased by 300%. It's not looking to get better very quickly for dairy farmers with milk solid prices below the break even point, and New Zealand's farm land values becoming more expensive. This is frustrating however, as farmers are still looking for capital gains rather than direct profits, making it difficult for them to see that less production could lead to more profits.

The end of the day focused on the theme of public trust and responsibility. Victoria University Senior Lecturer of Law Catherine Iorns pointed out that many states, past and present, have protected their citizens' rights to a

healthy environment. Currently, 192 of the world's countries explicitly do so, but New Zealand is not one of them. The ones that have such rights instill an attitude of responsibility for the sake of future generations, and have applied these rights to effect positive environmental change. For example, the court in Argentina used its environmental rights to impose the cleanup by the government of a water catchment polluted by a wastewater treatment facility. The point lorns drove home was that there are many examples in foreign legal systems and in the history of New Zealand legal systems, including Māori Kaitiakitanga, that could help in putting together a really good statement to put into law that gives New Zealand citizens the right to a healthy environment to live in.

Public responsibility is also important to have in place in protecting and maintaining a healthy environment, especially pertaining to water. Dr. Betsan Martin, director of RESPONSE, noted how in today's era of global interdependence many groups are drawing on their traditions to address enormous challenges, and adopting new ways of thinking. Furthermore, in the Māori worldview of a woven universe, obligation is a strong principle, so this becomes a promising basis for partnership and collaboration.

The relational aspect of responsibility is where one's wellbeing is intimately related to that of another. Responsibility in this context is about accountability and stewardship. However, in the capitalist industrial expansion, responsibility is becoming elided as with the removal of impediments to free up growth and development. Freedom is a cornerstone of this economic model, but it minimizes accountability, and undermines social justice. The key economic players are avoiding their roles of guardianship, so accountability needs to be put in place to reestablish trusteeship.

On Sunday 30 August, four workshops took place to take what was learned from the previous day and promote capacity building. Approximately 60 people attended the workshops with topics including successful campaigning, how to go through the statutory process, effective engagement in democracy, and the current state and protection of native fish species. A great outcome of the workshops was the ability for community members, students, and ECO member organizations to move forward with responsibility for freshwater

As an indication of the importance of the topic, and of a successful conference, registration sold out a week before the conference, and more space had to be arranged to accommodate the high number of students, community members, speakers, and ECO members. Updated information and research was presented by the speakers, as well as new approaches moving forward. This helped guide the discussions and planning to ensure environmental, social, and cultural priorities will be upheld in the future.