

Mission corrupted

Any move to make the Department of Conservation a resource trading department would open the way to corruption of its fundamental mission. That is why the "conservation management" concept is such a sinister intrusion into the draft legislation.

Where does "conservation management" as a production-oriented concept, come from? Its emergence may be traced to a fundamental schism which occurred in the American conservation movement just before the turn of the century. Obviously the origins of conservationist concepts reach back a lot further in both European and Polynesian cultures, where they are deeply entwined in myths and tender feelings about the human/nature relationship. But the word "conservation" was stripped of such emotional subtleties and rocketed into mass public consciousness as a simple scientific-mechanistic concept by the American philosopher-for-ester-publicist Gifford Pinchot, founding father of the US Forest Service.

Pinchot was undeniably a conservationist of sorts, inasmuch as he crusaded against the waste and depletion of resources associated with America's reckless westward expansion. But he expressed little understanding of non-material resource values, insisting as virtually a moral principle that renewable resources must be used, not "locked up". His advocacy of dams, grazing and logging in areas that others felt should not be touched led to a deep and bitter conflict with leading conservationists of an older school and spirit, people such as John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club and Stephen Mather, founder of the US national park system.

This philosophical division has strongly marked the conservation movements of most western-influenced countries. It is Pinchot's essentially utilitarian notions of conservation that dominate the thinking of departmental resource managers in New Zealand today, reaching their highest practical expression in the sustained management for the industry of serried ranks of radiata pine.

Pinchot's conservation philosophy was infused with the social and political themes of US President Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Era — a reverence for scientific management and technical competence, and a boundless optimism about the benefits of material progress. Conservationists today are much less ebullient about the benefits of advances in science and materialism; we search beyond these realms for deeper understandings and harmonies, in the human/nature relationship. The humility reawakened by our modern experience has given renewed impetus to the old ideal of stewardship: the idea that there is a good part of this country which we can and should largely leave alone, at least until we are an older and wiser nation.

"Wise" resource manager

The departmental resource managers claim already, of course, to be "wise" on our behalf. From the truism that most resources have multiple values they have de-

rived the self-serving concept of the professional, multiple use resource manager who should be given wide powers over our public lands. But it is a profound disillusionment with both the responsiveness and the effectiveness of management by the multiple-use bureaucracies that has led to the recent reform which split up those institutions.

Underlying the reform was a belief that smaller institutions with simple, non-conflicting goals will make for more accountable managements. A dominant use was to be recognized on each area of public land, and the land allocated accordingly to the appropriate institution. The political sensitivity of the allocation process was to be recognized through the establishment of a Crown Estate Commission making careful recommendations to the Cabinet. This new system for accountability in public land management seemed to offer a new clarity, transparency and responsiveness. It is these qualities that will immediately come under threat if the Department of Conservation is to become a reincarnation of the old multiple use bureaucracies, allowing resource managers once again to play god with the conflicting goals of production and protection.

Make no mistake: the philosophical base on which the new Department of Conservation is established will be crucial.

The impetus for more accountability came from two quarters, the Treasury and the conservation movement. The conservationists found that resource managers were rarely neutral. In a situation in which politicians could only be sporadically interested in environmental issues, the resource managers pursued their own Pinchotesque ideologies and did fairly much as they liked. The Treasury saw a similar failure of accountability. For example, commercial analyses were never carried out for the high pine planting investments, since resource managers had their own inscrutable reasons for what they were doing. The result has been a very poor rate of return on the taxpayers' investment in production forestry, while much of the State resource available for harvesting in future is poorly located on steep remote land whose high production costs seriously undermine the future international competitiveness of New Zealand's export forest industries.

From the Treasury viewpoint, management of Crown pastoral leases under a multiple-objective management regime is just as likely to miss vitally important opportunities for improved economic performance. Parts of the leased land are capable of much higher returns if subdivided or turned over to new land uses. The Treasury recognizes that much of the land is not suitable for intensive use and agrees there should be a process of evaluation leading to sieving out of land whose spe-

cial non-productive values require protection, either by preservation of such land in the Department of Conservation or by imposition of covenants. It is on the question of where the leases should be administered in the meantime that the Treasury and the conservation movement are in disagreement. The Treasury fears that if the leases are given to the Department of Conservation they will never come out again, and no real reform will result.

That fear is given some substance by the establishment of the "conservation management" concept, since that implies the positive management of leased lands for production, and will clearly strengthen the political claim of resource managers to retain control of leased land in the department permanently.

Key to resolution

The key to resolving the pastoral lands impasse is for the Department of Conservation to eschew any claim to be a production land management agency. The "conservation management" concept should be discarded in favour of the stewardship concept, under which it would be explicitly recognized that the pastoral lands were being held in their existing state for the time being. The job of the Department of Conservation would then be to rapidly identify those portions of the leased lands which should be withdrawn permanently from intensified commercial use, for scientific, recreational or national heritage reasons. After consideration by the Crown Estate Commission, the balance of leased land could then be released to the Land Development and Management Corporation, to meet the goals espoused by the Treasury.

This example, and that of wood production, both illustrate the point that the expected benefits of the environmental reform — greater transparency and accountability, a strengthened environmental protection system and enhanced economic performance — could all be placed at risk if the Department of Conservation is mandated as a production agency. The alternative concept of stewardship would overcome these problems. There will of course be a need for the legislation to allow for various kinds of development on public land, from construction of television transmitters to the removal of timber from roadlines. But such provisions belong — as they do in the National Parks Act — in the subsidiary fine print, not in the central purposes of the statute.

It is the stewardship role that must be recognized among the central purposes of the statute, if our public land allocation decisions are to be orderly and transparent, and are not to become once again the private affair of powerful departmental resource managers. Most important of all, a stewardship role would formally recognize that not all our land allocation decisions need to be made or biased right now, using only the limited information and technologies we presently have and the values of the present generation of powerholders.

Stewardship is a mark of respect for generations to come, and a reserving of certain powers of decision to them. ✎