

## LAND SESSION

### “Biodiversity - what does it mean, and who is the enemy?”

#### 1. Beyond the RMA?

The RMA is unique New Zealand legislation which attempted to replace a “planning” act in favour of one which managed environmental effects.

The Town and Country Planning Act, (TACP) which the RMA replaced, was a “planning” Act legislated to implement the belief in the power of centralised planning (Soviet style and otherwise) which had gained such widespread acceptance during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The TACP was based on the belief that committees of wise men (and they normally were men) were able to plan our towns and countryside to promote the economic, social and cultural welfare of the whole society.

The RMA was supposed to turn that on its head. Section 9 says that people can do what they like, provided it does not conflict with a rule in the Plan, while Section 5 says that “people and communities” are to be “enabled” to promote their own “economic, social and cultural wellbeing.”

So the RMA set out to remove the role of central planning (or macro-economic planning – for the economists) and set the people free, provided they managed their environmental effects, or again, for the economists, “internalised their externalities”.

This objective remains far from being realised and the “planners”, as opposed to the resource managers, continue to draw on overseas theories and legislation to legitimise their determination to “direct and control” the use of land. The RMA is, I suspect, quite unique in that it is administered by a profession which remains largely hostile to its purpose.

So it seems to me that the title of this conference – *Beyond the RMA* – is somewhat optimistic, given that most Planning Documents – with the exceptions of those prepared for Taupo and the Far North – remain light years away from achieving the intentions of the Act.

#### 2 Bio-diversity – another justification for planning.

Sadly, the more I read of the documents on Bio-diversity, the more it seems to me that this issue will be used as further ammunition to maintain us in the time-warp of Town and Country Planning, rather than of Sustainable Management, as defined in the Act.

I am reasonably sure that this is not the intention of those who promote the cause of “biodiversity” – but I am quite certain that many plan writers will turn this issue to their

planning ends.

The question which puzzled me, and I am sure many others, for so long was this:

*If the RMA was intended to set us free from the planning culture of the Town and Country Planning Act, how come so many people now feel “more planned” than they were under the previous legislation?*

I graduated with a Diploma in Town and Country Planning during the early sixties and worked for a few years in the Auckland City Council, working in a team which invented such new notions as classified roading networks, town housing and infill housing.

While the Act may have given us the **power** to plan we were remarkably lacking in **theory**. Certainly, grand theories about the survival of the planet were conspicuously absent. Most of our time was spent resolving conflicting externalities. I developed townhouses and infill housing as means of enhancing choice – in response to changing lifestyles on the one hand, and the need to save Freeman’s Bay from the MOW’s bulldozers on the other.

Nowadays, both these attractive means of housing people have been captured to serve “higher order” planners’ goals.

And that’s the difference. We had much power but little theory.

The modern planners may have less power, but they have no shortage of theories.

And they believe that their theories deal with such dire consequential ends that they justify any means. Hence we find that most RMA documents are servants of theories on new urbanism, global warming, population explosions, community development, hatred of the motor car, and totally unsubstantiated theories of resource depletion, environmental collapse, species extinction, and other general catastrophes.

Many resource managers fear that “biodiversity” will prove to be yet another “imported” assault on the intentions of the RMA. And indeed the signs are already there.

I have no doubt that the “crisis” in biodiversity will be used to direct and control the use of land - no doubt buttressing a new round of claims that we must huddle behind an urban fence, stop driving our highly efficient cars, and give up our dreams of sustainable life in the countryside.

Many conservationists have been frustrated by the fact that the RMA requires applicants to mitigate and otherwise manage their adverse effects but does not make provision for enforced “enhancement.” There are many who believe that present day landowners should be required to make “reparations” for the sins of their forefathers by restoring our land to its pre-European state.

The draft National Policy Statement endorses this objective and no doubt will be used to encourage councils to add enhancement rules to their plans.

For example, Policy 2 (c) requires that participants “recognise the contribution that enhancement and restoration (either on site or off site) can make to mitigating the adverse effects of activities.”

I shall watch with interest to how this policy is put into effect. Frankly, on the evidence to date, the prognosis is not good.

### **3           *Bio-what? What indeed?***

The term “biodiversity” has been imported from the Northern Hemisphere where it is fair to say that it generally means what it says.

However, New Zealand is in a curious position.

We occupy an island which was isolated from other land masses for millions of years and hence have a unique set of flora and fauna – which have been under stress since the arrival of human beings. The Maori wiped out some twelve species of Moa - but that is not surprising. Such mega-faunal extinctions have always followed human invasion of new territory. The flightless Moa just made it somewhat easier.

Our modern economy depends totally on the farming of imported species, and recent moves have effectively removed native timbers from the economic matrix. Certainly we make no substantial sums of money out of any of the native fauna of New Zealand. This is a great pity. If the kiwi was as profitable as the sheep then the landscape would be covered in kiwis.

Naturally, we did not score a hundred percent hit rate when we imported these animals and plants into New Zealand. Many have proved to be pests, which are damaging to both farmed and indigenous species alike.

Finally, because of the depredations of these pests and a diminution of certain habitats many of our indigenous species remain under threat, although the period of major extinctions is now behind us, as in the rest of the world.

The end result of our unusual circumstance is that in New Zealand “biodiversity” appears to be a code for “protecting indigenous species.” If this is what we mean, we should say so. In my experience getting the basic vocabulary wrong is never a good foundation for sound public policy.

For example many people insist that public transport always requires subsidy and yet taxi

fleets and airlines operate without subsidy in most economies. And taxis and aircraft provide public transport.

Similarly, if you are all in favour of biodiversity, a certain logic suggests you should also support widespread genetic engineering which clearly increases bio-diversity. One suspects this is not normally the case.

#### **4 The Prognosis.**

I believe that most New Zealanders are keen to see our indigenous species survive. I am less certain that they are prepared to pay large sums of money in the form of direct taxes or lost opportunities to satisfy this need.

Given that there is a growing interest in our native species and a growing determination to see them survive then preservation and indeed population increase should be no problem.

What is most striking is that few plants are now under threat. Almost all the species listed as threatened or at risk are animals of one kind or another.

Why is this?

We are a nation of gardeners and it would be a brave politician or bureaucrat who told us we must give up the right to propagate our plants – imported or indigenous.

When we found that the plant *Tecomanthe Speciosa* still existed on one of our offshore islands the response was immediate. A few plants were cloned and placed into the market as quickly as possible. Hundreds of plant nurseries reared them by the hundreds and soon thousands of these “endangered” plants were for sale.

Most of us felt duty bound to save these plants and nurtured them in our gardens with pleasure and paid happily for the privilege. My wife and I have several *Tecomanthe* flourishing in our own managed park – admittedly among some 40,000 other trees and plants we have placed in the ground over the last five years.

#### **5 Why not treat fauna like flora?**

But what if the *Tecomanthe* had been an equally “previously thought to be extinct” bird or other animal?

Such a bird or animal would remain on the threatened list because it would be not allowed to enjoy the benefits of the market economy. Instead of hundreds of keen animal breeders breeding up thousands of the young ones for sale, they would remain in a sanctuary and kept isolated from the “evils of trade”. What is more, many of the great enthusiasts for indigenous fauna seem willing to see them go extinct than be farmed for pleasure, or for

export.

I read recently that our green geckos are being exported (illegally) to American urbanites because they make attractive pets and they are easy to breed. Then why aren't we breeding them here in gecko farms and selling them under proper controls? If American apartment dwellers have the wit to breed these geckos, I am sure New Zealanders are equally capable.

What is the problem?

## **6 Get the Facts Right.**

New Zealanders are not only good gardeners – they are well informed gardeners. And they are not only good farmers they are well informed farmers and can soon detect shonky science and shoddy thinking.

It disturbs me that so many statements about our habitats and the state of the environment are plain wrong at worst and untested at best.

For example, New Zealand is rapidly re-foresting. Some of this re-foresting is in the form of monocultural plantations of pine and similar commercial species. But the four major chains of gardening centres are selling over 5 million native plants a year.

And these plants are being placed into gardens, farms and all manner of environments. You only need to drive through the countryside to see that what used to be endless plains of grass are now rich in all manner of habitats and natural reforestation is occurring in the valleys and hills which are being taken out of “production”. This reforestation has been rapid and widespread since Roger Douglas – the most successful environmentalist in our history – removed the farm subsidies which had encouraged the grazing of every hill and dale.

District Plans talk about “the state of nature”. There is no state of nature since the Moa were destroyed. We are all gardeners now.

These moa lived on the undergrowth which flourishes in our native bush. Indeed our indigenous plants reflect the fact that our own “giraffes” and “elephants” were birds rather than mammals. We have many plants which are designed to resist the pulling and tearing action of a large bird feeding – the flaxes and cutty grasses for example. Many of our trees grow rapidly while young and retain spiky leaves until they are above moa height.

Now that the moa are gone this natural thinning no longer takes place and we have become accustomed to think that the dense undergrowth is “natural” and that, therefore, all livestock must be kept out of the understory. But any gardener who manages regenerating bush must

have some doubts. I suspect that one of the benefits of emu farming would be that we could let emu do the job of the ancient moa and keep our understory healthy and thinned.

I suspect, too, that deer do less damage than we imagine and even a few cattle may do more good than harm. Possums are different. They are top feeders and our bush has no defence against such species.

## **7 Let good science underpin the rules**

If we are going to enforce costly rules through district plans we should begin with sound science – controlled experiments would be more persuasive than the repeated myths which currently pass as ecology.

Given the massive possum infestation of our bush, and in particular the existence of that huge and growing possum farm called the conservation estate, are these “green corridors” really a good thing?

I have a wonderful stand of native bush on my own property and I am pleased there is no green corridor linking it to the poorly managed conservation estate. I suspect that these green corridors are simply motorway networks for their possums.

Numerous planning documents also tell me that birds will only fly over bush and not over pasture. The pigeons and tuis and other native birds which inhabit my mixture of farm, bush and park, have evidently not read these sections of the District Plan. We don't say “as the crow flies” out of ignorance.

## **8 We have declared a war against nature**

Over ninety percent of the species which have lived on earth are now extinct. There have been mass extinctions in the past and life has not only survived, but has flourished in the aftermath. Indeed the mass extinction of the dinosaurs (a remarkably successful species) left “space” for the mammals to emerge and finally lead to the emergence of the human species.

Erlich and other pseudo-scientists of the seventies popularised the notion of the “delicate web of life”, which was so finely balanced that human intervention could send it spirally into destruction. He used the metaphor of the aircraft flying through the air and gradually losing its rivets one by one. Eventually the loss of rivets is too much and the plane crashes to the ground.

The logic is faulty. The difference between life and the inanimate aircraft is that the aircraft is not an ecology and no new rivets appear to fill the gaps. We know that nature abhors an ecological vacuum and if one species falls out of the system another quickly emerges to take its place.

There is no scientific evidence, or historical record, which suggests that current rates of species loss (which are slow) will cause such a trauma that life in general – or even human life – will be threatened. The population implosion is well under way. When we combine the halving of Europe's population within a generation or two with our much greater understanding of environmental management, we can safely assume that the future health of the planetary environment looks better than ever. So why worry?

## **9 We are driven by our humanity**

We worry about the extinctions of species such as the kiwi because we are human and because we are rich enough to worry about such things. Our concern for biodiversity is an aesthetic one.

The bureaucrats of MfE and DoC may try to persuade me and my neighbours that indigenous biodiversity is good economics because without it our productive farm sector would fail. The arguments are unconvincing and generally create a mixture of mirth and suspicion.

They claim on page that indigenous species are more robust and adaptable than exotics, but then bewail the collapse of indigenous populations under pressure from these foreign invaders. It seems to me that you cannot have it both ways.

Three property owners on our peninsula on the Kaipara, have between us planted over 100,000 trees and plants (mostly natives) over the last four years. We have done so because we enjoy the experience and because it creates a wonderful environment to live in – and it increases our property values.

We came to the Kaipara District because there are no “regulations” which are intended to promote revegetation, but which actually discourage it. If you plant 40,000 trees in Waitakere City you have lined yourself up for 40,000 resource consents in future. And the reward for your pains is that either the City or some other Government Agency will deprive you of your property rights. Your “slash and burn” neighbour next door escapes scot free.

We should honestly recognise that our concern for indigenous species is driven by aesthetic and related values. Pseudo-science is soon revealed for what it is.

From the point of view of the selfish gene New Zealand is a sty in nature's eye. We are host to a crop of uncompetitive species which would have long fallen off the planet if our islands had bumped up against a major land mass. Our own isolated species would soon have fallen prey to flying birds, flightless carnivorous mammals, egg eating rats, and numerous varieties of top feeders such as possums.

The harsh reality is that our proposed “biodiversity programme” is a war **against** nature.

The DNA of the selfish gene is determined to spread its most competitive forms all around the earth and into every ecological niche. Life is no fragile flower. *Archebacteria* thrive in the boiling pools of Rotorua. Diverse life forms flourish around the submarine volcanic vents. Life also thrives in the coldest waters of the Antarctic. We “eliminate” disease-causing bacteria only to have them mutate to fight the fight again.

## **10 The 747 – an expression of the selfish gene**

For millions of years many species were kept out of New Zealand by our isolation. Then humans began to settle these islands and the relentless DNA did its thing. The rats came with the Maori. Lice-ridden mattresses thrown from sailing ships allowed Monarch butterflies to island-hop to these shores. Europeans brought cattle, sheep, cats and a multitude of plants. Naturally they flourished as nature intended. The final triumph of DNA was the 747 and other mass transport systems which have made it possible for humans to act as a perfect agent of evolution, ensuring every species of flora and fauna can finally reach the furthest corners of the globe.

But the same human beings who invented the 747 have a highly developed aesthetic and ethical sense and have suddenly, and recently, decided to thwart this natural tide of life.

## **11 We need all the troops we can muster**

And so this new war against nature has begun. We seek to keep our indigenous species alive in spite of their inherent weakness. The only way to win this war is to harness all the human troops available. Sheep and cows would not survive long in a state of nature but they thrive because we farm them.

Kiwis and our other rare species are now valued enough by New Zealanders to farm them too. That way we guarantee their survival. Our current approach, which attempts to lock out human invention and enterprise has driven them to near extinction.

It's time to turn the tide in their favour.

If we are determined to wage a war against nature, and especially against the “selfish gene”, we have to recognise that our opponent is ruthless and will fight back with tooth and claw.

Certainly doing more of the same won't work. We need to harness the private interests of the people and encourage the farming of endangered species, including animals.

After all, no farmed animal has ever become extinct.

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