

Heritage or Millstone?

A Review of the Relevance of Historic Landscapes to Sustainable Management in New Zealand Today

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Introduction

The concept of sustainability and its relationship to resource planning and land management has been debated in New Zealand for at least ten years. It is now enshrined in two innovative pieces of legislation (Environment Act 1986; Resource Management Act 1991), yet there is still uncertainty about the interpretation of the concept in practice.

Several writers have addressed this uncertainty. For example, Cronin (1988), whilst explaining the ecological implications of non-sustainable resource use, did not make clear connections with the necessary changes in practice. Baines (1989a, 1989b) acknowledged that much published literature "fails to make the link between the understanding and interpretation of what sustainable development is and how to put it into practice" (Baines 1989a). However, his solutions still assumed ecological understanding as a necessary unifying, integrating principle. This is understandable given the emergence of global environmental crises which are "unprecedented in the history of humankind and in the history of the biosphere itself" (Cronin 1988).

Despite the urgency of the problem, I feel that a reliance on

enhanced ecological understanding alone is unlikely to be particularly effective in changing current practice, either at an institutional or a personal level. It is misguided simply to emphasise the biosphere when discussing sustainability—we can understand conceptual, abstract issues far more easily if we can relate them to real places and things that we encounter in our everyday lives. Naveh (1991) suggested that those concerned with environmental resource management ignore the cultural aspects of their work at their peril. He stressed that "all sub-natural, semi-natural, agricultural, rural and urban industrial landscapes represent . . . different gradients of cultural landscapes." He disputed the "fiction of 'virgin' natural landscapes" through our inputs of energy/matter and/or information." It is therefore essential that we acknowledge the im-

portance of physical cultural systems, and the different ways in which these are perceived and valued, in any attempt to introduce sustainable practices in resource management.

The Importance of the Past

"The past," according to L. P. Hartley, "is a foreign country." Yet the past is not that strange. "We are at home in it because it is our home—the past is where we come from" (Hartley, cited in Lowenthal 1985).

Wanting the past is often defined disparagingly as "nostalgia." People indulge in nostalgia because they are unhappy with the present or frightened of the future. The "past" of nostalgic reminiscence still has compensatory virtues, despite the fact that it is rarely the past that actually existed—one which was full of poverty, and smells, and high rates of infant mortality. "Attachment to familiar places may buffer social upheaval. . . . Nostalgia reaffirms identities bruised by recent turmoil. . . ." (Lowenthal 1985).

We are all familiar with attempts to repossess the past: books and television programmes take us back to a past which may be based on fact, but which is largely imaginary. Most of us have dipped fleetingly into the past of museum reconstructions. Others who believe in spiritualism and reincarnation insist that the past is always with us.

We try to re-enter the past for a variety of reasons. We may be fired with curiosity about major

historical events or about personal roots. Looking for a "golden age" has been a feature of European civilisations since the Ancient Greeks. We may simply enjoy looking at the past from our present-day perspective, with our "superior" knowledge and understanding. Alternatively, we may explicitly or implicitly engage the past in order to impose a new interpretation on it, thus changing our perception of what actually happened.

Yet evidence of the *human* past is rarely regarded as important to national identity as evidence of New Zealand's *pre-human* past. Indeed, past cultural activity is often regarded as irrelevant or even undesirable—a conceptual millstone which retards progress. The draft New Zealand Conservation Strategy, for examples, stated that "the New Zealand landscape has been changed dramatically during its brief period of human occupation, and New Zealand has in fact been quoted in overseas literature as an example of over-development and consequent loss of landscape richness and diversity" (NZNCC 1981).

Denying the value of some aspect of the human past is not confined to New Zealand. There is a strong European tradition of interpreting the past as an evil influence on the present. This may simply be manifest as a feeling that people are pawns in an endless game over which they have no control. Alternatively, some have felt (Popper 1957) that too great an emphasis on the past prevents

creative thought and stifles progress. Sometimes, remembering the past is so painful, or reflects so badly on people in the present, that it is either purged from the collective memory or re-interpreted. Alternatively, different groups of people may remember the same historic events in very different ways. Sinclair (1988) demonstrated this trend by referring to what are now often called the New Zealand Land Wars, as both the *Maori Wars*—the settlers' term—and *te riri pakeha*—the Maori term, meaning "white man's anger." Sometimes also a confusing present leads to denial of the past. Sinclair described the gradual conversion of the Maori to Christianity and the dominance of the culture of the missionaries, which led to a period of confusion for the Maori. "First of all in the Bay of Islands, then elsewhere, losing faith in their own gods and culture, they turned in hope to the Europeans for guidance" (Sinclair 1988).

Reflecting on the past exploitation of our natural resources may also lead to a wish, if not to forget, then not to emphasise the role of humans in the past. Cronin (1988) gave a series of examples of environmental problems caused by human use. The list included loss of forests, over-exploitation of fisheries, soil erosion, loss of wetlands, unsustainable agriculture, and the whole urban environment.

The past can also be neutralised: take artifacts out of their everyday context and put them in

a museum, and they often lose their power. Many Maori feared that their *taonga* would lose power and meaning if displayed in the exhibition "Te Maori." To prevent such damage, tribal representatives traveled with the exhibition to ensure that the *taonga* were treated with sufficient respect.

The final reason why the past may not be taken seriously relates to the vagueness of those who profess to value it. Sometimes it is simply taken for granted. If it is impossible to define it, perhaps it does not exist. Further than this, for many Maori, memory of past losses has made them increasingly wary of sharing insight into their heritage. Their appreciation of the past may be vivid, but if it is not shared, will policy makers and planners acknowledge it? If we are facing global environmental crises from which life as we know it may well not emerge, why should resource managers incorporate into their thinking concerns for a resource which is not capable of rational analysis?

There are nevertheless compelling reasons for acknowledging the past. Familiarity and recognition are "the surviving past's most essential and pervasive benefit" (Lowenthal 1985). The simplest and most persuasive point is that we cannot escape from the past: it surrounds us. If we deny our human past its role, we are diminished. Much of this past is reflected in familiar things in our everyday surroundings. We use this past to make sense of the present: through the evidence of the past,

we know where and who we are.

The persistence of tradition reaffirms and validates our existence. In societies which rely on oral rather than written transmission of tradition (such as the Maori before European colonisation), the constant retelling and reinterpretation of the past blurs the distinction between past and present. In literate societies people are more aware that the past is different from the present, but it is still affirmed by the maintenance of tradition, although, paradoxically, it appears that much tradition has been created relatively recently. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) cited examples such as the popularising of Christmas carols in nineteenth-century Britain. In colonial New Zealand, British traditions were adapted to new conditions, for example, the annual candlelit carol service by the River Avon in Christchurch. Other recently established traditions which are local in origin include bi-cultural events such as Waitangi Day celebrations.

Our sense of identity is strongly based in the past. Many people relate to the past through place, sometimes by remaining in one place all their lives. Those who lack identity with place create other links. Settlers in New Zealand clung to the habits and culture of the places they had left. Lady Barker's letters described a social life of paying calls, attending balls, and holding picnics that owes its origins to England (Barker 1950). Phillips' account of fear and loathing in the New Zea-

land landscape (1981) explained how the settlers never considered adopting Maori culture, preferring to import the trappings of their past lives at great expense. Sometimes the past which is identified with is itself a myth. Sinclair (1988) commented on the popular belief that New Zealanders are "more British than the British" and the "rather odd editing of the facts" that this belief encouraged.

Today, Maori are reasserting their identity by emphasising their links with the past. At *powhiri* and *hui* (ceremonies and meetings) the speakers establish their identity by reciting their *whakapapa*, or genealogy, which justifies their *turangawaewae*, or place to stand. More and more public occasions in New Zealand feature elements of Maori protocol. It has become so frequent that the procedures can now be satirised in the national press (Welch 1991).

The past teaches us, although today we are more inclined to look back for guidance than for eternal truths. We can learn from our experience in modifying New Zealand from the sub-natural state in which Europeans found it. We may wish that we had not made many land- and resource-use decisions, but that is no reason to deny those aspects of our past. The landscape of New Zealand is now a more complex blend of the cultural and the natural which must both be reflected in the development of sustainable land management practices. It is our heritage and our responsibility.

Heritage

"Heritage" is an emotive word. Traditionally, it has not only a personal but usually also a class connotation—only the wealthy would imbue their belongings with the status that the word implied. But it is no longer used purely in a personal context. "Heritage" is now used in a classless sense, to describe "a nation's historic buildings, monuments, countryside, etc., especially when regarded worthy of preservation" (Allen 1990). In New Zealand, the idea of heritage has recently been embodied explicitly in legislation. The Resource Management Act of 1991 attempted to be both precise and all-embracing. A heritage order may be used to protect "any place of special interest, character, intrinsic or amenity value or visual appeal, or of special significance to the tangata whenua for spiritual, cultural or historic reasons" (Resource Management Act 1991, section 189).

Yet imprecision can also be an issue. Lowenthal (1991) stressed not only its variability, but also its potential for generating rivalry and conflict. In any one country there are many different pasts from which people can draw their heritage. Such pasts can include that of their immediate family, and also of their cultural, religious, ethnic, trade, or professional groups. These varied pasts infuse all art, literature, and society. Interpretations of heritage can cause anger because of differences in group perceptions concerning overuse, perversion,

chauvinism, and frivolity (Lowenthal 1991). Nevertheless, without a heritage derived from some aspect of the past, Lowenthal believed people do not have an identity and therefore will not function as whole people.

In short, "heritage" implies something from the past which is highly valued by a particular community. It is implied that such things merit care and protection. Yet because of its variability, what is heritage to some people may be a millstone to others, creating a heavy burden or responsibility which they may not wish to bear and may therefore reject.

The idea of a distinctive *natural* heritage has been current in New Zealand for some years. Pioneering conservationists such as Cockayne (1910) were advocating awareness early in the twentieth century, but it is only in the past few decades that the country's unique natural features have become strongly linked with national identity. The draft New Zealand Conservation Strategy (NZNCC 1981) explained that "because New Zealanders lack ancient buildings and a common tradition as foundations of a cultural heritage, the natural heritage of unique flora and fauna is very important for providing visual symbols of a national identity." McSweeney (1987) also stressed the uniqueness of the country's natural heritage, which, although "a shadow of its former glory" is "a heritage we increasingly recognise and cannot afford to lose." In contrast, the impact of people "has

brought phenomenal changes to the land and its inhabitants. . . . Today much of it resembles European pastureland or North American pine plantations."

The implication behind such statements is that only the natural remnants of pre-human New Zealand are distinctive and special enough to be regarded as heritage. The multi-cultural history of the country, and the resultant lack of a common cultural heritage, is also apparently believed to militate against the association of cultural features with heritage. This view is still influential in many quarters, and is implied in much of the current debate about the meaning and application of sustainability in a resource management context. For example, in its Corporate Plan for 1990-91, the Ministry for the Environment focuses on ecological issues, with cultural concerns being clearly subordinate (Ministry for the Environment 1990). This view appears to be based on the belief that New Zealanders need *one* heritage and *one* national identity. This may be a valid aim in activities such as international sport, where the silver fern is used as a unifying icon, but it is too simplistic an approach to be valid in everyday life. Subordinating cultural heritage to natural heritage has the effect of denying important aspects of a distinct identity to many New Zealanders. Gruffudd, Daniels, and Bishop (1991) referred to a growing body of literature which questions the very idea of "a single, eternal national identity." It is my con-

tention that most New Zealanders will not begin to appreciate the relevance and meaning of sustainability until a concept of cultural heritage is widely accepted which acknowledges the significance of the past of each cultural group, however they may define themselves.

The Role of Historic Landscapes

According to the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects, "the landscape reflects the cumulative effects of physical and cultural processes" (NZILA 1982). The simplicity of this statement belies its conceptual complexity. Both natural and human acts alter our physical surroundings. Each landscape can be read as a text, although the text usually appears more as a parchment which has been repeatedly partially amended (as is a palimpsest) than as a newly printed page.

There is no need to argue the case for a significant cultural component of landscape for the "old world," from which most nineteenth-century settlers came directly to New Zealand. "Not much of England . . . has escaped being altered by man in some subtle way or other, however untouched we may fancy it is as first sight" (Hoskins 1955). The interaction between aspects of cultural history, the landscape and national identity has now become a fruitful focus of research (see Daniels 1991; Revill 1991; Bishop 1991).

The pioneering work of Hoskins into the study of landscape history was matched in the United States by that of Carl

Sauer. In New Zealand, we are fortunate in that we can learn from both the relatively static approach of Hoskins, who concentrated on the study of past geographic documentation to determine landscape change over time, and from Sauer, who studied the way cultural aspects of landscapes change as a result of ongoing processes (Tishler 1981).

However, we are more familiar with the idea of using the historic landscape as text in the sphere of fine arts than in that of resource management. In an essay on the photographs of Wayne Barrar, Paul (1990) demonstrated how the artist generated new awareness "of landscape itself as artefact and artifice; as the ground for the inscribing hand of culture and technology: as no clean slate." The photographs show "native forest through the meccano-like grid of a viaduct; new pine forest on the bones of the Marlborough hills; steel pipes, narrowly elegant, juxtaposed with a tangle of sprayed bindweed. This is an approach to landscape which defies our normative understanding of what is heritage, art, or beauty."

It is difficult to adjust our established views of what is valued in a landscape, but nevertheless it seems important that some adjustments be made. Our reason relates to the bi-cultural value of New Zealand society, and the supposed intention of current governments to support this duality. Goodall (1990) acknowledged that Maori are criticised for their "living evocations of the past," for

cherishing their ancestors, and even for having too much past. "But," she says, "pastlessness is the curse of Pakeha." In other words, New Zealanders of non-Maori descent lack Maori heritage, and although belonging here cannot claim the same identity with the land.

There is a paradox here. The landscapes of the more densely inhabited parts of New Zealand are visible expressions of European and North American cultures. The past that these landscapes reflect is largely a non-Maori past. The text is legible Pakeha and Maori alike, but radical elements of both groups reject the text, preferring others. Most environmentalists and resource managers identify with the sub-natural landscapes of areas such as South Westland, and with symbols such as the silver fern and the Chatham Island black robin. They do not feel as strong an identity with the patchwork of the Canterbury Plains or the hills behind Takaka. The Maori stance is more complex. First, identity of people and land is complete—hence *tangata whenua*. There is no separation: people and land are one. Second, knowledge is *tapu* (sacred): only members of the same *iwi* (tribe) have any right to the knowledge which defines them and establishes their *turangawae-wae*. Third, many landscapes which once read as subtle blends of the natural and the Maori, are now transformed as Pakeha landscapes. But to the Maori the transformation may only be skin

deep. There is a spiritual identity to these landscapes which transcends many of the physical transformations of the post-Treaty settlers.

When considering the historic landscapes as text in New Zealand, there are at least three distinct languages to be learnt. Most people are fluent only in one. If we are serious about introducing sustainable land management practices into New Zealand, we must somehow ensure that we learn to read the landscape in its natural form, for its Maori meaning, and as a reflection of post-colonial culture. As Tishler (1981) says, "If we lose the landscapes that represent our culture and traditions, we will have lost an important part of ourselves and our roots to the past. . . . [I]t is our professional responsibility to ensure that these special environments are identified, protected and used wisely to retain their viability as symbols of man's world heritage."

Conclusions

Land management and resource use practices must be sustainable in an ecological sense in order to permit the survival of the biosphere as we know it. But emphasising only the ecological side of sustainability is not enough. Sustainable land management means ensuring the continuity of the cultural as well as the environmental context of people's everyday lives. We need to enhance our understanding of the ways in

which notions of tradition and heritage develop from the cultural use of land.

The past is important to all of us. In particular, past human activities have altered the appearance, structure, and meaning of the land, producing complex, layered, interwoven, and sometimes contradictory versions of cultural heritage. Rather than deny these complexities, we have to find ways of dealing with them. There is no future in looking for single unifying factors.

Resource managers need to acknowledge the richness and diversity of New Zealand's natural *and* cultural heritage. They need to accept that there is no gulf separating natural from modified landscapes: there is instead a continuum of cultural landscapes as suggested by Naveh (1991). We need to acknowledge and work with the full spectrum of landscapes, whatever combination each displays of historical, spiritual, or natural interest.

Therefore, it is important that we do not regard historic landscapes as conceptual millstones. Such landscapes are vital expressions of the continuity and variability of our cultural heritage. Rather than regard them as a burden and a responsibility which will impede progress, we should acknowledge their importance as components of any strategy aimed at achieving sustainable land management.

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