

BOOK REVIEW

BEYOND MANAPOURI: 50 YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN NEW ZEALAND

Catherine Knight
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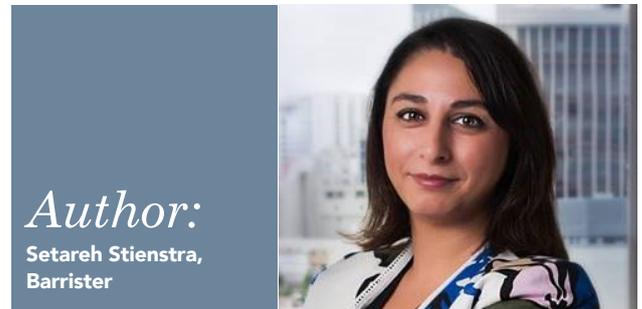
It is appropriate that my final review of this book is in the Manawatu – the heart of nature tourism and agriculture. As I review the key themes of the book I am looking at Mount Ruapehu; skiers, mountain bikers, farmers and trail walkers congregate at a café overlooking the disused railway line connecting the central North Island to the rest of New Zealand, while plenty of logging trucks go by. It is here that the dichotomy put forward by the author is apparent: do we modify our ways or just keep going? If we keep going, the environment will lose.

The author's central tenet is that without the environment, the New Zealand economy would not exist. The dialogue that this book has opened is wide-ranging and important: not since the Save Manapouri campaign have we focused on what it is that we value in the environment and try to protect it. That was 50 years ago; shouldn't we take the opportunity to determine where we want New Zealand to be in 50 to 150 years' time? What is the legacy of the current policy framework?

The book is short – at 217 pages of written text, in an A5 size, it makes for a quick and easy read. The book is divided into nine chapters, which comprehensively assess the start of the conservation movement through to the policy dilemmas we face as a nation today.

The book starts with a challenging proposition: is New Zealand a leader in environmental policy-making, or has it fallen short? Knight is not shy with her view. She answers the question with an emphatic no – New Zealand is not a leader in environmental policy-making. Knight goes on to explain the reasons for her view, and what it will take for New Zealand to become a leader in environmental policy-making.

The initial three chapters focus on the way in which the New Zealand environmental movement began – the era of the Think Big projects, which brought together various groups and gave them a common cause. A key project, which is the focus of the first two chapters, was the government invitation to Comalco to establish a



base in New Zealand. This single action sprouted the first large-scale environmental movement in New Zealand – the Save Manapouri campaign. It led to policy and legislative shifts that saw conservation policies entrenched in law.

These first three chapters are factual and contain a myriad of references to further reading material for anyone who is interested in investigating the facts summarised by Knight, or who is just interested in the history of the environmental movement in New Zealand.

The next two chapters focus on the shift from conservation and development to resource management and the positive influence that Māori concepts have brought to resource management practice.

These first five chapters provide an excellent plotted history as to progress of the environmental movement and how slowly economic decisions are being influenced by environmental issues. Knight provides a succinct review of key policies and texts written to advocate for this shift. To those in resource management who began practising in the 1950s–1980s when resource management was an extension of property law, some of the issues raised may not be new; but for anyone who started practising after the introduction of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), these early chapters provide a comprehensive review of the past, even if that view is tinged with a conservation ethic.

The next four chapters tackle the issues that New Zealand faces as a society today. The heading to chapter six, "Death by a thousand cuts?", is a giveaway as to Knight's position on environmental management. Knight sets out her view on the effectiveness of the RMA as follows:

"On the whole it [the RMA] has proved effective at dealing with known, specific effects from identifiable sources or activities, such as factory discharges or the subdivision of land." (at 121)

Knight's view is that the RMA has been unable to deal with pressures stemming from "everyday" activities; or at

least, that the RMA cannot assess the impact of a myriad of activities. On that basis, Knight appears to assert that the RMA has failed to protect the environment, particularly where effects arise from activities with cumulative effects.

The “intractable issues” (at 121) for Knight are the pollution of rivers, lakes and estuaries resulting from the activities of what she refers to as ordinary people – activities which in her view hailed, and continue to hail, a new era. Her summary is that pollution and environmental effects are arising not from large corporates, or industry, or large scale government projects, but from everyday people going about their business. It is Knight’s view that the same adverse effects are being suffered by other ecosystems and the landscape.

The gradual assault on the environment from everyday activities is deeply concerning to Knight. In her view, this has resulted in damage to waterways which were unseen and therefore not managed. Knight offers some reality checks on the current rhetoric that industrialised dairying has resulted in waterways being polluted. Knight notes that in the 1950s and 1960s many streams, rivers and lakes were acutely polluted; a memorable quote from the book is that “rivers running red with blood and fat, or smothered by ‘fungal mats’, were not unusual sites” in the 1950s, “nor were fish-kill incidents – fish dying en mass, generally as a result of toxic discharges from a factory” (at 122). In essence, Knight reminds the reader that until the 1970s farms and factories were unregulated and used waterways as drains.

Knight’s real concern about waterway pollution is that historically we knew the sources: it was either sewerage or factory pipes leaching. The clean-up was simple: shut down the source. Knight’s assertion is that Catchment Boards and Harbour Boards were able to take immediate action. Her view is that once control of the environment was passed to regional councils and consenting discharges commenced, the natural environment lost out to productive activities.

Knight considers that the failing of the current regulatory framework is the RMA’s failure to control run-off and leaching of nutrient-laden water from farmland. As stock numbers have grown, she asserts, the run-off has become worse. The excessive nutrients that enter waterways have strangled riverbeds and freshwater habitats, dislocating ecosystems. A specific case study is provided of the impact of intensive dairying in Pelorus Sound.

The conclusion as to these “intractable issues” – which starts with waterways, but also addresses cultural issues, landscapes and ecosystems – is that the RMA is not the

right framework to manage effects on a cumulative basis when it comes to intensive farming. Knight does not seek to provide a solution, but she suggests that we should actively consider the impact of cumulative effects in the development of policy in this area. The chapter is concluded with Knight implicitly inviting the Green component of the new coalition government to look at this issue more carefully; some might read her invitation as urging the government to seriously review the balance between environment and economy.

With the “intractable issues” setting the framework for Knight’s key challenge to the new government, the author moves onto climate change – the biggest intractable issue, she argues. Knight posits that we have lost 25 years on being a leader in the field of climate change policy, law and technology. These chapters may be challenging to readers who consider that it is New Zealand’s current climate crisis that requires policy changes, but Knight’s view is that New Zealand has been slow at adapting and responding to the challenges arising from climate change. In her view past administrations were not focused, and so opportunities were lost.

This debate then shifts to other areas that Knight considers have been lost opportunities to protect and preserve the environment. The author makes some challenging statements but raises some important questions. She considers that the binary view of the environment as separate from economic policy discussions polarises the debate. Each side has a different value baseline which seems intractable: conservationists protecting conservation values at all costs on the one side, and landowners protecting their right to utilise their land in a way that maximises productivity on the other.

Knight looks at the case of the Mackenzie Basin to exemplify this polarised position. The valuable insight Knight posits is that we must recognise when polarised positions are taken – when we are polarised, she states, the economy and the environment suffer, and those affected by the decision lose their voice. Knight states that this is short-termism.

Short-termism, in Knight’s view, will result in both sides losing out and therefore New Zealand Inc missing out. Going into the next century, she suggests, we should set aside the “culture of plenitude and low consciousness of the public good” (at 211) and focus on four ways in which to better care for the environment:

- First, be a global citizen – Knight embraces the concept of globalism.
- Second, change our attitude and move away from our colonial pioneering mentality.
- Third, display and embody more responsibility towards the environment – become involved. Here we are reminded of how the New Zealand environmental movement began with the Save Manapouri campaign.
- Fourth, look at the environment and economy as one system – the failure of one does not result in the success of the other. Here Knight is borrowing from the seminal work *Chrysalis Economy* by John Elkington, along with *Natural Capitalism* by Amory Lovins and Paul Hawken.

For anyone working in the resource management field, this book provides some thought-provoking facts and raises important questions. Could we as a nation make different

choices so as to protect and enhance the environment whilst creating a productive economy? This is a good question, which Knight suggests should lead policy-making in the 21st century.

Ultimately, the book is a good resource; it addresses the key issues facing the nation in the economic and environmental sphere. Knight was inspired to write the book after living in Japan and returning to tour New Zealand before taking a role with the Ministry for the Environment as a policy analyst. Her key drivers are to influence the discussion on policy-making, and to challenge the reader's contribution to the New Zealand we are leaving to the next generation. Knight does as she has set out to do: she chronicles the way New Zealand has endeavoured to respond to environmental issues since the 1970s, and questions how those lessons might influence the making of policy in the future.

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