

Welcome to the conference

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One of the pleasing aspects about speaking on urban biodiversity issues is that it is no longer considered a fringe topic. It is a sad reflection on how far removed from natural wisdom our culture had become when it becomes noteworthy to point out that the environment is now recognised as a central issue.

We are in fact starting to appreciate the idea that our environment does not come to a halt at the boundaries of our own property. People are beginning to show all the signs of realising that not only are there no fixed boundaries for environmental care; they also are showing that they understand they are responsible for providing their share of that care.

One of the great ironies for a senior local body politician has been in seeing things turn around to the point that now we get told off for not doing enough to advance the goal of zero waste. Even just over a decade ago it was an uphill battle to get people actively involved in recycling. It was something for the fringe — now it is utterly mainstream. In Christchurch, 70 to 80% of households show by their actions each week that they are willing to go that extra bit further to cut down the waste stream.

This is a great response and demonstrates how quickly things can turn around. I say that because I think one of the great sorrows of our times is that too many people feel they can do little or nothing to reverse the slide of the global environment. Battling this pre-defeatist attitude is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks of all to do when trying to build support for sustainable change. Yet battle it we must.

I think one of the reasons people shy away from this subject is that it is very easy to sound hugely dramatic about ecological and environmental issues. Yet ultimately maybe we do need to get dramatic. We all need to remind ourselves that without our environment in relatively good working order all our other activities will become redundant. That the healthy future I want for my grandchildren is the best inheritance I can help provide them.

Humanity has not got the skills to produce what nature has given us for free. We all need to be ready to move from the old attitudes of exploitation of this gift to those of respect and conservation and restoration of the environment.

Christchurch as a city has already taken some important steps in this direction. We have bedded the 'Triple Bottom Line' policy into Council decision making, which formally charges us with a duty to consider the environmental, social and economic results of our decisions.

It is a huge change in how we do business and act. We believe that it also reflects the deep love and attachment the people of this city have for the environment we enjoy.

One of the reasons that Christchurch has leapt ahead as a high-tech hub of New Zealand is because the workers in these new jobs, the so-called gold-collar workers, love the natural

¹Editor's note: at the time of the conference, Lesley Keast was Deputy Mayor of Christchurch.

environment we have on offer. It draws them when few other considerations will have the same effect. There is a lot of natural environment on offer to encourage this affection.

Christchurch is noteworthy in that one-third of all public land is turned over to parks and reserves. We are the world's top Garden City.

We also have Council staff helping develop world-class alliances between themselves and the public. Together, we have been helping to jointly transform streams and old waterway systems by gradually restoring them back to something closer to their original natural state. It has been a hugely successful programme that as a result makes each year here one where people are seeing more and more native birds and wildlife coming back to live within the city limits.

We also have projects like the Travis Wetland restoration which led the Christchurch Mayor, Garry Moore, to tell APEC delegates a few years ago that we were one of the few cities in the world rebuilding our swamps. Most folk drain them. Our idea of natural progress has become to restore them.

It is also worth noting that this has occurred during a time of recently unequalled economic prosperity and growth in Christchurch. This has led us to question the very nature of prosperity as it is generally seen, and to conclude that our abundance of natural gifts and settings is in fact part of the prosperity package of this city.

Our Council has recently (2003) asked some direct questions of the public about environmental issues in our annual survey. We received some interesting answers that may surprise those who think Christchurch is a hugely conservative city.

We asked people questions such as whether they would like to see more native birds in their neighbourhood. Of the group, 72% said they would, and 3% said they would not. Asked about more native plants, 58% said they wanted to see more, 35% thought it was about right and again 3% were in favour of less. What we did find was that Christchurch people like their changes balanced. They favour evolution, not revolution.

There has been a debate running for some years about native versus introduced species. The majority wanted a balanced mix when asked which they wanted to have for our existing parks, riversides and streetscapes. Retention of the English garden style plantings, with virtually no natives received 17% support. A mix of the old English style plantings with natives included had 56% support, while replacing some of the old English style with native plantings was supported by 22%. Complete replacement got the support of just 4%.

The message I take from these figures is that the public will support change very much on their terms. When they can see merit in environmentally sensible moves they will make them quite swiftly.

I believe our task in moving toward a more sustainable Christchurch has to be one of persuasion rather than radical change. I also think that the public will for a more pragmatically green Christchurch is quite strong already.

We have a strong foundation; the problem for public policy makers is less one of persuasion than of finding the right degree of pressure to put on the metaphorical accelerator.

Consider yourselves welcomed.