

Central Otago Environmental Society Newsletter

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*“Never doubt that a small
group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can
change the world; indeed,
it is the only thing that
ever has.”*

Margaret Mead

Welcome to the Central Otago Environmental Society (COES) Newsletter. This is a bi-monthly publication to keep our membership and supporters informed about our activities on behalf of the Central Otago environment.

COES Calendar 2021

It is with a great deal of excitement and pleasure that we can report that a fundraising calendar for the work of preserving our Central Otago environment is now available. The calendar (Te Mana o te Wai) is dedicated to the preservation of natural waterways everywhere, and in particular to recovering the life of the Manuhereki River. All proceeds will go to the Central Otago Environmental Society (COES) and its campaign to advocate on behalf of the unique environment and waterways of Central Otago. Images have been provided by Matt Sole, environmentalist and passionate guardian of the local landscape. And meditative words for each month have been added by the many resident poets of our region: Brian Turner, Jillian Sullivan, Michael Harlow, and Mike Riddell.

The end result is a work of artistic collaboration as well as a means of making a contribution to the conservation of natural resources that are under threat. You can purchase the calendar for \$20.00, plus \$5.00 p&p (for up to 10 copies) within NZ, from a number of outlets as well as by writing to us at centralotagoes@gmail.com and ordering your copies. Payment is to Central Otago Environmental Society, 38-9006-0477812-00. (Name as reference).

We already have several people who are ordering in reasonable numbers to provide a convenient Christmas present. You can make a small but important contribution to our common work in preserving a landscape we are all passionate about.



Protection

Te Mana o te Wai
ensures that the first
right to the water goes
to the water.



Farmers and Environmentalists (Opinion Piece)

by Mike Riddell

Conflict

Currently two members of the Central Otago Environmental Society are facing legal action for defamation, initiated by Cr. Michael Laws, Deputy Chair of the Otago Regional Council (ORC). Because the issue is before the District Court, it is not able to be commented on in any detail. Suffice it to say that the matter was sparked by an opinion piece by COES members, published online, concerning matters to do with the allocation of water in Central Otago.

I confess that I'm one of defendants. This might have been something to be accepted and moved on from. Unfortunately, around the same time I wrote a letter to the Otago Daily Times which was subsequently published. It covered many of the same issues but expressed considerable sympathy for farmers in the Maniototo where I live. A few days after the letter was published, I received a fairly pointed response via the ODT from my neighbours in the small community in which I live.

This is all fine and good, and I appreciate the cut and thrust of debate between people holding different opinions. But I was hurt that my local friends seemed to personalise the issues, and complained that "Riddell has recently come to live within our farming community." In a village of 34 residents, it was a conflict being played out in the public arena. For a time things were tumultuous and relationships fractured.



The implication I took from both of these events was that I should shut up and keep my opinions to myself if I knew what was good for me. Having been involved in many contentious problems over my lifetime, that was never likely to be the outcome. On the other hand, I completely understood the reason why I was being called out. No one wants a Johnny-come-lately telling them what to do.

In such ways, differences of opinion can easily escalate into anger and feuding, neither of which help any of us move forward. Indeed it may not be wise to be once again wading into this territory in the current article. Evidence perhaps that I'm not very good at learning lessons and adjusting my behaviour!

The fact is that I don't see farmers as public enemy number one. In yet another letter to the ODT in January I had argued: "As an environmentalist I'm wary of blaming all problems on farming. Indeed the Maniototo has historically been farmed by low intensity sheep and beef operations, which are reasonably sympathetic to the landscape." The great majority are doing what they can to both survive and prosper in a changing ball game.

*Many individuals
are doing what they
can. But real
success can only
come if there is a
change in our
societies and in our
economics and in
our politics.*

David Attenborough

I did go on to say: “But the recent proliferation of dairying and consequent intensification has been a game-changer, sucking up natural resources and creating effluent problems. This development is unsustainable in Central Otago... we’re all in this together, and we will not find solutions unless we respond as a community rather than lobbing bricks at each other. That said, something needs to change.”

Mortal Enemies?

Dare I suggest that such tensions are not essentially irreconcilable? It’s too easy to portray farmers as the enemy of the land, as if they set out to harm the very basis of what provides them with a decent living. The vast majority are decent hard-working people who with their families have sought to improve the properties that they are responsible for tending.



“Dairy bosses have been telling us they’re well on the way to cleaning up their act, but the environmental statistics show the truth – the biggest degradations in New Zealand’s environment in recent years have been caused by the dairy industry.”

*Steve Abel,
Greenpeace
advisor.*

Many of them have ridden waves of government policy over generations, which have tended to promote boom or bust. The flood of dairying conversions over the last generation is a direct result of encouragement both from the state and economic players such as banks. Small wonder that so many farmers looked with real hope to dairy, as wool and sheep meat prices dwindled. They invested heavily into the infrastructure necessary to change the nature of their farming.

The banks were knee-deep in pushing such ventures, helping many farmers to change their generations-old practices, with an eye to a profitable future. And now, to use an agrarian analogy, the worm has turned. In the space of ten years, farmers have become denigrated as polluters, profiteers, exploiters of public resources, and enemies of a sustainable future for the country.

In the eyes of a large number of farmers, the blame for all this can be laid at the feet of environmentalists – a label that I’m happy to wear with some pride. We in the Central Otago Environmental Society have been working consistently toward a very broad aim: to preserve and maintain the unique ecosystems and landscape that make up this very special region that we all love so much.

Not surprising then that tensions have arisen, and certain topics such as the allocation of waterways and polluting runoff have been matters of strong debate. If we allow these divisions to fester, they will inevitably lessen our common wellbeing. Some may consider it already too late. But it might be worth asking if there’s not a way forward. It will require a willingness on both sides to listen and learn.

An Unavoidable Crisis

Times change. History happens. We have no clearer example of this than the current COVID-19 epidemic – an event that few of us saw coming. In a matter of months it was all we could think about and talk about. In a similar way, climate change and ecological collapse have

arrived before we were ready. The effects of these two factors promise to be massive, and could potentially threaten the existence of the human race.



We are change averse, and the most common strategy seems to be one of denial until the facts are no longer able to be ignored. We assume it won't be as bad as everyone says it will, and imagine there will be some technological development that will save us from the dire prophecies of scientists. Yet all the time we turn our backs on the future, the window for making significant change diminishes.

*Close scrutiny will
show that most
'crisis situations'
are opportunities to
either advance, or
stay where you
are."*

Maxwell Maltz

I'm no prophet but I try to read widely and keep up with trends that are reliably indicated through the work of reputable researchers. On the basis of listening carefully, I think we can predict with a fair degree of accuracy the sort of planetary changes that are looming. I'd suggest some developments that are significant for us here in Central Otago, and more widely in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

- I'm not going to reiterate the evidence, because it's available everywhere and you'd need to have your head in the sand not to know about it. Some of the main features are ecological degradation, loss of biodiversity, species collapse, and extreme weather events. These are forces that are well advanced now, not something that might happen in the future.
- Economic chaos, due in large part to an unrestrained emphasis on growth and exploitation of natural resources. The myth that we can keep on growing and taking more and more from the planet that sustains us has reached its absolute limits. The series of financial crises that seem to have a shortening half-life means that there will soon be extreme competition for the necessities of life.
- Massive changes in food production globally. Farming practices as we know them now are under huge threat from the above two factors. But also because what people eat and the way that food is produced is shifting at a pace that we have yet to fully comprehend. Personally I'm an omnivore, but I recognise the writing on the wall. Plant-based diets and consuming synthetic meat grown in labs will become a majority practice within the next ten years.
- A shift in geopolitical power that will mean even a comparative backwater like Aotearoa New Zealand might become attractive to foreign forces that may see it as a source of land and natural resources. Whether hostile or benign, any significant migration will put strain on every sector of society.

Such societal shifts will affect us all – farmers and environmentalists alike. There is little point in playing the blame game, as it will only hamper us in our attempts to adapt to a massively changed world. The way forward lies in working together to find a way to adjust.

With Every Crisis...

...comes an opportunity. And Aotearoa – New Zealand is in a unique position to respond to what seems a global disaster. Despite the environmental ravages of recent decades, our land and waterways are not beyond repair. The ‘100% Pure’ slogan may well be aspirational, but it’s not a bad aspiration to have.

Our farmers are in general innovative, flexible, hard-working and well-educated in both the theory and the practice of producing food from the land. And the markets of the world are looking for produce that is ethically raised, nutritious, organic, and sustainable. We, as a nation, are in a position to steal a march on the rest of the world in terms of adjusting farming practices to meet a growing demand.



Good farming practices are always environmentally friendly, and nutritious and wholesome food will find a market in the new world. None of which is to minimize the work that is necessary to make the transition. As an environmentalist, I’m sure that partnership with farmers rather than antagonism toward them is a far more productive relationship. It may take some time for all of us to get beyond fear of difference.

To my mind, the key issue is that of leadership. Following the election, I’m sure that there will be informed governance coming from those who hold political power. And hopefully funding to incentivise the necessary changes. But the real leadership needs to come from the farming community itself. We look to the younger leaders who understand only too well what the issues are and can help others through the change process.

The greatest barrier to achieving partnership and transformation, in my opinion, is the shocking leadership of groups like Federated Farmers. Their spokespeople are antagonistic, ignorant of solutions, completely reactionary and stuck in outmoded models of agriculture, and incapable of leading farmers into the world that we now face.

More open-minded, but also needing to face the future, are regulatory groups such as the Otago Regional Council and the Central Otago District Council. For the past 30 years there has been a dearth of monitoring of waterways or biodiversity in the region for which the ORC has statutory responsibility. With the gazetting of the National Policy on Freshwater Statement following the Skelton Report it seems that the ORC will have to pick up their game in this regard, and there are tentative signs that this is happening. From our perspective they will need to be monitored.

A Tough Time

Let us not belittle the stress and pressure created on farmers as a result of historical inaction regarding environmental issues. They have a combination of financial pressure in meeting new regulatory responsibilities, the necessity of changing farming practices to meet a new market, and a sense that they have lost the respect of the community. There is severe stress on families that are both financially and psychologically burdened by such factors.

*Southland
Federated Farmers
president Geoffrey
Young has upped
the pressure on the
Government,
advising members
not to seek resource
consent if they are
unable to meet the
new grazing
regulations.*

Farmers Weekly 21/8/2020

They need as much support as possible from whatever resources are available to help them manage such monumental change, and no doubt some will go out of business in the next ten years. For many years the profit of farming has been privatized while the costs of environmental damage have been socialized. That is about to be reversed over a rather short time frame.

From an environmentalist point of view, the time of enmity must come to an end. We who care deeply about the state of ecology in the world need to find ways to form partnership. This can happen through partnership in catchment groups for the management of waterways and assisting with riparian planting and other remedial measures. Without surrendering our robust monitoring of processes, we might try trusting farmers to initiate their own response that fall within the national regulations.

“We are in an era of remediation, transformation, and new possibility. It’s a time for partnership rather than battle.”

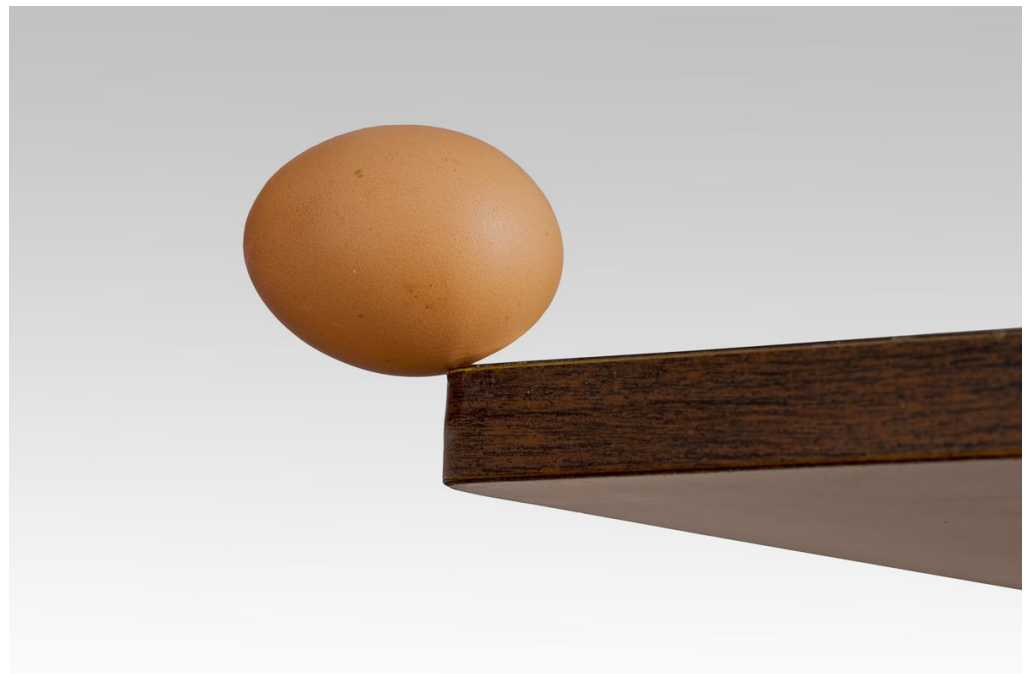
Such a move will require a shift in imagination and practice both from environmentalists and farmers. To a large extent the war is over. We are in an era of remediation, transformation, and new possibility. It’s a time for partnership rather than battle. Given the history, many parties on both sides of the battle will feel suspicious of the other side.

For environmentalists, we are entitled to remain vigilant. But let’s direct most of that monitoring focus on bodies such as the ORC and the CODC that have so often evaded their responsibilities in the past and may be reluctant to face the new national requirements. But even here, we may need to form strategic alliances.

For farmers, we understand the pressure you are under in which many of your traditional farming practices have now been deemed unacceptable. We offer an olive branch, hoping that you may employ your usual pragmatic solutions to facing a new and somewhat uncertain future with courage and creativity. I hope we can find a way forward together.

Climate Change Tipping Point

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (edited)



The climate change crisis has reached a tipping point, and if we don't act quickly, we face an uncertain and tumultuous future. For decades, George Monbiot, a British investigative journalist, author and activist, has been decrying environmental exploitation, a message that often falls on deaf ears.

"We've lost 30 years or more ... during which we could effect a gradual transition out of the destructive, extractive economy into a far more benign one," said Monbiot. "But now, we find ourselves at the cliff edge."

People are listening. They are angry and demanding change. And as Monbiot pointed out, "coming out of the pandemic gives us an unprecedented opportunity to do so."

Even as individuals we still have power

As individuals fighting against climate change, we may often feel we have little power to make a real difference. "There are clear limits to individual action," said Monbiot. "We're facing structural pressures, and we need structural change in response to those pressures. We need system change."

But that doesn't mean we should sit back and expect politicians to handle things, he said. Given the modern distractions at our disposal, it's easier than ever to switch off. "We can push everything away. We can just forget about the waste; we can forget about the resources required; we can forget about the energy required [and] just buy," said Monbiot. "Buy stuff; fly for that lovely holiday; buy this completely useless gizmo; buy this vast gas-guzzling motor because you're worth it, you deserve it."

We have to strike our own direction.

These are the forces we have to fight, according to Monbiot. "That endless tide of advertising, of marketing, of celebrity ... the ones telling us to consume," he said. "We have to resist all that and we have to find our pleasures elsewhere — In nature, in community, in our families. We have to find meaning and purpose where meaning and purpose should lie."

We have to take action in our own lives but also on a grander scale, Monbiot stressed. "We can't be either passive citizens or passive consumers, just allowing whatever comes our way to guide the direction that we take," he said. "We have to strike our own direction."

A global pandemic has paralysed progress

Just as the climate change movement was picking up momentum, it was hit hard by the global pandemic. As society locked down, protest organizers had to alter their plans. "The pandemic arises from our appalling mistreatment of the living world," Monbiot said. "But what we also see is that the failures of government to prepare for and prevent pandemics of this nature are very similar to the failures of government to prepare for and prevent climate breakdown and ecological breakdown."

Instead, he said, "We see commercial interests dominating, we see corporate lobbying dominating, rather than the interests and needs of humanity and the living planet as a whole." He said our planet should be top of mind, "because we are in the middle of a climate emergency, not just a public health emergency, ... and we have very little time to turn things around."

We have an opportunity like no other

If the global shutdown of economies has shown us anything, said Monbiot, it's that we actually *can* adapt quickly and live with dramatic change. "When the pandemic turned up, governments asked people to do something very, very big indeed — to stay at home, not to go to the shops at all, not to travel at all," he said. "And suddenly we thought ... yes, it can be done."

"It was entirely to do with political will," Monbiot said. "And if we can make these massive changes to our lives in response to the pandemic, surely we can make the smaller changes to our lives required to respond to an even greater crisis."

The pandemic has given us the opportunity to build a new world, said Monbiot, "an economy which respects the lives of future generations and doesn't sacrifice those lives for the wealth of current generations; an economy that can be sustained without trashing our life support systems."

And it's time we seize the moment. He said, "As we come out of this pandemic, we can build on that mutual aid to create the better societies that we need."

Snippets

- COES members have as always been active in making submissions on various plan changes and proposed developments. One of the major ones to be heard by the Environmental Protection Authority is the revised Plan Changes 7, 1 & 8, proffered by the ORC in response to the Skelton Report. While we are pleased in the main with the direction of the changes, we are suggesting changes to the legislation, and particularly pushing the necessity of monitoring and enforcement, as well as maintaining a timeline that will provide incentive for changes to be implemented in time to address the longstanding over-allocation and pollution of our natural waterways in Otago.
- Another development that has caused us concern has been a proposed subdivision and expansion of the Sunfruit Syndicate Limited property opposite the Clyde Dam above Lake Dunstan. The proposal is for workers' accommodation and camping ground that appear to us to be in clear contravention of Significant Amenity Landscape provisions and Outstanding Natural Landscape values. Our submissions point this out, and express concern that this is the beginning of a creep toward development of an irreplaceable vista of natural beauty.
- Work continues for our representatives on the Manuherekia Technical Advisory Group (TAG) under the auspices of the ORC. This is a longstanding and time-heavy commitment for which our members (unlike the ORC representatives) are unpaid. While COES members make valuable contributions, there is the feeling that the process is turning out to be non-responsive and largely driven by the interests of the paid representatives of the ORC. At times it seems like a ship that is very hard to steer.
- There has been vigorous opposition from local residents to announced plans by Christchurch airport to develop an international airport in the small rural settlement of Tarras. Consultation has been very thin on the ground, and many opponents feel that it has been presented as a 'fait accompli', with huge investments in land acquisition, and the statement that the airport will be up and running within ten years. COES is keeping a watching brief on this and has indicated an informal partnership with opposition residents.

COES

Our primary aims are:

The protection and preservation of the natural landscape and character of Central Otago. This covers many values including landscape, amenity, aesthetic and Central Otago's endemic flora and fauna.

Raising awareness of issues concerning the natural landscape, heritage and resources of Central Otago with the wider public.

To encourage and support the Government, the Central Otago District Council, the Otago Regional Council, the Department of Conservation and other statutory authorities as appropriate, to establish policies and make decisions which will preserve and enhance the special character of Central Otago's landscapes, heritage and resources for the benefits of future generations.

