

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This issue is contributed by Kevin McBride of Pax Christi Aotearoa New Zealand.

Listening to the Land and the People who are the Land

Recently, I made a visit to Portugal, where I stayed in the village of Troviscal, which is situated in the region of Leiria, about 40 minutes from the university city of Coimbra. The former sheep-grazing area has been taken over by forestry, mostly made up of Australian eucalyptus with some radiata pine. Local landowners were convinced by business-minded advisors to abandon their traditional diversified farming methods for easier earnings provided by trees 'growing themselves' on their land. As many had already made a move to find employment in urban areas, it made sense to go along with the conversion to forestry. The folly of this was shown a couple of years ago when fire swept through the region, with the loss of more than 50 lives, mostly of people caught trying to escape along main roads through forested areas. These tragic effects were partly traceable to the failure of local authorities to create local infrastructure, in the form of fire brigades and proper surveillance, to quickly spot fires and to prepare remote villages with early warnings for safe and speedy evacuation.

Lessons do not seem to have been learned, however, with regrowth being supplemented by new plantings, once again in eucalyptus. Just before we left to come home, there was news of another major forest fire in a different area of the country.

New Zealand has its own history of experience and consequences of similar policies. Just last year, while travelling in the South Island, I was forced to make a diversion through Motueka while driving from Greymouth to Nelson to avoid forest fires which had broken out in pine plantations behind Wakefield.

The low foothills of the northern Southern Alps have long been the scene of extensive plantation forestry in this region, including the extensive Golden Downs Forest. In other regions, it's only a year ago since heavy flooding in the Tolaga Bay region required \$10 million worth of cleanup when "slash" – debris from upstream forestry – damaged roads and bridges and piled up on farms and in gullies. I can also remember growing up as a youngster in Christchurch and seeing the air thick with smoke from fires in the nearby forests of Balmoral in the 1950s, and just last year viewing the damage caused by similar plantation fires in the Port Hills of Christchurch.

But it's not only plantation forestry which has played havoc with our land and ecology. In 2016, Pax Christi's David Wakim Memorial Lecture was delivered by Professor Mike Joy, then of Massey University's Institute of Agriculture and Environment. In an earlier Society for Conservation Biology's 'Diagnosis and Cure' report on managing New Zealand freshwater biodiversity and supporting ecosystems, Professor Joy and fellow ecologist, Professor Russell Death, said that 74 per cent of our native freshwater fish, mussel and crayfish species are now listed as threatened with extinction.

The report cites "*excessive nutrient run-off from over-intensive agriculture, extraction of water, river engineering, and human and industrial waste discharged to waterways as the causes of widespread pollution of New Zealand's freshwater waterways. All this, along with commercial exploitation and exportation of many threatened and endemic species, means freshwater species numbers are fast dwindling*".

Once again, we have a case of commercially-driven policies putting the relationship between humanity and our natural environment into conflict mode which in turn threatens our continuing existence on earth. Commenting on the situation, Professor Joy said that “[fresh water quality] is a *taonga* of paramount importance and valued for its contribution to biodiversity, recreation, the economy and the overall wellbeing of New Zealanders.”

In using the word *taonga*, he drew attention to the great difference between the approach of ‘colonising’ and indigenous peoples to relating to the land.

In a guest article for the International Institute for Sustainable Development’s “SDG [Sustainable Development Goals] Update”, Jeffrey Y. Campbell makes the point that, “*Indigenous peoples are of vital importance to the world’s land management and keeping the world’s food systems diverse and sustainable ... [they] are the de facto guardians of 80% of global biodiversity – including most of the plant and animal species on Earth ... As family farmers, fishers, pastoralists and forest-dwellers, indigenous peoples apply traditional methods of land management and food production which have evolved over centuries and which have often proven their sustainability and resilience in the face of environmental changes. Indigenous knowledge systems and languages contribute directly to biological and cultural diversity, poverty eradication, conflict resolution, food security and ecosystem health, and serve as the foundation of the resilience of indigenous communities to the impact of climate change. Their awareness of traditional food sources and the fundamental connection between food systems and healthy landscapes can help to promote diets that are diverse and sustainable.*” (“No Sustainable Development without Indigenous People”, IISD, 8 August 2019)

Campbell’s article makes it clear that there is an important contrast between the practices of corporate-driven management of land for profit and the sustainable management practised by indigenous peoples.

Here in New Zealand, we can well ask ourselves if the examples of destruction and pollution mentioned above would have

occurred if the land had continued to be managed by indigenous Māori. Between 1860 and 2000, Māori land ownership was reduced from 80% to 4% by a combination of confiscation (4 million acres during the 1860s wars), the operations of the Native Land Court and sales of various kinds. Some were by way of land boards and trustees (8 million acres) and more was taken or gifted for specific purposes (e.g. schools or churches). We can also ask, in cases where Māori have been involved in ongoing management, has it been conducted in traditional forms or under the influence of systems borrowed from colonialist sources?

The current dispute over development of land at Ihumātao near Auckland is a case in point. This issue has elements of unjust confiscation of land in 1863 but another critical matter concerns differences among Māori claiming *mana whenua*, genealogy-based spiritual relationship with the land. The Prime Minister rightly observed that this issue must be resolved by those Māori before any decisions can be made about the future of the land, an observation borne out by the results of subsequent negotiations.

However, it is useful for all of us to understand something of the concept of *mana whenuatanga*, the spiritual relationship with ancestral land, which most probably will have guided them. A friend, brought up in a rural Māori community, shared with me how as a child, she was taken by an elder *kuia* into the forest so that she could, as she says, “*hear the fall of a leaf to the ground.*” In this way, she was taught to develop the *mana whenuatanga* which would guide her as an indigenous person into the fullness of relationship with the land which Jeffrey Campbell speaks of above. It seems to me the kind of relationship on which the rest of us will depend, if the world is to move away from destructive, profit-based exploitation of land and water towards a sustainable future founded on conservation and respect.

But first of all, this means a readiness for all here to acknowledge the special status of *tangata whenua*, ‘the people who are the land’, and to restore to them the authority guaranteed in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In this way, we can reaffirm an interaction of culture, land and people which enables us all to listen to the land, to address sources of its stress and to live as *tangata tiriti*, in a respectful and peaceful relationship with the land and all that it sustains.