

10. RESOURCE MANAGEMENT LAW ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE - BLENHEIM CONFERENCE - OCTOBER 2003

Officer responsible	Author Sue Wells, Councillor
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The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the above mentioned Conference.

Last month, Councillor Helen Broughton and myself were fortunate to attend the Resource Management Law Association (RMLA) Annual Conference, held this year in Blenheim. As suited the location, the theme of the conference was 'Aqua Vitae', and the speakers and workshops were geared towards the issues of water under the Resource Management Act.

The conference was attended by practitioners from across the spectrum, from politicians to planners, lawyers to judges. As always, the intent of the conference was to lift the game of those practising under the discipline of the RMA and it achieved that with distinction.

The keynote speaker was Bjorn Lomborg, author of the Sceptical Environmentalist. I found him challenging and thought provoking. His core message is simply to re-evaluate the facts, look at history and think about economics as the Council looks at environmental challenges. Out of that he moots that we act from a position of strength rather than one of panic. Rather than contradicting the TBL framework or principles of the Natural Step, his speech was refreshing and reinforcing those ideas of solid thought delivering solid outcomes.

There was much discussion on aquaculture and marine reserves, some of it highly spirited and memorable. Jim Hopkins' compering of the session on whether marine farms are granted a licence to occupy was simply brilliant, and I now feel much more confident in being able to draw a distinction between sections 12(1) and 12(2) of the RMA.

Less riveting was the Oceans Policy segment, but that was because the foreshore and seabed issue had fallen upon the nation without the conference being able to amend its programme. Suffice it to say that I found the blithe good cheer and optimism of the young policy planners from Wellington startling. I cannot imagine government is likely to be able to implement any Oceans Policy in the timeframe it is forecasting, given the consequential amendments to so many other pieces of legislation. The presence of Lindsay Gow at the helm of the policy development does reassure me somewhat.

The workshop sessions were very cleverly managed. Taking up an entire afternoon, all bar the ocean policy segment were held off-site. Delegates were effectively captured and taken out by bus, often to a water destination. My workshop travelled on a bus to Picton, enjoying the commentary offered by one of the local council planners. His explanations of the statistics of change of use from fruit orchards to vineyards, and the consequential downstream effects on water uptake and contaminant discharge made the whole journey fascinating, even though it's a drive she has done many times before. When you journey with a planner, you see exciting things like the river into which the local cheese factory happily discharged fatty waste. You see the piece of the gorgeous rugged coastline at the base of which is a long pipe discharging (until recently) untreated raw sewage into a tidal environment. You look at plump cattle and then realise they are defecating in a stream. You start to think about coastal camping grounds and the effect of those in the summer months. And then to think about the needs of (for example) Outward Bound, with its unspoilt environment an essential part of its business - but right nearby the burgeoning Shakespeare Bay which will be home to the mega ships of tomorrow.

The Sounds are under huge development pressure. When the aquaculture moratorium is lifted, so will be similar coastal communities, including Banks Peninsula. Given discussions the Council has been having lately and the possibility of some degree of unification, I was delighted to have increased my knowledge in this area.

Of all the conferences I have attended, I found the RMLA conference far and away the best for intellectual stimulation. I did however, have a strange feeling that not everyone may find it quite as exciting as I did. My evaluation of this conference is that it is well worth continuing to send Councillors who identify their ongoing professional development needs as being in this area. I would not throw someone into the deep end on it though; for those less familiar with the RMA, the NZPI conference which is more generalist is probably a better first step.

Recommendation: That the report be received.