

RNZIH Conference 2003: a retrospective

Murray Dawson FRIH¹

Bringing nature back into towns and cities was the focus of a major conference held at the Chateau on the Park in Christchurch by the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture during 21-24 October 2003. Entitled "Greening the City: Bringing Biodiversity back into the Urban Environment", the conference attracted more than 150 participants, including scientists from several countries, conservation groups and trusts, educators, horticulturists, landscapers and local government representatives. The British Council New Zealand, Christchurch City Council, the Community Trust, Landcare Research, Environment Canterbury, and Pyne Gould Guinness Ltd were among the conference sponsors.

There was a diverse and interesting range of contributions, with some 40 oral papers and 20 poster presentations in total. There is space here to outline only the conference highlights; visit the conference pages of the RNZIH website (www.rnzih.org.nz/pages/conference2003.htm) for more information. It is also planned to publish the full conference proceedings later in 2004.

John Taylor (outgoing RNZIH President), Lesley Keast (Deputy Mayor of Christchurch) and Richard Johnson (Chairman, Environment Canterbury) welcomed participants at the conference launch on the evening of Tuesday 21st October. Following this welcome, Dr Morgan Williams (Parliamentary

Commissioner for the Environment) presented the keynote address "The Ecologies of Liveability - Why Cities Need Biodiversity".

The first full day of the conference (Wednesday 22nd October) began in style with the first of three international keynote speakers. Professor Chris Baines (one of the UK's leading environmental campaigners, and an award-winning author and broadcaster) spoke on "The Nature of Sustainable City Living", drawing upon his 30 years of experience as an environmentalist in the United Kingdom. The other keynote speakers were Associate Professor Mark McDonnell (Australian Research Centre for Urban Ecology, Melbourne, Australia) and Mason Tan (Landscape Architect and Director of Mace Studio, Singapore).

The remainder of Wednesday's programme focussed on community attitudes and involvement in urban biodiversity, and why restoration and revegetation projects throughout New Zealand's towns and cities are gaining in popularity. Australian examples were also presented for comparison.

In the evening, Dr Colin Meurk delivered the 2003 Banks Memorial Lecture entitled "Cities are Cultural and Ecological Keys to Biodiversity Futures", which appears in this issue. Dr Meurk, a Landcare Research ecologist, was awarded the prestigious Loder Cup Award in 2001

for services to conservation.

During Thursday 23rd October, the focus was on the Canterbury region, with field trips in the afternoon to sites of biodiversity interest around the Christchurch City area. We visited Riccarton Bush, the Styx River, Travis Wetland, and the Avon-Heathcote Estuary/Ihutai. At each site, Christchurch City Council, Landcare Research and Community Trust members explained the restoration initiatives being undertaken. The conference dinner was held in the evening, with Dr Brian Molloy (Riccarton Bush Trust) providing a thought provoking after-dinner speech.

The last day (Friday 24th October) covered themes in arboriculture ("Trees in the Urban Environment") and landscape architecture ("Using Plants to Create Healthy Environments"). The conference officially closed with an exploration of future directions, resolutions and positive outcomes. For those staying on during the weekend, a post-conference field trip was offered on Saturday 25th October to Akaroa and the Hinewai Nature Reserve.

The conference on urban biodiversity attracted media interest, and radio and television journalists interviewed several of the conference speakers. The Organising Committee, Davids Given, Moyle, and Shillito and I wish to thank all those who attended and contributed towards making the conference so successful.

¹ Landcare Research NZ Ltd., PO Box 69, Lincoln 8152