A ‘new’ philosophy for environmental management?

J.A. Hayward

ABSTRACT

Recent legislation has institutionalized a quite different philosophy for environmental management from that of the past. The Conservation and Environment Acts emphasize the integration of the spiritual, human and natural worlds—a philosophy far removed from the Western ethnocentric, pro-development approach to the environment. They contain concepts such as sustainability and the needs of future generations that environmental managers must give meaning to if they are to capitalize on opportunities for developing strategies for sound environmental management offered in the Acts. Meaning will only be derived if managers adopt a more appropriate philosophy for environmental management.

A traditional Western view of natural resources

Lynn White (1967) has attributed the origin of Western attitudes towards resources to the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation. He claims our attitudes lie in the belief that “man was made in God’s image and shares in God’s transcendence of nature, and that the whole natural order was created for the sake of humanity”.

It is difficult to substantiate White's proposition that a Judaeo-Christian-derived attitude implies a belief in an exploitative attitude to nature. Glacken (1967) and others suggest that the Judaeo-Christian legacy can be argued in exactly the reverse. Nevertheless, this philosophy has other implications for the way in which the Western mind perceives its relationships with the natural world. Most importantly, it establishes a hierarchy of God, humans and the environment and authorizes humans to be responsible for nature. Whether that responsibility is to be exercised in an exploitative manner or in a manner of stewardship, is debatable (for example see Black [1970], Passmore [1974]).

What is less debatable is that our attitudes toward our environment have been pre-development, and we perceive the human, natural and spiritual worlds to be distinct and separate.

These attitudes to nature and natural resources are shaped by our system of science which constructs propositions about how the environment functions and the implications of using natural resources in a particular way. Our system of property rights gives emphasis to the rights conferred on individuals or groups to use natural resources, while our system of economic management gives priority to freedom for transactions between individuals and groups which are validated by laws in the courts. Taken together, these aspects of Western culture have resulted in a pro-development attitude to natural resources and a demand that the natural world provides an ever-increasing supply of goods and services.

This is not to suggest that Western culture has no concern for the environment; recent history tells us that it has. But while some important advances have been made in environmental management, these should be seen within a continuing trend of progressive, worldwide environmental exploitation and degradation.

The Environmental Act and the Conservation Act

In April 1984 the Labour Party manifesto noted that: “Labour recognizes that the fundamental purpose of a sound environment policy is to ensure the management of the human use of the biosphere to yield the greatest sustainable benefits to present generations while maintaining potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.

“Labour will therefore implement a strategy to integrate conservation and development so that: (a) We move to a sustainable economic base by shifting from the use of non-renewable resources. (b) Those resources are used to achieve the ends of social justice. (c) Our trusteeship responsibilities for future generations are recognized. (d) Our remaining endangered species and eco-systems and representative examples of our full range of plants, animals and landscapes are protected.”

By April 1, 1987, that intention had become a package which included the Conservation Act and the Environment Act. The Conservation Act is an Act to promote the conservation of New Zealand’s natural and historic resources. In it, conservation is defined as the preservation and protection of natural and historic resources. The Environment Act requires that in the management of natural and physical resources full and balanced account is taken of:

(i) the intrinsic values of eco-systems;
(ii) all values which are placed by individuals and groups on the quality of the environment; and
(iii) the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi; and
(iv) the sustainability of natural and physical resources; and
(v) the needs of future generations.

In that Act the definition of environment includes:

(a) eco-systems and their constituent parts; and
(b) all natural and physical resources; and
(c) the social, economic, aesthetic, and cultural conditions which affect the environment or which are affected by changes to the environment.

Where did these ideas of conservation, sustainability, intrinsic values and the needs of future generations come from? They originated in a world view which is fundamentally different from a traditional Western view—a world view that is embodied in Chief Seattle’s (1854) response to an 1854 Congressional offer to purchase a large tract of his tribe’s land.

“Every part of the earth is sacred to my people . . .

“We are part of the earth and it is part of us . . . If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred . . .

“We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs.

“The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on.

“He leaves his father's graves behind, and he does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children, and he does not care.

“He treats his mother, the earth, and

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his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads.

"His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert . . .

"Where is the thicket? - gone. Where the eagle? - gone. The end of living and the beginning of survival."

There is a striking similarity between Seattle's philosophy and that of the tangata whenua of Aotearoa. As Mary Orbell (1985) put it:

"Maori thought and mythology were centrally concerned with the human situation and human experience, as all systems of thought have necessarily been, but in their thought, as in their way of life, a balance was maintained between human beings and the environment. Their closeness to nature and the immediacy of their dependence upon it, their intimate and profound knowledge of plants, animals and landscape, led to a view of the world which recognized the tapu, the sacredness, of other forms and the landscape itself. By seeing themselves in the natural world and thus personifying all aspects of the environment, they acquired a fellow-feeling of the life forms and other entities that surrounded them, and they saw a kinship between all things."

While we might wish to believe that our new environmental legislation has evolved from the wairua of the tangata whenua, our history tells us that it has not.

**Origins of the conservation movement**

From my reading, the origins of the conservation movement are to be found in the late nineteenth century, in the writing and ideas of people like George Catlin, and Henry David Thoreau. These authors held the oneness of the natural and spiritual world as a central theme. In their holistic view, people were but part of a natural order which controlled them as much as they thought they controlled it.

The indivisibility of the human, natural and spiritual worlds was also central to the philosophy of John Muir. He formed a love for the wilderness which would ultimately lead him to the establishment of the Yosemite National Park and the Sierra Club of which he would become the first President. To Muir (1968) undisturbed nature was "a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator".

While orthodox Christian teaching set man apart from the rest of nature as a creature of special endowments and drew boundaries between the natural and the spiritual, Muir rejected such notions as human contrivances. "Earth and Heaven are the same," he wrote, "one and inseparable."

For John Muir it seemed that "Lord Man" had committed the ultimate blasphemy of taking God-like powers unto himself. Instead of God creating Man in His own image, as the Bible had it, perhaps the opposite had taken place. Perhaps Man had invented a god after his own image - a deity with an overwhelming concern for Man (Fox 1985).

Muir became well known by the intellectuals of his day and in 1893 met Gifford Pinchot - the man who was to become the first Chief of the United States Forest Service and who has been widely recognized as the "Father of Conservation". The relationship between these two men reveals important insights into the evolution of the conservation movement.

Muir was the farmer, the amateur, who, because of his love of nature, sought to save forests from mindless destruction. Although he considered himself to be first and foremost a scientist (his understanding of glacial processes in land formation were full of deep insights) he rejected the scientific method of reasoning from the general to the particular, or from an a priori intuition to a conclusion. In his words: "All correct knowledge of the natural world begins with an impassioned sensual joy in the environment" (Fox 1985).

In contrast to Muir, Pinchot was the younger, urban man of wealth. Educated at Yale and in Germany, he had what one historian describes as a "gen- teel love of nature" and a belief that forests could not only be protected but managed by scientifically trained people (Fleming 1972). It was because of Pinchot's success in developing the forestry profession that most historians regard him as a great pioneer of the conservation movement. Only a few note, however, that this career professional drew most of his ideas from the intellects of John Muir and others who preceded him (Fox 1985).

While the ideas of Muir and others were based on a oneness of the natural, spiritual and human world, Pinchot and the professionals who followed him accepted those ideas but applied them within an ethic which separated man from nature; an ethic which was primarily concerned for development.

Within a few years of Pinchot taking up his position as Chief of the United States Forest Service, forestry became a profession and the hope was that conservation, despite its sentimental origins, would become a science. Forty years later, Aldo Leopold (Fleming 1972) would note of this professional and scientific approach:

"The trouble with conservation was that it had become a specialized activity, an official one at that, taken in hand by Governments and bureaucracies and conducted by experts who monopolized the joys of husbanding nature that ought to be the birthright of everyone."

The relationship between Muir and Pinchot demonstrates the way in which the amateur gave way to the professional, and the perceptive moralist gave way to the scientist. But more importantly, it demonstrates the way in which concepts and ideas that belonged to one ethic were captured and denatured by another.

**The challenge ahead**

What relevance might such an insight hold for the staff of recently established environmental agencies searching for new mechanisms for management? Concepts such as sustainability, intrinsic values and the needs of future generations belonging to a world view in which there is a total integration of the human, natural and spiritual worlds. If we are to promote these concepts then I believe we must also subscribe to that world view.

The problem is that we come from a Western tradition of resource development in which the human, natural and spiritual worlds are clearly separated. The question we must now ask is: "Do we wish to continue to support that tradition with its expectations that the natural world is ours to manipulate and develop in our demand for an ever-increasing supply of goods and services?"

We cannot continue to promote the concepts on which the Conservation and Environment Acts are based while adhering to a traditional Western pro-development ethic. If we attempt to use the concepts of the Conservation and Environment Acts as a basis for management within our traditional Western approaches to resource development,
then we will witness the continuing exploitation of our natural resource base and the Conservation and Environmental Acts will become discredited. I believe that the concepts on which our recent environmental legislation are based are appropriate to the future. However I also believe that those concepts must be used within an appropriate philosophical or ethical framework. Only then will we make clear the character of the ideological debate. For environmental management is much more than a debate about clean waters and indigenous forests, and endangered species. Important as these might be, the Brundtland Commission (1987) has made clear that environmental management is concerned with the kind of creatures that we are, and what it is that we must become if, as a species, we are to survive.

References
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Fleming, D. 1972. Roots of the new conservation movement. Perspectives in American History 6:

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Cancer from bracken
The 'New Scientist' April 1988 notes that guidelines are being drawn up to protect forestry workers in Great Britain from bracken spores.

According to the article, animals grazing on bracken get mouth and gut cancers and three important carcinogens have been identified in bracken. Animal studies suggest the spores are the most carcinogenic parts of bracken. Fortunately forestry workers in Britain clear bracken in the spring when few spores are present.

The article emphasized that it isn't a 'red alert' situation.

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