

'Treasure or Dross? Conservation land and economic development

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Hugh Logan

I will read you out two sets of quotes I have heard over the past twenty years;

- "Get the money lenders out of the temple", and "Conservation is God's work"
- "Conservation policies are wrong and sinful", and "National park status sterilizes the land".

The two sets of phrases encapsulate a debate over how people view protected areas. On one end of the spectrum, some regard them as a higher calling, and an imperative to safeguarding the future of human kind and the planet. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who see them as barriers, indeed morally wrong barriers, to economic growth and satisfying human desires. So, what are they: asset or liability, treasure or dross?

New Zealand has quite a lot of conservation land. We are not exceptional in this regard. So too have many other countries we like to compare ourselves with such as Australia, Canada, Japan, the United States and Norway.

The purpose of conservation land in New Zealand is overwhelmingly about protecting and preserving nature and history (I am using those terms in their widest sense) for the benefit, use and enjoyment of the public. These terms appear upfront in the Reserves Act 1977, the National parks Act 1980, and Conservation Act 1987, the three key pieces of legislation underpinning New Zealand's protected areas. The words "economic development" do not appear.

The stated priority of the present government is economic growth and development. Actually I know of no New Zealand government that hasn't had economic development as a priority. However, in the current context, how does conservation land relate to economic development?

There is no doubt in the minds of those who have looked at this issue closely that conservation land is already a major contributor to New Zealand's economic development, despite some of the quotes I gave at the beginning. I'll go on to justify this statement in just a moment. Where the debate lies, though, is about the nature of the contribution and what the implications are for conservation.

This morning I will outline briefly the way New Zealand's publicly owned conservation lands gained their conservation status, and what drove this development. I will then examine the various economic contributions of conservation land, in all their guises. I then want to move on to look at what I think is at the heart of the current debate about uses of conservation land. The issue is one of values. What value do individuals, communities and the whole public of New Zealand see in conservation land, and why?

a. Characteristics of New Zealand's Protected Area System

The pathways to New Zealand's conservation lands are as old as the first human settlement, maybe 800 years ago so we are told by archaeologists, by carbon dating specialists, and by some, but not all, Maori genealogists.

Our human history has been one of great transformation of the landscape. New settlers tended to use, and almost inevitably overuse, natural resources. And if these resources weren't already being used, this was regarded as just a temporary state in anticipation of future exploitation.

But over time, the exploitation imperative started to be challenged by other views. Firstly, some land was seen as best left in its natural state to protect other uses elsewhere. The obvious example of this was the emergence in the 1930s and 1940s of the soil and water protection paradigm. Secondly, as communities, individuals and the whole of New Zealand began to relate to their landscapes another urge developed – one that involved conserving places because of their cultural and social significance. Humans, after all, are social and spatial animals, and deep down they are imprinted by landscapes as places of familiarity and belonging.

Each of the phases - exploitation, reservation, and conservation - have found their expression in institutions and organizations, be it in various components of Maori tikanga, or in colonial and postcolonial laws and institutions. The influence of all of these elements can be found in the nature, shape and management of the conservation estate we have today.

Having given a very generalized overview of the pathways to the present, I will now turn to a key period that defined the present conservation estate: the 1980s, and in particular 1987. In this period New Zealand created what has come to be recognized as a world-leading approach to conservation management. It established an integrated approach to national conservation management, and created an integrated conservation estate. In 1987 the conservation components of existing development-oriented government agencies were amalgamated into one national conservation-oriented entity, the Department of Conservation (DoC). At the same time the idea of a unified conservation estate took root (although differently categorized and with varying levels of protection). For a country with a unitary form of government, limited size and resources, limited human capital, and large scale intact and semi intact indigenous ecology (albeit facing significant, in some cases crisis-level, pressures), it can be argued that this made good sense¹.

The post 1987 conservation management regime put a priority on nature conservation ahead of other activities. Governance involved a direct public voice in how things are managed and access was free for all citizens to enjoy, based on a principle that conservation land was the common heritage of all New Zealanders². If New Zealand can be regarded as a world leader in conservation management (and many argue it is), then the idea of integrated conservation management with consistent national

¹ There are, of course, alternative views about what is the best form of institutional and organizational arrangements for conservation management. These loosely can be divided into ideas that argue for the superior efficiency and effectiveness of management through localized communitarian or through strict property right regimes.

² This principle is inherent in legislation, if not explicitly stated. It lies at the heart of debates over use of conservation land in Treaty of Waitangi claim settlements. Maori argue in differing ways, depending on iwi and circumstances, that the land is not a common heritage (or “public domain”, the phrase used in the current foreshore and seabed proposals). It was originally Maori land, and should be returned to that status. Officials often argue that the land is owned by the Crown (a curiously feudal concept on which our law is based), and thus distinct from the idea of common heritage.

standards, combined with public input and freedom of access would lie at the root of that claim.

The 1987 changes were driven by two sets of forces. The first was a desire by environmental NGO's for more effective conservation management. This did not arise from an economic imperative. Instead it based on values and backed by ethical beliefs. The second force had economic and political motives. Its architects, a small elite within politics and the public service, wanted smaller and more efficient government³. The idea that conservation itself was as an economic development opportunity was not part of the equation. Rather it was an externality, to be tolerated at best.

Since 1987, times have changed. In the twenty three years between 1987 and 2010, conservation and protected areas have moved from being seen as an externality to a contributor, even a core contributor, to New Zealand's economy, and New Zealand's economic future. I will now go on to describe how it contributes.

b. Approaches to Economic Development and Conservation Land

The economic benefit of conservation land depends on how you look at it. There are truckloads of different economic analyses canvassing the economic value and non-value of protected lands, and an equal number of truckloads of argument and disputation amongst academics, lobbyists, interest groups and snake oil salesmen as to who holds the truth. I am not going to enter into those arguments in this section. I will settle for describing ten different ways conservation lands deliver economic benefit.

1. Direct economic benefit from ecosystem services: This is a benefit currently being strongly touted in international circles, both as a justification for protected areas and because it is a real benefit; one long recognized if not so openly acknowledged. City water supplies are the most obvious example. It was the justification that lay behind the soil and water protection movement. There is plenty of data to show that intact natural ecosystems provide the best ecosystem services in terms of soil conservation, clean water, carbon sequestration, and biological diversity. These are direct economic benefits. There is also some data to show that conservation management contributes to better ecosystem services.

2. Direct economic benefit as conservation management spin-offs: Techniques and specially developed equipment, expertise, technology transfer, and contracting are regular spin-offs from active conservation management. This is especially true in New Zealand's case where DoC has developed world leading techniques in species management, place based conservation, and recreational facilities and light engineering structures and building. There is a distinct conservation management business sector that has been able to sell its expertise worldwide.

3. Direct economic benefit through biosecurity: Control of pests on conservation land has a direct benefit to neighbors, whereas non-control has a cost (as neighbors argue. It's worth remembering that the pests originally didn't come from the conservation land. They arrived in New Zealand for cultural reasons e.g. deer and garden plant escapes, and for economic development reasons e.g. Chamois, Tahr and possums.)

³ The neo-liberal economic thinkers among the officials and other interest groups never felt happy with the 1987 result for conservation either institutionally or organizationally and have regularly tried to revisit the 1987 conservation changes in order to more perfectly reshape it to fit neo-liberal economic beliefs.

4. Economic benefit from management fees and charges: DoC is able to generate revenue from fees and charges, thus providing an alternative to tax funded revenue and hence lessening the draw on taxes (even if in a minor way!). In New Zealand this has generically usually been applied on a user pays principle, with a number of notable omissions, such as access, about which I'll talk later. Overseas there are examples of national conservation agencies collecting revenue from wildlife sales, but these have always been species that are in high demand, and generally abundant. Sale of natural resources throws up a whole set of thorny issues about ownership, the difficulty of protecting property rights, and risk of the type of corruption that is so rife in the wildlife management internationally.

5. Economic benefit through "Brand": New Zealand's conservation estate is a core component of the international image that New Zealand uses to project itself in the international market place.

6. Economic benefit through wellbeing/happiness: There is a view that the existence of, and ability to enjoy, public conservation land helps support well being and happiness and in turn this contributes to social harmony as well as being an attraction to living and working in New Zealand

7. Economic value through national identity: This is a more inchoate benefit, but one that studies have consistently shown is real. The majority of our national symbols are tied up in our conservation estate. Thus the kiwi, Rangitoto Island, Mt. Taranaki, the beaches of Abel Tasman National Park, Aoraki/Mt. Cook and Mitre peak are what many New Zealanders see as symbols of our nation and what in part make us distinct in the world. They are what we take pride in, and give us confidence in who we are. This sense of confidence helps support New Zealanders individually, as groups, and when we work on a world stage, be it in business or any other walk of life.

8. Economic value through health and recreation: New Zealanders have one of the highest participation rates in using public conservation land of any country in the world. This is a result probably of the proximity of the estate to all populations in New Zealand, outdoor recreation role models, and freedom of access. Aucklanders have their Gulf Islands, Waitakeres and Great Barriers, Wellingtonians their Orongarongas and Tararuas (poor souls), Christchurch people have the reserves of Banks Peninsula and the high country tussock land parks on their doorstep, and Dunedinites have the Otago Peninsula, Catlins and the Otago high country parks. We enjoy walking, sight seeing, and everything from soft adventure to the hard end of extreme sports. These activities, and the supply of goods and services to them, have their own economic sector as witnessed by a heritage ranging from Fairydown products of the past, to Ice breaker and Cactus today. Furthermore, physical and mental health benefits flow from outdoor recreation, which in themselves are of economic benefit in terms of the health sector and social harmony⁴.

My last two categories are ones are most commonly understood as the direct economic benefits of conservation areas. The first category is what I have called "soft" economic use. The concept is based on the ideas of "strong sustainability". The second category I have called "hard" economic use, based paradoxically, on the concept of "weak sustainability". I won't go into the intricacies of the economics of natural resource use and the ideas of long term environmental sustainability, but in a nutshell economists tend to separate use of natural resources into 'strong' sustainable

⁴ A cynic might argue that certain parts of the health system wouldn't benefit economically from healthy people.

use, whereby the environmental capital base is 'maintained' or enhanced; and "weak" sustainable use, whereby the original environmental capital base can be changed or used up as long as it is replaced by something of equal capital value through substitution

9. Economic benefit through "Soft" direct use: The most obvious examples are tourism, filming, and recreation. For example, the tourism industry and the conservation estate have grown up together over the past one hundred and fifty years. In an overpopulated and urbanized world people are increasingly seeking an authentic, natural experience, and this New Zealand provides *par excellence*. Tourism is New Zealand's single largest business sector in terms of income. The nation's conservation estate provides New Zealand tourism with a crucial competitive advantage. The capital base is maintained, and increasingly there are examples of tourism businesses seeking to enhance that environmental capital further.

10. Economic benefit through "Hard" direct use: The conservation estate is used for electricity generation, mining, farming, fisheries, and forestry⁵. These uses all have direct hard impacts. As an economic use, they involve altering nature. New Zealand's history has many examples of outright destruction and transformation of nature from these activities. This form of economic use is all about trade-offs. You can have one or the other, but not always both (some argue never). Where they do occur on the conservation estate the trend has been to seek substitution and mitigation.

In this section I have canvassed ten ways that New Zealand's conservation estate contributes to economic development. The way the conservation estate is used is a direct result of policy decisions and choices. Choices and policy are determined by process, and process is determined by where power lies in society. The policy behind conservation, now and in the past, is an interesting study in power. It tells us a lot about what dominant national interests were and are, and how they have been able to express their values in the way natural resources are managed. So this now takes me on the third part of my presentation about how views of dominant interests about conservation have changed and in turn have influenced economic uses.

c. A Perspective on Public Attitudes to Protected Areas in New Zealand

I have outlined ten ways in which protected areas contribute to economic development. Can conservation land contribute more to economic development? The answer is "yes" and in all ten of the categories. Conservation land is treasure, not dross. However, and here is the rub, how much each category of use contributes will depend on what the public will accept. And this is because of the way people regard conservation land in New Zealand. They regard it as an asset, yes, but an asset in a cultural sense, not in an accounting sense.

Over the past forty years there has been a cultural shift in New Zealanders' attitude to nature. Many of those who study New Zealand history have noted how New

⁵ I haven't included hunting and freshwater fishing because in New Zealand these activities are actively promoted for recreation at no harm to the native biodiversity. In fact, they are a positive benefit to that biodiversity.

Zealanders once driven by a frontier imperative to clear the land and exploit its resources now see their cultural identity wrapped up in these islands' natural landscapes and wild nature. Whereas the power relationship in the past lay with development and hard economic use, it has undergone a shift since. I know some will disagree and argue that business and commercial interests have greater access to political decision makers. While there is evidence to support this, there is also evidence that the institutional settings for conservation in New Zealand have shifted a long way in the direction of "soft" sustainable use, with direct links between that shift and the influence exercised by public opinion.

Thus there is now an affinity with the conservation estate that involves a deep sense of collective ownership and stewardship. This cultural identity lay behind the debates over raising Lake Manapouri, wholesale logging of native forests, the National Development Act, and we are seeing it again over proposals to mine national parks and other lands protected under Schedule 4 of the Crown Minerals Act.

This sense of cultural identity will lead many to acquiesce and, at times, support and encourage strong sustainable economic use of conservation land. Equally, it will cause suspicion, and outright opposition to proposals that involve weak sustainability, or no sustainability whatsoever. New Zealanders may say they would accept weak sustainability where the impersonal term "conservation land" or "DOC estate" is used (and pollsters, please note the difference between the word "accept" and "support", lest it leads to misinterpretation of public mood). The utilitarian motivations that drove the new settlers and the frontier spirit of exploitation are still with us. It is important not to overplay New Zealanders' attachment to nature or the appeal of intrinsic worth, a mistake some ardent conservationists make. New Zealanders tend to be pragmatic people accepting of trade offs when these don't come too close to their core values.

Pragmatism has its limits however. These limits are reached where "hard" direct use, and its trade-offs, involve places special to New Zealanders' sense of cultural attachment and identity, be they marine reserves, nature reserves, "parks" of local, regional or national interest, and, especially, National Parks.

Protected conservation land is the source of myriad forms of current and future economic development. However, in the end the public have battled, argued and enshrined the view that its primary use involves something else, the protection of and preservation of nature and the symbols of who we are as a people. In the public eye these places are National Parks, not business parks.